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FACING TOUGH REALITIES AND INSPIRING CHANGE: THE COMIC SATIRE OF SHERMAN ALEXIE

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition

---

by

Jill Alison Henry

June 2005

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ABSTRACT

There has been much discussion and analysis on humor and its applications in the service of societal re-adjustment, particularly for Native Americans. The use of comedy, both from classical interpretations and Native American perspectives, can be used to illuminate the manner in which Native American author Sherman Alexie tackles the tragedies found on most contemporary Indian reservations using a variety of comic modes. I examine the comic modes Alexie uses, the purposes behind Alexie's critical, yet humorous, commentary, the multiple audiences toward which his satire is aimed, and the desired outcomes of his satire. Chapter one looks at alcohol abuse and its effects on Native Americans in contemporary society. This theme appears most frequently in Alexie's writings, and there is no denying the fact that alcoholism plays a huge role in the degradation of Indian lives in modern times. Yet, as we dig deeper into Alexie's works to uncover the reasons why alcoholism, as well as other critical areas of concern, has become such a problem for the Native American community, we come to the focus of chapter two: Why have Native Americans become so dependent on White handouts,

White history, and how has that passivity and acceptance created problems in Indian society? Further, Alexie offers, via his comedic expressions, inspiration and solutions to the complex scenarios facing tribal societies. Chapter three will offer insights into the way Alexie makes use of humor in an effort to communicate hope, restore community, and rebuild tradition in Native American society.

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CHAPTER ONE

ALCOHOLISM: THE SERIOUS, THE COMEDIC, THE HEALING

Throughout his work, Sherman Alexie writes about the lives of Indians on the modern-day reservation. Looking at reservation life through his perspective, derived from his own experiences growing up on the Wellpinit Reservation in Spokane, Washington, we get a frank appraisal and a strong understanding of the bitterness Alexie feels regarding the plight of modern Indians. As he himself claims, "Every theme, every story, every tragedy that exists in literature takes place in my little community. Hamlet takes place on my reservation daily. King Lear takes place on my reservation daily" (McNally par 10). Alexie spares no punches in his angry diatribes aimed at those responsible for the conditions on reservations, and he does not let anyone, Native American or White American, escape his judgments. That means that within his poetry and prose we are shown the harshness of Indian life, the causes of that bitter reality, the reasons for the continuance of the problems found on reservations, and the apparent willingness of some living

that life to accept their lot. Woven within these tales of tragic lives, Sherman Alexie draws on various comic modes to illustrate the primary themes of his writings. These modes function in critical ways while addressing different audiences for different purposes. Ultimately all of the comic treatments found in Alexie's works function in the service of satire which exposes, enlightens, criticizes, and condemns as it promotes change.

Among the hardships of life on the reservation, alcoholism is, according to Alexie, a predominant factor. He explores this problem in many of his short stories and poems, where he deals with the horrors of alcoholism on the reservation with an infusion of humor. Some readers have found Alexie's depictions of alcoholic Indians to be a negative reinforcement of stereotypes that do nothing to promote positive pathways for modern Native Americans. For example, writer Louis Owens, in his article "Through the Amber Looking Glass: Chief Doom and the American Indian Novel Today," criticizes Alexie for "reinforc[ing] all of the stereotypes desired by white readers." According to Owens, these allow those same "Euramerican readers . . . to come away with a sense . . . that no one is really to

blame but the Indians" for their societal problems (qtd. in Evans par 3). The statistical reality of Indian alcoholism is indeed a painful one. Fergus Bordewich, author of Killing the White Man's Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century, offers some disturbing figures taken from Indian Health Services reports:

> Indians are three and a half times more likely than other Americans to die from cirrhosis of the liver. . . . Between five and twenty-five percent of Indian babies may be born mentally and physically damaged by fetal alcohol syndrome, compared to less than one-fifth of one percent in the general population. . . . Alcohol . . . is a contributing factor in many, perhaps most, Indian deaths from pneumonia, heart disease, cere-brovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer (qtd. in Evans par 16).

These statistics reveal the depth of alcohol abuse on Indian reservations. In revealing these realities, however, Alexie is not attempting to add to the humiliating stereotyping of Native Americans. Rather, he draws both Whites and Indians into his critical analysis

of contemporary Indian life in order to promote change. To do so, he has to delineate the problem in realistic fashion. And while the picture of reservation alcoholism may be harsh, if change is to occur, it is necessary to force a hard look at it. This hard look implies shared responsibility. If the origin of alcohol abuse can be traced originally to the introduction of that addictive drug by early white settlers into Indian culture, it is still the Indian of today who faces the challenge of breaking that addiction. Therefore, all are criticized by Alexie in the blame game. As critic Stephen F. Evans, author of the article "Open Containers: Sherman Alexie's Drunken Indians," points out, this makes Alexie a "moral satirist rather than a cultural traitor" (Evans par 5). For if Alexie draws upon "certain conventional character types . . . . including the prejudicial stereotype of the drunken Indian" to compose a realistic view of modern Indian life, he does so in an effort to promote survival and bring about an awareness on the part of both Indians and Whites that can lead to positive change (Evans par 5).

Alexie's treatment of the problem of alcoholism involves the use of multiple comic modes, enabling him to effectively target his criticism toward a variety of

responsible parties. This is, of course, what satire is all about. As critics Hugh G. Holman and William Harmon argue, satire involves mixing critique with humor "for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity" (qtd in Evans par 13). To take this definition one step further, we can observe that "true satirists are conscious of the frailty of human institutions and attempt through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling" (qtd in Evans par 13). Alexie has this intention in mind as he represents reservation life. Literary critic Robert Corrigan, author of Comedy: Meaning and Form, maintains that writers who view life satirically do so "by necessity" as they are "smitten with a tragic sense of life, and lyrically in love with the ideal in a world poorly equipped to satisfy such aspirations" (Corrigan 12). Alexie sees the Indian world in this way; he knows its problems and tragedies and has found a method of artistic communication that works both to illustrate those problems and to find a way to attempt to reach the ideal through a comic "remodeling" of reality. Critics of Alexie's work that find his use of stereotypes abhorrent are missing the more important underlying ideologies he scripts in his poetry and short narrative pieces.

One strong example of the way Alexie draws upon the humorous--in this case, irony and black humor--to reflect on the problems associated with alcoholism while exploring the possibilities of survival can be found in his short story "Every Little Hurricane." Here Alexie describes a youth named Victor, a character he uses throughout most of his writings. Obviously symbolic, Victor's name represents a "winner," someone who survives at the end of a tremendous battle, or, in this case, a storm. Victor lives on a reservation and "dream[s] of whiskey, vodka, tequila, those fluids swallowing him just as easily as he swallowed them" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 7). It is ironic that Alexie compares the drunken behaviors in this story to a hurricane; every pain Victor experiences in his youth comes to him as a "tiny storm" damaging parts of his life each and every time. This prose piece opens as a "hurricane dropped from the sky . . . and fell so hard on the Spokane Indian Reservation that it knocked Victor from bed." Yet, while the reader may be thinking the storm is real, Alexie makes it clear this is a metaphorical tempest that comes as Victor's "mother and father . . . host the largest New Year's Eve party in tribal history" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 1). And as the "winds increased and the first

tree fell," we know that the young Victor is experiencing, in reality, the storm of "two Indians rag[ing] across the room at each other" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 2) in a drunken brawl. Alexie uses the words "little" and "tiny" to describe these meteorological traumas in Victor's life, but, ironically, these storms are devastating, "spun from the larger hurricane that battered the reservation" and destroyed Victor's world.

Victor's experiences and his feelings of drowning in a sea of alcohol are explored further when the narrator of this darkly humorous tale relates the story of "an old Indian man [who] drowned in a mud puddle at the powwow. Just passed out and fell face down into the water collected in a tire track" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 7). The tragedy here is the loss of a life, but in the true nature of black humor, this death was not one of a proud Indian warrior, but rather the demise of a drunk who drowns in a puddle. The satiric significance of this scene lies in the humiliating end of not just one man, but also a people. Victor isn't the only one to be torn apart by the devastating effects of alcoholism; he is, however, the representative example Alexie uses to illustrate how other reservation Indians have become ironic "Victors." This

exemplifies the way that Alexie, according to Evans, "insists on confronting, through satire, the culturally embedded patterns of modern Indian defeat, of which alcohol-related problems are symptomatic" (Evans par 22).

If all Indians are "Victors," however, then it is possible that Alexie is also suggesting that his people can be victorious over the alcohol that seems to be defeating them. It is his ability to simultaneously make this point by using various comic modes that reveal Alexie's great comic genius. As is often the case in his work, "Every Little Hurricane" is peppered with multiple forms of comedy. In addition to irony and black humor, we find elements of the burlesque. As Victor contemplates these sorrowful alcoholic moments at this party thrown by his parents where everyone is getting drunk, he witnesses some examples of alcoholic misbehaviors, moments of strangely uplifting humor infused into these tragic scenes. He sees "Lester FallsApart passed out on top of the stove, and some other drunken Indian comes along and turns "the burners on high." Meantime, "James Many Horses . . . told so many bad jokes that three or four Indians threw him out the door into the snow" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 10). These moments could be classified as burlesque

because Alexie is portraying a serious subject in a frivolous manner. The main quality of burlesque is that there is often a discrepancy between the subject matter and the way in which that subject is treated in a piece of writing. In this case, Alexie gives us a view of Victor's "latest nightmare," which is "the largest New Year's Eve party in tribal history" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 1). The hyperbole and absurdity Alexie describes during this night of alcoholic abandon emphasizes the burlesque nature of this comedic moment. Yet, through it all, when the party was over, "all the Indians, the eternal survivors, gathered to count their losses" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 10-11).

Unlike elsewhere in the story, Alexie is certainly not using his humor here to make us laugh at the actions of these drunks; rather his humor serves another, much more critical purpose. While his criticism appears to be aimed at the tragic loss of a people's historical strength due to an addiction to alcohol, Alexie is also making an important satirical statement designed to inspire change. Whereas in the past, Indians would gather after great battles as warriors and "count their losses," in modern times, it is the alcohol they must battle. Rather than

counting coup, they end up counting passed out drunks. The satire, in this case, turns its face toward Alexie's own people who must find a way to pull out of this tragic lifestyle. Alexie, in a serious moment in this tale, acknowledges the reasons behind this struggle with alcohol: "Alcoholic and dreamless. . . there was enough hunger . . . enough geography and history, enough of everything to destroy the reservation and leave only random debris and broken furniture" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 10-11). The reader has been informed that there is a background and a foundation for the need, the use of, the addiction to alcohol. Yet, despite the struggle, Alexie holds firm. He implies that his people will survive because they are "the eternal survivors," but only if they confront their flaws (with the aid of humor). Alexie's burlesque criticism of modern "fallen Indians" encourages Indians to accept responsibility for the problems of modern-day reservation life. While the earliest white settlers and the United States army can be blamed for the historical abuse which put Indians on reservations and addicted them to alcohol in the first place, it is the Indians of today who continue in the cycle of alcohol abuse. Stephen Evans is correct when he surmises that "the

mirror [Alexie] turns towards his readers is admonitory, and shaming, beaming a reflection of false values that themselves must be defeated in order to insure real survival" (Evans par 31). Those readers, Indians and Whites, all need to be made aware of the bitter realities of life if change is to ever occur. The use of multiple comic modes within a single work is a way of encouraging this recognition to take place.

What is it, though, that enables Alexie to effectively turn this so-called mirror toward his own people? Certainly there are white readers who can accept the criticism against white Americans for their negative contributions to contemporary Indian lifestyles. But Alexie expects Indians also to accept the criticisms he dishes out. He is working within a tradition of Indian tragicomedy. As Critic John Lowe has argued, it is an important part of Indian writing to "create comic treatments for underlying tragic themes such as drunkenness" (198) in an effort to "force the audience to face, via laughter and tears, both the degradation and endurance of a proud people" (203). In Alexie's case, this combination of the tragic and the comedic moments centered on characters like Victor, Lester FallsApart, and

James Many Horses, who are often caught in self-induced embarrassing situations, can facilitate change and provide hope. All readers see this child Victor exposed to situations of horrible alcoholic abuse, but because of the use of humor, even Indian readers can find sympathy and understanding for all the players in these scenes. They know that, even amidst the degradation, there is the hope of survival. All can recognize the reality and therefore understand the behaviors, and it is the laughter at the absurd moments that helps to bring about an understanding that is sympathetic. In his piece entitled "Types of Comedy," J.L. Styan reminds us of the views of William Hazlitt, who found that the "essence of the laughable was 'the incongruous', a distinction between what things are and what they ought to be." Styan labels this incongruity satirical laughter, which is a good description of how Alexie's writing functions (Styan 152). Readers want Victor to be victorious and rise above this atmospheric pressure. We want his existence to hold more promise for him. We are certainly sympathetic to his plight. Presumably, this sympathy extends to other Native Americans living with the problem of alcoholism, since

Victor, as mentioned above, is symbolic of all Indians and their desire to see change come about.

Alexie treats the problem of alcoholism in equally complex ways in his poetry as well as in his short stories. Indeed, in both genres he reveals similar satiric purposes and technical versatility. In his book of poetry called First Indian on the Moon, for example, several of the poet's discussions often focus on the abuse of alcohol occurring on Indian reservations. In the ironic prose piece entitled "A Reservation Table of the Elements," Alexie runs through a list of elements from the periodic table while sharing fragments of reservation life and lore:

> My father quit drinking by use of a simple formula. He bought beer only with the money he saved from recycling the aluminum Coors Light cans he emptied by drinking. At 19 cents a pound for recycled cans, it was the Reservation Law of Diminishing Returns. Nobody can be alcoholic and ecological at the same time. (Alexie, First Indian 38)

There is a subtle irony occurring in this prose piece: the title refers to the periodic table, which is an

arrangement of the chemical elements in accordance to the periodic law of which all things on earth are made up. These natural laws and principles, which are the scientific foundation of the world, have taken on new meaning in Alexie's piece because he is really referring to the laws and economic principles of life on the reservation, which, apparently, do not fall into the same category as those "natural" laws and principles which guide the rest of the world. On the reservation these laws of the universe are transformed because of alcohol abuse and poverty. Thus, under the heading of "Aluminum," Alexie combines the notion of alcoholism--which is seen in the form of aluminum cans that contain beer--with the ironic notion of a forced abstinence due to an inability to get enough of a return on the recycled cans to provide for the next six-pack.

The laws of nature change on the reservation and, ironically, Alexie gives these elements different meanings other than those we acknowledge on a scientific level. For example, just as the element of aluminum is distorted to represent alcohol abuse through the symbol of a beer can, neon is another element Alexie uses symbolically to represent the signs that light up the windows of a bar and

a pawn shop; this makes the connection between alcoholism and the need to sell off items of personal value to maintain that addiction. In a similar fashion copper represents the pipes that freeze in a reservation winter, and oxygen, in a repetition of an earlier discussed plot line, represents the "Indian man [who] drowned here on [the] reservation when he passed out and fell face down into a mud puddle" (Alexie, First Indian 40). He no longer had any oxygen.

This new understanding of the world's elements takes on a critical meaning as Alexie is evaluating the disassociation of Indian lives from those that exist in a natural situation. The connection to nature for the Native American has always been of prime importance, but Alexie's satire in this situation is focused on the ways that the economic and social problems of reservation life have distorted that connection. Rather than the spiritual relationship between the Indian and the natural world, there is a stronger relationship, Alexie alleges, between the Indian and his alcohol. The criticism Alexie is making using ironic humor condemns those Native Americans who have allowed this vital part of Indian life to be lost because of alcohol consumption.

In another ironic prose poem entitled "Year of the Indian" from the same book of poetry, Alexie provides further condemnation of those who ignore the problems associated with alcoholism. He writes that March finds Indians in the "Breakaway Bar on St. Patrick's Day, drinking green beer and talking stories" (Alexie, First Indian 11). Right away we are introduced to two stereotypes: the Irish and the Native American drinking in a bar. The "green beer" refers to the Irish while "talking stories" is an Indian tradition. There is further ironic humor in the bar's name as Alexie comments on one reason for alcohol abuse: the move to "break away" from the reality of harsh conditions on this day of celebration is an understandable one for those who normally live lives of pain. There may also be, symbolically, more to this title and the specific day Alexie has chosen. Just as Native Americans were oppressed and denied rights in their homeland, the earliest Irish peoples, the Gaels, were denied their rights to choose a religion and were chased out of Ireland by Saint Patrick, a Christian with the intent of making all of Ireland a Christian land. Furthermore, years of British rule added to the pain in the lives of the Irish.

Alexie sees this relationship as a connecting point between the Irish and the Indian. Certainly the Irish have been an oppressed people as have the Indians. Yet, looking at this idea differently, we can envision a stronger ironic perspective of this "celebratory" event: Alexie is recalling that St. Patrick's Day is celebrated as a unification of a people who have broken free of oppression. After all, the holiday was established after many Irish people left their homeland to find freedom in America. Here, though, we have both a connection and a contrast between the Indian and the Irishman. The Irish have a day of celebration, similar to other Americans' celebration of Columbus Day, a holiday that Indians find offensive as it marks the beginning of their oppression. In this light, Indians would certainly find more to celebrate on St. Patrick's Day than on a day typically seen as an American holiday. Native Americans are once again, in Alexie's view, breaking away from that which has been typically oppressive. The problem is, however, the breaking away involves alcohol.

Later in the piece a discussion ensues and an interesting point is made as a joke is told at the bar:

> 'Did you ever hear about the guy who was half-Irish and half-Indian?' [one Indian asks another].
>
> 'No,' I [the speaker of the poem] say.
>
> 'He owned his own bar but went out of business because he was his own best customer.'
> And we laugh.
> And I buy him another beer and then another.
> One, because he's Indian all the time, and two, because he's Irish today.
> We've all got so many reasons, real and imagined, to drink. (Alexie, First Indian 11)

If we take into account the history of both groups of people, the Irish and the Indian, and the stereotypes attached regarding those two groups and their propensity toward drink, we certainly can understand the desire of breaking away from the pain, sharing stories and jokes in a bar on a holiday that has multiple meanings. It's ironic that either member of these two groups would find humor in a joke such as this one, but perhaps this laughter is working satirically as far as Alexie is concerned. The first person narrator of this piece knows well that there are "many reasons" to drink, and plenty of

those reasons, including a history of oppression, are "real." What about those that are imagined? This is where Alexie is focusing his satirical commentary. The point seems to be that this history is in the past, and thus Alexie is saying that those "imagined" reasons are, in contemporary times, excuses for the continuation of alcoholic behavior and escapism from reality. Here, again, he is asking for his fellow Indians to contemplate the seriousness of alcohol abuse, but he is doing so in a humorous manner. It is the humor that opens the door of recognition and allows readers to understand, and hopefully accept, the need for change. If, as critic J.L. Styan maintains, "the best comedy teases and troubles an audience; it can be painful. . . . [it can] create the conditions for thinking," then we can see Alexie's goal in his critiques of his people's behaviors (Styan 156). Furthermore, we may find that "the best jokes are not only compatible with the most solemn intention, but are likely to be the best jokes for that reason" (Styan 156). We see this incongruity that joins two very different themes, alcoholism and humor, and it is working within Alexie's writings in order to create a sympathy for the characters, while offering the laughter that can, perhaps, open a door

for change in a social climate that Alexie sees is in desperate need of change. Rather than using alcohol to break away from the bitter realities of Indian life, Alexie's ironic poem encourages a breaking away from those issues that have held Native Americans in their addictions for years.

In a similar commentary on breaking free, Alexie changes comic modes turning to black humor to analyze this bondage Indians have with alcoholism in a poem entitled "Captivity." Yet the difference between this piece and "The Year of the Indian" discussed above is the finger pointing. In this poem, Alexie clearly means to condemn the actions of white Americans as he delineates the struggle surrounding alcohol addiction due to historical oppression. In the poem, a white tourist asks about an "Indian in a bottle" that's for sale at Crowshoe's Gas Station: "'How do you fit that beer-belly in there?'" the tourist wonders. "'We do it . . . piece by piece'" (Alexie, <u>First Indian</u> 99). There is within the title of this poem a statement about the nature of reservation life: Indians are not free but are captives on their own land. As alluded to in the piece, this is both a reason for, and perhaps even a result of, the alcoholism

referenced by the white tourist wondering how the "beer-belly" fits into the bottle. Furthermore, we have this idea of an Indian in a bottle, much like those ships that get built mysteriously within a bottle and are usually replicas of the ancient sailing ships like those Columbus or any other so-called explorer sailed to America. Due to the arrival of these sailing vessels, Indians, like fitting ships in bottles, were squeezed onto small pieces of reservation land rather than being allowed to roam their country freely as they did prior to the arrival of white settlers. After the invasion of those early white settlers, Indians became captives on reservations.

This use of black humor, which is a comic mode known for its overt tone of anger and bitterness, also serves to highlight how white Americans, in Alexie's view, have a tendency to use the Indian as a commodity for consumption. The white tourist is looking at something for sale, "an Indian in a bottle," in a manner similar to--and this is one of Alexie's favorite criticisms--the way white people purchase items like wind catchers and think they are capturing a bit of Native spirituality because of that purchase. The bitter disapproval of this scene comes with the final expression that Indians fit into their captivity

"piece by piece." In a rather harsh expression of anger, Alexie is suggesting that this selling off has denied Native Americans a sense of wholeness: as a community, they are in pieces because of historical oppression.

The examples above clarify the horrible reality of reservation life; however, Alexie adds the subtle satiric humor in these instances in an effort to inspire the hope that can allow for survival. Native American author Vine Deloria claims that there is a history of this type of humor in Native American culture:

> For centuries before the white invasion, teasing was a method of control of social situations by Indian people. Rather than embarrass members of the tribe publicly, people used to tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion. In this way egos were preserved and disputes within the tribe of a personal nature were held to a minimum. Gradually people learned to anticipate teasing and began to tease themselves as a means of showing humility and at the same time advocating a course of action they deeply believed in. (Deloria, Custer 147)

While the term "teasing" may seem a rather simplistic label to apply to the discussion of a people's alcoholic self-abuse and thus the degradation of a community, Alexie actually is teasing his Indian peers in order to promote change. While he probably doesn't want to be critical in an offensive way, Alexie uses humor here in a way that promotes positive change. Once again, this places him in a larger comic tradition. As Kenneth Lincoln observes, there can be found in most Western literature a "tradition of degradation. . . . A component of malice, of debasement" which makes the comic writer of such tragic circumstances write as a "social corrective" (Lincoln 30). Alexie's satire certainly fits into this category as he is not subtle in the least regarding his characters and their abuse of alcohol. We can see, however, with his use of humor, that he is attempting to uplift his people through this highlighting of their faults. And if Alexie's focus seems to be only on his Indian brethren and their self-degrading alcoholic adventures, we should not forget his contempt toward the historical oppression by Whites over Indians. Both targets of Alexie's venomous attacks need an understanding of the problems before true change can

occur in society. His black humorous works seek to prod his multiple targets to just such an awareness.

Sometimes, however, it appears as if Alexie's desire to use his writing as social commentary becomes so strong that the humor is sublimated, blending into pathos. It is important for the achievement of Alexie's goal to, rather than dissuade readers from tackling his tough topics by degrading them and their actions, allow for a sympathetic and understanding approach to these issues. In the poem ironically titled "Drought" from his book <u>Old Shirts and New Skins</u>, Alexie writes about the "thirst" of "so many Indians born with the alcohol spirit" and the "vodka which stole . . . dreams / without scent" (lines 8, 9, 21-22). The humor here is not so easy to pinpoint; the seriousness of Alexie's attempts to explain why alcoholism has pervaded his Native American society really diminishes the comic moment. Subtle or not, though, ironic humor is present in the way a "drought" is referenced within a poem thematically focusing on the reasons behind alcoholism. There is pathos in the idea that vodka, which is liquor that has no smell, can come and steal dreams of a better existence without being detected. The "thirst" and "drought" to which Alexie alludes actually represent a

loss, an emptiness within the Indian spirit, and the depth of this situation sublimates the humor to the more important concerns of the author, which are to provide a wake-up call to Indians who can't see the loss of their dreams because of the alcoholic haze.

In a manner similar to the earlier discussion about the willingness of some Indians to put themselves in an alcoholic bondage, Alexie claims that "there is a reservation for every prisoner / willing to accept their four walls and windows" (lines 13-14). There is a bitterness contained within this moment that changes the nature of the comedic. Since irony really is a term that is usually used in a broad sense as it refers to a reality quite different from that which is presented, it could be that Alexie is making use of a rather grim humor to delineate a societal criticism. If, as he implies with the use of the word "accept" regarding Indians choosing to crawl into their own reservation prisons constructed of alcoholic dependency, then we are meant to see, again, Alexie's criticism of his own people who place themselves in roles of dependency.

In "Drought" Alexie, as the poet within the poem writes, "Once, I wrote of dreaming of a country / where

three inches of rain fell in an entire year. / Then I believed it was a way / of measuring loss. Now, I believe / it was a way of measuring how much / we need to gain" (lines 30-35). Thus the poem moves away from sadness and subtle humor to end, seemingly, on a positive and hopeful note. We can envision a lesson learned, an inspiration toward change: "Now," Alexie is stating, Indians should be putting loss behind them and, instead, focusing on making societal "gains" in an effort to change, to break free of the self-constructed "prison" of alcoholism.

In a related example, in the book The Business of Fancydancing, Alexie discusses dreams similar to those mentioned in "Drought," which are seemingly lost due to alcoholism. In "Spokane Tribal Celebration, September 1987" when Seymour, "his dreams / simple as smoke," is wrapped in a blanket, he is content with his "bottle of dreams." He "swallows mouth after mouthful of dreams" and all those gathered at the powwow laugh when Seymour claims that he will "fly through the pine like fire" (lines 9-10, 18, 19, 22). The speaker says, "We all laugh, especially me, because I / know the only time Indian men / get close to the earth anymore is when Indian men / pass out and hit the ground" (lines 23-26). And as the night "keep[s]

singing," Seymour keeps drinking and the speaker "wonder[s] if [he] and the other Indian men / will drink all night long, [and] if Seymour's dreams / will keep him warm like a blanket, like a fire" (lines 32, 37-39). This moment in Alexie's piece is very serious, combining the Native American spiritual inspiration with the abuse of alcohol to create another incongruity. It may be precisely this kind of moment that has led critics to accuse him of merely reproducing damaging stereotypes. But there is another way to see Alexie's achievement here. Kenneth Lincoln's term "comic binocularity" can be applied to this poetic moment because one side of this story can be viewed as being "straight-faced in the facts" while "the other side [is] strategic in the survivalist art of humor" (Lincoln 24). Even though there is alcohol present--and we know from Alexie's consistent thematic discussions on this topic that he truly sees dreams slipping away from the Indian community because of the abuse of alcohol--we can also envision a survival of a people because they still have and maintain dreams and hopes. Alexie has made it his mission in life to see that those dreams do survive for his people; thus, he makes use

of this poetically pathetic moment in an attempt to provide a renewal of the Native American spirit.

In the end, it might be argued that all of Alexie's humor tends to function in support of a larger goal--community building. The very tolerance of joking itself is a part of this process. The humor in "Spokane Tribal Celebration" could be seen as degrading toward the culture of a people because of the loss of the spiritual. However, as author Mary Douglas contends, the Native American community can "permit the disrespect . . . as something of a familial or social agreement" (qtd. in Lincoln 26). In this poem we are seeing a group of people sharing a communal moment; regardless of the alcohol abuse and the critical comment that Indian men may have lost their ability to perform spiritual rituals, this group is still involved in the "Spokane Tribal Celebration," and they do participate in "singing and dancing," a tribal communal activity, and, probably most importantly, they still have dreams. This is where Alexie offers his tribal community a positive understanding about where they are and where they must get to in order to survive as a community of people. This may be why, as Douglas commented, the disrespect of the speaker--when Alexie

claims that "the only time Indian men / get close to the earth anymore is when Indian men / pass out and hit the ground"--is tolerated and, perhaps, even accepted or agreed upon. This kind of criticism is important: it could be that those on the reservation stuck in the cycle of alcoholism need the expression of this serious moment in comic terms to serve "as a wake-up call to the community, which needs to recognize how the dominant culture has eroded, stereotyped, and even erased culturally specific rituals and traditions" (Heldrich 48). This understanding can promote a new, and perhaps even healthier, communal direction.

When assessing the functions of Alexie's various comic portrayals of alcoholism, we should focus on his overall satiric point and emphasis on hard-won hope. We can see this desire for tribal healing, regardless of the alcohol abuse, in Alexie's short story "All I wanted to do is Dance" from the Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. Here the drinking is "familiar and welcome" as Victor performs his dance at a powwow, and his proud, but drunken, parents look on (87). Alcoholism is a dance: "His father passed out beneath the picnic table, and after a while his mother crawled under, wrapped her arms around

her husband, and passed out with him" (88). Later, however, when Victor is an adult, and alcoholic as well, he sits in a bar with a woman who wants to dance, but Victor "wanted to drink and ease that tug in his throat and gut" (88). Alexie often uses the idea of dancing symbolically to represent a tribal custom, a bonding, a communal connection. But here it is a distortion of what is meant as a spiritual event. Early in Victor's youth, he was able to dance, to participate in his tribal custom. However, Victor, through years of witnessing and experiencing the taint of alcoholism, has come to distort and disregard the closeness represented by dancing.

There is, however, so much more that causes Indians such as Victor to turn toward alcohol and away from tribal unity. When Victor gets his paycheck, he stands "in front of the beer cooler in the Trading Post." One person asks another in the store how long Victor has been standing there, and the response is, "I think he's been standing there for five hundred years" (89). Obviously Alexie is pointedly illustrating how the coming of the early white settlers drove, and continues to drive, Indians toward alcohol and the degradation that entails. At the same time, he is "teasing" Victor to try to shake him out of

his complacency and despair. Alexie explains that "it happened that way. [Victor] thought one more beer could save the world. One more beer and every chair would be comfortable. One more beer and the light bulb in the bathroom would never burn out" (88). At the depth of Victor's soul lies the idea that there is "nothing more hopeless than a sober Indian" (87). Yet he does, in fact, have the desire to "drink so much his blood could make the entire tribe numb" (90). The numbness that comes from the bottle can hide the reminders of years of oppression by Whites and the misery of reservation life due to that oppression. However, despite the desire to drown out the horror of life as Indians have known it, Alexie maintains hope. At the end of the prose piece, Victor shares a bottle, "in an intertribal gesture" with a stranger who tells him a significant joke: "You know how to tell the difference between a real Indian and a fake Indian?" the stranger asks.

"How?"

"The real Indian got blisters on his feet. The fake Indian got blisters on his ass" (91).

This moment creates a comic bond between the seemingly confused and lost Victor and the Indian

stranger. It is a bonding that is symbolic of the need for community to ward off the pain in a positive manner. Victor is made to recognize that he has stopped dancing; he has become, instead, a "fake Indian" sitting on a barstool rather than dancing in a communally spiritual fashion. The important insight offered by the stranger brings Victor back to a critical place in his understanding:

> And Victor kept laughing as he walked. And he was walking down this road and tomorrow maybe he would be walking down another road and maybe tomorrow he would be dancing. Victor might be dancing. Yes, Victor would be dancing. (92)

Victor could be victorious over the alcohol; he could find a way to heal himself and his community via dancing. This does not imply that alcohol and its abuse will easily disappear; however, it does suggest that healing is possible. In an emblematic moment, Alexie demonstrates how a joke inspires the main character toward change. This understanding of the function of satirical joking is the foundation of Alexie's work and the key to his hope for creating change within his community. Here, as elsewhere, he is literally telling his people to get up

off their asses onto their feet and dance for change, for healing, and for the community.

Stephen Evans is critical of Alexie's readers who miss the author's intentions and condemn him for allegedly drawing on stereotypes of the drunken Indian without seeing his true mission:

> Alexie [has] essentially moral aims in writing poetry and fiction that is heavily infused with irony and satire, including ethical reversal or extension of stereotypes in order to establish new valences of imaginative literary realism. . . . Much of Alexie's work to date comprises a modern survival document from which his readers gain strength by actively participating in the recognition of reality as viewed through Alexie's satiric lens. (Evans pars 13-14).

This consistent focus on survival characterizes Alexie's writings about alcohol abuse on reservations. Alexie treats these issues with varied comic modes in an effort to restore hope and inspiration to his community. Such satirical humor may be crucial to the survival of his people. The universality of his work comes from the fact

that this form of criticism helps all of mankind face problems, learn to deal with them, and move toward change.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN CULTURES COLLIDE:

RED + WHITE = THE BLUES

Alexie's commentary on the issues related to alcoholism and Native American lives is just the tip of the iceberg. In order to truly understand the dependency related to that addiction, we must delve deeper into, not only the Indian and his participation in that addiction, but the reasons for the addiction, the methods white oppressors used to create the addiction, and the outcome of this Indian/White relationship. One of the more significant, and undoubtedly multi-layered, issues Sherman Alexie tackles in his writings is the outcome of the cultural collision between Whites and Indians. The consequences of this forced relationship are myriad and far-reaching, but Alexie isolates a particular thematic topic that allows for a wide-ranging critique of the Indian and the White: the many conflicts that stem from 'dependency' issues. Alexie treats dependency in both historical and contemporary terms, in some cases simultaneously as he writes about dependency related to

commodities and the historical narratives of the "colonizers" as well as those who were colonized. He addresses these topics via a variety of comic modes--irony, parody, and black humor--in an effort to assuage the bitterness that can come from discussions such as these. The comedic modes he utilizes work in different ways to target the different audiences he writes for and about. After all, Alexie knows that the root of the contemporary problems suffered by Native Americans is a byproduct of the white invasion hundreds of years ago and the subsequent oppression of Indians by Whites. He is highly critical of those historic abuses while finding that even modern day Whites continue to contribute to this oppressive reality. And yet, Alexie also recognizes that, though much blame can be laid at the historical and contemporary feet of Whites, today's Indians also share the responsibility of acknowledging the problems associated with this cultural collision. He often comments in his poetry and prose that those Indians who ignore the problems facing their lives on modern day reservations are missing opportunities to improve their lot in life. If true change toward a positive and

mutually beneficial relationship is to ever occur between these two cultures--and that is one of Alexie's goals because it is a primary focus of his writing--then the medicine he offers goes down a lot easier with a strong dose of humor. Both white and red can swallow the horrible tasting stuff and find healing from the honesty of Alexie's commentary.

Dependency on commodities has become, in Alexie's view, one of the more critical facets of the white and Indian relationship affecting both groups in negative ways. A representation of this can be seen in the poetic prose piece "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys" from the book First Indian on the Moon. Here, Alexie explains how the conquering Euro-Whites discovered a way to gain control over the earliest Native Americans:

> Win their hearts and minds and we win the war. Can you hear that song echo across history? If you give the Indian a cup of coffee with six cubes of sugar, he'll be your servant. If you give the Indian a cigarette and a book of matches, he'll be your friend. If you give the Indian a can of commodities, he'll be your

> lover. He'll hold you tight in his arms, cowboy, and two-step you outside. (Alexie, First Indian 102)

Obviously, this passage indicates Alexie's strong distaste for the methods of the early white settlers in gaining Indian cooperation: make Native Americans dependent--in this case, on the products of the white man --and they will always comply to keep those things accessible. Alexie also seems to be making a metaphorical comparison between Indians and prostitutes. If you pay prostitutes, they'll do anything you ask: they'll "be your lover." Alexie is pointing out how Indians have been bought via the products of white culture: cigarettes, coffee, sugar, alcohol, and fundamental food supplies. These provisions are given in exchange for complete cooperation, as is the paying of a prostitute for her services. Alexie is juxtaposing prostitution to Indian behavior as a way of criticizing the way Indians have been 'bought' by Whites in this history of cultural collision. These items provided so readily by Whites have changed the world of the Indian for the worse, according to Alexie. But with a further touch of irony, he also notes that,

through this relationship of dependency, early Whites hoped to "win [the] hearts and minds" of these people. Though this has the ring of some benevolent action on the part of the Whites as they attempt to bring Indians over to their side, it also puts Whites in the role of the 'John' who has to turn to the Indian/prostitute for his fulfillment. We begin to see a pattern of co-dependency in this example: Whites pay with "coffee . . . six cubes of sugar . . . a cigarette and a book of matches" and in return for these 'gifts,' Whites get a "servant . . . friend . . . lover." Alexie uses this ironic and highly critical moment to chastise both the Whites, who have to pay for cooperation rather than truly winning it via real benevolent actions, as well as the Indians, who will accept pay for their cooperation in this dysfunctional love affair.

This kind of humor that Alexie utilizes in pieces like "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys" is intended to force readers to ponder uncomfortable questions. Because "it's the same old story whispered . . . in every HUD house on the reservation; [because] it's 500 years of that same screaming song," then we have to wonder why the

pattern of commodity dependency continues (Alexie, First Indian 103). Alexie feels that the early white Americans planned this deception knowing the outcomes, and, if this is true, as Alexie proposes, white Americans also believed that these dependencies would bring about the powerless cooperation of nations of proud people who would forever be manipulated because of those dependencies. There is a great sense of remorse evident in this prose passage as Alexie condemns the way his people are still allowing this manipulation to occur in the 21st century. He claims that everyone knows about this dependency as it is "whispered . . . in every HUD house on the reservation." Alexie's use of diction is critical here for an understanding of his bitterness and his condemnation of these issues of dependency. Despite the fact that all Indians are well aware of what is taking place, they don't voice their opinions or concerns aloud, even though, for "five hundred years" this "same old story" has been told. It is a story, in fact, that is really a "screaming song," an angry resentment for those years of dependency, yet Indians have to, or feel they have to, "whisper" the truth rather than "scream" it.

In the poetic prose piece "The Native American Broadcasting System," Alexie uses irony to address more of these disturbing situations. He writes,

> NEWS BULLETIN: The Adolph Coors Corporation is sponsoring a new promotional contest. On the bottom inside of every beer can and bottle, Coors had printed a single letter. The first Indian to collect and spell out the word RESERVATION will receive a train ticket for a special traveling back 555 years. (Alexie, First Indian 85).

The horror of years, centuries even, of alcohol abuse brought on by the white settlers' introduction of that drug to the Native American culture is seen here. We see a huge corporation, the Adolph Coors Corporation, which symbolically represents white America's economic power, promoting a contest that involves loads of drinking. Furthermore, if one could spell out the word that represents Indian oppression best, he is awarded the grand prize of a trip back to the time when the earlist Whites first invaded this country. So much can be seen in this brief passage: Alexie establishes the awful results of

the historical abuses brought on by the introduction of European goods to Indian culture as he illustrates the power and control of Whites, white government and white corporations over the Indian. In the end we are given the ironic suggestion that it would be some kind of great prize to be able to go back to the inception of this horrendous abusive process.

The reality underlying Alexie's comedy in a piece like this is that commodity dependency certainly has been no prize for Indians. As Adrian Louis writes in the introduction to Alexie's book Old Shirts and New Skins,

> We are a disenfranchised people whose lands, cultures and very voices have been stolen, used, and abused. A good many of us are as dependent now on federal handouts for our very survival as we were when we were first caged in reservations in the late nineteenth century. (vii)

Alexie seeks independence for Native Americans though, and his comedy attempts to move toward that goal by mediating the horror and shame of this history of dependency. Richard Duprey writes in his article "Whatever Happened to

Comedy," that the technique of using comic modes can "cure the sores and boils that have formed on the susceptible flesh of history" (Duprey 164). While Duprey is speaking in terms of a myriad of historical abuses rather than Alexie's specific conversations on the matter, his arguments are clearly relevant to this discussion. He maintains that comedy works "as social corrective" by bringing about a "controlled and reasoned disgust" regarding the misbehaviors of "those who appear virtuous" in an effort to "shatter an expected pattern of human action" (Duprey 161-164). In Alexie's works we see the manipulative efforts of white Americans as he creates a "contest" with a prize that no Indian would want to win. The disgust Duprey writes about, and we feel as we are party to Alexie's disgust at this manipulative effort, does not "release the intellect from the problem of witnessing man and his actions"; we must, in fact, face those actions head on. This disgust, when presented in a comic light, can "involve and yet [not] excuse one from responsibility," but it does "leave room for hope and [it can] engender a feeling within us that the wrongs can be and ultimately must be righted" (Duprey 164).

It is with this optimistic idea that Alexie serves up a healthy dose of criticism aimed at all parties involved in this relationship of commodity dependency. Readers will come to this discussion in Alexie's writings in different manners: Whites may envision the abusive and manipulating actions of their ancestors and perhaps find ways to ameliorate the modern situation. Alexie illustrates these disgusting actions in "The Native American Broadcasting System," as Whites have given Indians "a book on survival / and cut out the last chapter"; Whites have given Indians "a car without brakes or a steering wheel"; Whites have given Indians "a manual / for home improvement / without a table of contents" (lines 15-16, 23, 27-29). Likewise, Indians may be shown portraits of themselves that are less than flattering, bringing about what Duprey termed "a reasoned disgust": in the same piece Alexie's speaker says, ". . . I hide myself in / Lester FallsApart's right shoe, waiting / for the next General Assistance / check" (lines 2-5). Indians in this piece hide rather than face their reality head on, continuing to be dependent on the commodities of Whites. These condemnations made by Alexie

against both Whites and Indians are working as Duprey suggests, in an effort to right wrongs. Alexie hopes his honest and frank portrayals of both Whites and Indians will give Whites insight into the abuses against Indians while allowing Indians to gain the inspiration to rise above the historical horrors to achieve independence and strength.

Because of these commodity dependencies, Indians are giving up those elements of their cultural lives that were once a vital part of what it meant to be Indian. In his prose piece "House(fires)" Alexie writes that an Indian "with braids will stand in one place in the bar for years. After he dies, it will be discovered his right foot was nailed to the floor" (Alexie, First Indian 45). Alexie's ironic humor makes a strong point: Indians were handed these commodity dependencies that have kept them subdued, or "nailed to the floor" of a bar, therefore allowing Whites to take control and remain in control. It doesn't even really matter who did the foot-nailing to the floor. If Whites nailed the Indian's foot to the floor, Alexie ponders why the Indian hasn't tried to pry free. The loss intensifies in this moment of dependency when, this

Indian, whose braids symbolize his tribal connection, cannot move from his place in the bar because he has become a permanent fixture. He can't move, or won't move, because of his dependency, and this creates a loss of substantial value as his culture, symbolically represented by his braids, doesn't even help him remove himself from the bar. There is, as Alexie and other Native American writers claim, a true need to review those historical manipulations and their related dependencies in an effort to understand them and get beyond them for the survival of Indians, not only their personal survival, but the survival of their tribal culture.

We can similarly see Alexie's concern for cultural loss related to commodity dependency in his prose passage "How to Obtain Eagle Feathers for Religious Use." Here he again uses irony to further his argument that, because of the dependency of Indians on the "gifts" of Whites, Native Americans have been forced to practice their cultural traditions via the constraints of the dominion of white America. Alexie notes,

> Applications for a permit to acquire eagle feathers for religious use may be made by

> completing the macaroni and cheese dinner, by opening the bag of commodity noodles, by shredding the commodity cheese, by pulling the cast-iron pot down from the shelf, by boiling water and adding a pinch of salt, by paying the light bill, by renting the HUD house, by working for the BIA. (Alexie, First Indian 75-76)

In order for Indians to be able to practice their fundamental cultural spiritual ceremonies, they must participate in this commodity dependency role. Not only do they have to use the commodity macaroni and cheese, but they must even mire themselves in the systems of white America by "renting the HUD house" and by "working for the BIA." The role of dependent Indian is what gets them access to their spiritual accoutrements.

Furthermore, Alexie begins this prose piece citing from a United States Government document that states, "The Federal law protecting bald and golden eagles makes provisions for the use of eagle feathers by Native Americans for religious purposes" (Alexie, First Indian 75). In this context, it becomes important to wonder, "Which came first, Christopher Columbus or the eagle?"

(Alexie, First Indian 75-76) This sounds like the age-old quandary over which came first, the chicken or the egg. There has never been a definitive response to this question, and there cannot be an easy response to Alexie's either. In fact, the pondering of ambiguous questions such as these lead to a strange circular reasoning that really doesn't even allow for an answer. But the question is posed in Alexie's prose piece as an ironic way of alluding to the far-reaching and long-standing dependency between Indians and Whites. And, since Whites have taken total control of the Indian and his spiritual practices and offered in return macaroni and cheese, Alexie's ironic humor once again attacks the dysfunction of this relationship. Commodity food, in this instance, is a humorously symbolic vehicle for satire because Alexie wants to paint a vivid portrait as to how thoroughly white government and bureaucracy has taken control of the Indians' lives. And it's not just the surface of contemporary Indian life that concerns him. More importantly, Alexie looks at the depth to which this dependency has penetrated and contaminated the spirituality of Native Americans. This juxtaposition of

the historical roots and the modern effects of commodity dependency highlight the significance of this abuse. The ironic incongruity of linking the preparation of commodity macaroni and cheese to the spiritual preparations of a religious ceremony intensifies the satiric nature of Alexie's piece. And the inclusion of Columbus only strengthens Alexie's point that the Indians' spiritual lives, historically and in contemporary times, have been subordinated to the basic instinct of survival due to white cultural domination.

Columbus is just one icon of American history who Alexie considers in his poetry and prose as he addresses the relationship of dependency between Whites and Indians. The introduction of Columbus in "How to Obtain Eagle Feathers for Religious Use" highlights another critical issue which is the way the history of white America has contributed to the modern-day problem of dependency faced by Indians. Indeed, Alexie's discussion of dependency often centers on the problematic ways that Indians have been forced to rely on, or even submit to, the historical narratives of European colonizers and their descendants. Columbus, of course, is perhaps the easiest target for

Alexie. In this context, according to Vine DeLoria in his book Custer Died for your Sins, "Columbus jokes gain great sympathy among all tribes" because "the fact of the white invasion from which all tribes have suffered has created a common bond in relation to Columbus jokes that gives a solid feeling of unity and purpose to the tribes" (DeLoria, Custer 147). Kenneth Lincoln agrees: "For American Indians a five-hundred year holocaust exploded in the slipstream of Christopher Columbus. His wake vaporized 97 percent of the 75 to 100 million natives in the Western Hemisphere" (Lincoln 3).

Alexie is in no way subtle about his distaste for what the history of Columbus' voyage stands for in Indian culture. He writes, "Christopher Columbus was a cockroach / and look what followed him" (lines 50-51). In the poem "The Theology of Cockroaches," Alexie's speaker searches for an illusory cockroach that survives anything and can be "associated / . . . with poverty, grinding / and absolute" (lines 17-18). Here Alexie makes use of the mode of black humor: the notion of Columbus as a cockroach is funny, but the situation in which it is used has a tone of extreme bitterness. After all, viewing Columbus as a

cockroach, a creature that can survive even a nuclear holocaust, shows how hard it will be to eliminate the effects of Columbus' invasion. There is also some indication that this cockroach, who can't really be caught or eliminated, will easily continue to survive even, speaking metaphorically, if the lights are turned on. Alexie is trying to enlighten his Indian readers, giving them a chance to see how affected their lives have been by this creature's invasion. In the process we get the feeling that Alexie knows how difficult it will be to exterminate the after-effects of such an invasion. Columbus is a bug, a pest that needs to be eliminated if the "poverty" is to be conquered. Further, the real horror lies in the fact that "cockroaches / are never alone . . . never / the last one on the ship . . . never / the one who dies alone" (lines 46-48). This one cockroach the speaker of this poem seeks represents all of the white colonizers that "could have been . . . sent to test" the "faith" of Indians (lines 72-73). It is made clear in this poem that Alexie believes the outcome of the Columbus invasion is an endless cycle of problems for Indians. And, as the speaker continues "searching / for the cockroach" (lines

94-95), we get the feeling that Alexie knows we can never eliminate the consequences of that invasion. This isn't a problem that Terminex can solve in one visit.

Kimberly M. Blaeser, author of the article "The New Frontier of Native American Literature: Dis-Arming History with Tribal Humor," sees the need to cast off dependency on the narratives of Anglo-American history as central to Native American literature. She finds there is a "weight of history" that must be explored:

> Much of contemporary Indian literature in style alone writes itself against the events of Indian/White contact and, perhaps more importantly, against the past accounting of those events. (Blaeser 161)

As Alexie writes about what has occurred historically, he focuses on figures such as Columbus, comparing him to an illusory cockroach, to analyze the ways in which the history of America has been communicated in White terms and Indian terms. Whites celebrate Columbus Day as a part of America's great past of exploration and discovery. White Americans surely don't view Columbus as a cockroach, but of course, this legendary explorer stands for

something very different to Native Americans. In his poem "Postcards to Columbus" from the book Old Shirts and New Skins, Alexie asks, "Christopher Columbus / where have you been? Lost between Laramie and San Francisco / or in the reservation HUD house?" (lines 5-7) Again, Columbus is an illusory being, difficult to find because the effects of his invasion are still present, but hard to diagnose and cure. There is a bitterness that can be experienced via Alexie's use of black humor here. While white Americans may celebrate Columbus Day as an honorary event, Alexie claims Indians "celebrated this country's 200th birthday / by refusing to speak English and we'll honor the 500th anniversary / of your invasion, Columbus, by driving blindfolded cross-country / naming the first tree we destroy America" (lines 18-20). The poet insists on expressing the bitterness using black humor to be sure audiences, white and red, understand the need to break away from a dependency on white America's versions of history and to evaluate these so-called truths of history with a new and enlightened perspective.

Vine Deloria writes that modern authors such as Alexie present a "reflective statement of what it means

and has meant to live in a present which is continually overwhelmed by the fantasies of others of the meanings of past events" (qtd in Blaeser 161-162). This is why Alexie blends the ambiguity of Columbus as a cockroach scuttling out of view with the Columbus who is lost on a highway somewhere in America. This is not a brave explorer: rather, Columbus is a pest and an explorer who can't find his way. Yet, we must remember that Alexie has his own point of view. His accounting of history has its own distorted 'truths,' but his intentions in re-viewing white historical perspectives bring about an understanding that is necessary for Whites and Indians to proceed toward something better for all involved. These re-viewings of history allow Whites to clearly understand how Indians may not share the same views of Columbus while breaking the dependency Indians are forced to live with regarding historical accounts of the White/Indian past.

A parodic assault on the "great men" of American history form the central part of Alexie's strategy to overcome historical dependency. As Blaeser explains, "Humor [can] work to unmask and disarm history, to expose the hidden agendas of historiography and, thereby, remove

it from the grasp of the political panderers" in an effort to "liberate the reader from preconceived notions and incite an imaginative reevaluation of history" (Blaeser 162-163). Columbus, Custer and Buffalo Bill are three historical white icons who are treated humorously by Alexie in order to reinterpret the history of hurt perpetrated by white Americans. This is the way the author, as Blaeser puts it, creates an "imaginative reevaluation of history." As Alexie reevaluates history, his comic purpose appears to be two-fold: He is, of course, admonishing those responsible for continuing the illusion of the heroic white man in the conquering role and dependent Indians in the role of the defeated. He wants to make it clear that Indians play a part in this historical disillusionment because of the willingness of some to become mired in the hopelessness caused by this cultural collision and to accept the historical narratives that praise men like Columbus, Custer, and Buffalo Bill. Alexie wants both Whites and Indians to take a second look at what happened historically, and he uses humor to make that second look tolerable for both parties in an effort to bring about understanding.

We can understand Blaeser's point by taking another look at Alexie's poem "The Native American Broadcasting System." Here he creates a parodic caricature of Custer: "Custer came back to life in Spokane managing the Copper Penny Grocery, stocked the rubbing alcohol next to the cheap wine: RUBBING ALCOHOL 99¢ THUNDERBIRD WINE $1.24 The urban Indians shuffle in with tattered coats and boots, counting quarters while Custer trades food stamps for cash, offering absolution" (Alexie, First Indian 84). As an icon of white American history, Custer is typically thought of as a brilliant American soldier who fought to end the violence perpetrated by the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes against white settlers in the 1870's. The parody is evident as Alexie turns this so-called icon of white America into a grocery store manager who now conquers Indians by putting rubbing alcohol next to wine on store shelves. Thematically, of course, we are focused again on alcohol dependency, and the reader notices that the rubbing alcohol is cheaper than the wine. Custer, while managing his grocery store, is continuing his earlier work as a killer of Indians. The cheaper rubbing alcohol would kill faster than the Thunderbird wine, and that may be the

reason for the product placement and price. This symbolism insinuates that Indians will drink anything as long as it contains alcohol; more importantly, however, this symbolic episode highlights the manipulation of a white man to keep the Indian dependent. The Indians are forced to deal with Custer because he is the one providing what the Indians have come to need. And it is Custer who provides the "absolution," a type of cleansing. This is a sort of ethnic cleansing, such as the one his historical persona perpetrated centuries ago. And yet, this is a diminished Custer, a shopkeeper rather than a war hero. Such a parody of Custer gives Alexie the chance to expose the deficient self-images of both Whites and Indians in the aftermath of their historical interactions. As Blaeser claims this type of "imaginative re-evaluation of history" allows readers who are white to see a very different portrait of an American icon, but, because the "Indians shuffle in" to give Custer their business, Indian readers can review what that white history means in their contemporary lives. After all, the noble Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse who helped defeat Custer and his troops are also viewed in a slightly parodic manner. Rather than

strong warriors, they "shufflė in with tattered coats and boots, counting quarters" so they can purchase the rubbing alcohol or the wine.

Keith Basso maintains that the type of parody discussed above can be used to evaluate the social interactions of two cultures by juxtaposing the behaviors of each in given and specified situations. Though Basso's writings deal primarily with the Western Apaches and their use of these "joking performances," they are relevant to this discussion of Alexie's parodic writings. Alexie's parodies highlight the limitations of relationships of dependency. When Alexie exaggerates the behavior of Whites, in this case through the image of a Custer who organizes his grocery store to further his white man's agenda, he makes it understood that there are Indians who give this grocery store owner their business. This is, of course, worthy of criticism. At the same time, though, there seems to be mockery here of the businessman who would build his life around this type of commerce. As Basso states, for a clear comic understanding to take shape, it is necessary for the "model [that is] construct[ed] of the white man" to be "judged and

appraised in terms of models that members of his audience [primarily Indians] have of themselves as [Indians]" (Basso 56). The outcome of this appraisal, according to Basso, is to point out how different and "defective" the behavior of the white man is when compared to that of the Indian. While the Indians in Alexie's piece who "shuffle in with tattered coats and boots" may represent alcoholics in need of a fix, we, as readers, are more likely to feel sympathy toward them for their plight rather than sympathy for the Custer character who is, as Basso states of the typical Apache portrait of the whiteman, "ineffectively guided and therefore cause for amusement" (Basso 57). Even though, in Alexie's model, the white man and the Indian are both apparently guilty--one of selling the alcohol and the other of buying it--Basso's discussion holds true because the reader will be able to contrast the actions of both, finding fault with both and realizing what must be done, behaviorally, to change the situation from horrible to positive. This is what Basso found to be the goal of the Apaches in these "joking performances," and, likewise, we can see that this is Alexie's goal. When we think about the parody in these terms, the poem's

deeper irony comes to light. The Indian in Alexie's poem must seek "absolution" from Custer and cheap wine when, indeed, it is Custer who should be seeking absolution from the Indian.

This pattern reappears in many of Alexie's other comic portrayals of Custer. In his short story "The Search Engine," which further illustrates the contemporary results of years of Indian dependency, Alexie claims that "George Armstrong Custer is alive and well in the twenty-first century." He doesn't kill Indians like he used to, with rifles, rather, "he kills Indians, by dumping huge piles of paperwork on their skulls" (Alexie, Ten 10). In this case, the parody ridicules the absurdity of white bureaucratic notions that stem from the first invasion of Whites who believed they were helping the Indians with their modern, white ways. Further, we now see that icon of the great American West as a simple paper-pushing bureaucrat. Alexie, in his attempt to re-view the white historical version of the past, explains that "Indians had learned how to stand in lines for food, love, hope, sex, and dreams, but they didn't know how to step away." Alexie claims that "Indians made themselves easy targets for

bureaucratic skull-crushing." They did, in fact, take "numbers and line up for skull-crushing" (Alexie, Ten 10). The Indian parody found here distorts the warrior image into a portrait of defeat. And it is a defeat that is faced willingly, according to Alexie. This is a complex scenario: we see the tragedy of, again, the dependence of Indians on the white agenda, yet we also are invited to contemplate the rather difficult idea surrounding the reasons why Indians don't "know how to step away."

Basso's notion again comes into play here. Indian behavior is parodied along with the behavior of Whites in order to provide an evaluative tool with which to determine a correct way of socially interacting. Alexie is explaining to his white readers how truly pathetic and non-helpful the programs for Indian services are, while reminding his fellow Indians that if they don't step away, the cycle of dependency continues. If there is to ever be liberation of Indians away from the constrictions and humiliations of the white way of life, then both cultures need to understand the fundamental situations that are causing these cultural crises. In this story, "The Search Engine," we see basic human needs, such as love, hope, and

dreams, placed alongside white bureaucracy, which appears to be the only way to fulfill those needs since Indians willingly "line up." Yet such faith--a faith prompted and promoted as white American benevolence toward Indians--in bureaucracy is exactly what Alexie is parodying. Deloria claims that the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and other white American agencies, has become the subject of Indian humor because Indians are "justly skeptical about the extravagant promises of the bureaucrats" (Deloria, Custer 160). Alexie vividly portrays the image of the modern-day white cowboy, who no longer uses a weapon that shoots real bullets, but rather a weapon filled with bureaucratic bullets, and Indians have no choice but to "line up." These bureaucracies were introduced historically as ways of saving Indians, and the white icons that white America reveres are the so-called saviors for creating these governmental band-aids. Alexie, however, does not see these institutions of white America as being helpful at all.

There is another famous white American that Alexie often draws upon, using parody, to re-evaluate the historical dependencies brought on via the red/white

collision: William Cody, also known as Buffalo Bill. Indeed, Bill is placed in many of Alexie's writings as a historical symbol used to comment on several facets of Indian life such as alcohol abuse, historical misperceptions, the commodification of the Indian culture, and the dependency of Indians and Whites alike. In Alexie's poem "Evolution," from the book The Business of FancyDancing, the poet obviously points the finger of distrust at the white hero, but he includes an element of blame for his own people due to their willingness to allow such injustice.

Evolution

Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on the
reservation
right across the border from the liquor store
and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

and the Indians come running in with jewelry
television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded
buckskin outfit
it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo
Bill

takes everything the Indians have to offer,

keeps it

all catalogued and filed in a storage room. The

Indians

pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last,

they pawn

their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin

and when the last Indian has pawned everything

but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for

twenty bucks

closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over

the old

calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN

CULTURES

charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter.

(Alexie, Business 48)

This poem symbolically represents the dependency of Indians on Whites for the money to buy liquor. After all

a white man, Buffalo Bill, has cleverly established "a pawn shop on the reservation right across the border from the liquor store." Alexie is critical here of the willingness of the powerless to allow the powerful all the control. All of the power revealed in this poem is in the hands of Buffalo Bill. We can see this as Alexie makes use of action verbs to illustrate his point because it is Bill who "opens . . . stays . . . takes . . . keeps . . . closes . . . paints . . . calls" and finally "charges." The Indians simply "pawn." They hand it all over, and "when the last Indian has pawned everything but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks" too. The image of this pawning of "their hands, . . . thumbs, . . . skeletons, . . . heart," is important as the Indians, in Alexie's view, have been the pawns of Whites for materialistic purposes since the early white settlers arrived. These willing victims of Bill's consumerism appear to be created as evidence of "the messy aftermath of abuses of America's natives . . . while advertisers continue to turn tricks and make bucks" (Lincoln 4). Furthermore, we are shown--and Alexie is obviously critical of--Indian passivity and dependency as items of

materialistic value (VCR's and TV sets) are handed over as easily as the items of critical value (hands, hearts). Everything is pawned in a willing way because we see that "the Indians come running."

The tragic elements of this poem are contained in the images of the Indians losing/giving everything to a white man. In the poem the "border" represents the boundaries, both physical and cultural, that hold the Indians in; further, the idea that the Indians "come running" is an evaluation of the position Whites have put Indians in because it is here we see the Indians' need to have to pawn everything in order to survive. They pawn all they own, including a "beaded buckskin outfit," which can be seen as a cultural symbol that significantly represents tribal identity. In fact, the creator of that buckskin outfit, Inez Muse, carries a symbolic notion along with her name: a muse is a source of inspiration, and it appears that Alexie, in using this term, is making a statement about a great loss of inspiration, and thus, of Indian culture as a white man takes this cultural symbol for his own greedy motivations. But we can't ignore one of Alexie's major points: the Indians have become so

dependent on this white man that these items are handed over without a fight. Alexie wants his readers to sense this tragic loss of cultural identity in a clear fashion as he condemns the willingness of Native Americans to hand themselves over in such a passive way.

Thus, we can find Alexie's use of irony related to this dependency of the Indians on Whites in the title of this poem: "Evolution." This implies an upward movement of a people, whereas the poet is really emphasizing the "devolution" of Native peoples. The fact that Indians have pawned away their culture to a white man who, ironically, opens the "Museum of Native American Cultures" using the work of their lives, the soul of their existence, and then charges them to enter to see their own lives certainly illustrates the theft of the Native American culture for white exploitation, a topic Alexie writes about with great fervency. Because the Native Americans find it necessary to "come running" to pawn their items, they seem to have lost their independence "on the reservation" and must rely on this white man to supply them with the money needed for survival. We can also see, within the ambiguity of the last line, that it is possible

that some Indians actually pay "five bucks a head to enter" this museum. These Indians have been made dependent, and, clearly, the title of this poem reflects Alexie's distaste over this situation that Native Americans continue to allow in their communities. And it is with this criticism that Alexie hopes to turn things around and bring his people out of the devolutionary cycle into one that has more promise, upward movement, and positive outcomes for Native American society.

However, the truly devolutionary behavior can be seen in a review of the actions of Buffalo Bill, a symbol for white oppression and manipulation in this poem. Ironically Bill, himself, can be seen as dependent on the Indians. After all, he needs what they have in order to be successful. Alexie is giving us a picture of a societal dysfunction, a kind of co-dependency that is not in any way evolutionary. Within this historical parody, the irony of Alexie's title exemplifies the satirical view of both white and Indian peoples as all are a party to enabling this devolutionary behavior.

Yet Buffalo Bill profits in this story despite, and really because of, the dysfunctional nature of the

relationship between Indians and Whites. In fact, Buffalo Bill's historical behavior, though condoned and even idealized as a valued effort in white historical thought, used the Native Americans of his time in a similar fashion as Alexie's parodied portrayal. Much of William Cody's fame comes from his so-called courageous efforts during the Civil War as a Union scout who led missions against several Indian tribes. He earned his nickname, Buffalo Bill, because he killed so many buffalo--4,280, to be exact. Furthermore, related to the context of Alexie's poem, Bill was the star of a traveling theatrical troupe that presented dramatizations of battles between Whites and Indians, using real Indians on stage. This exploitation is what Alexie turns his critical eye on. In the poem and in real life, Indians willingly took part in the exploitation, and Alexie desires an end to this dependency, as stated above. But Bill is not allowed any dignity in Alexie's poem either. Bill actually did, and does in this poem as well, put the Native American culture on display for the world, promoting it for his own cash gain and denying the humanity of those Indians in the process. Yet this so-called American hero, who fought in

real Indian battles, is no longer a great warrior figure either; instead, he is a shopkeeper who needs the Indians and their things in order to be successful. He "takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it all cataloged and filed in a storage room" until the time he is ready to display the culture for his own greed and personal profit.

This leads us to another interesting irony found within the parody when, at the end, Bill has opened his museum, and he "charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter," sounding very much like a scalping. What is historically considered to be a barbaric Indian atrocity of the earliest centuries of America, Alexie is attributing now to a white man who represents white Americans and their barbarity that is, and has been, more subtle in society (or fictionalized to promote the heroic status of white Americans). In fact, there has been some historical discussion about an alleged event when Bill claimed he not only shot and stabbed an Indian warrior named Yellow Hair, but he also said that he scalped Yellow Hair in less than five seconds. This scene was witnessed by those attending the performances of Bill's Wild West

Show as he glorified his battle with Yellow Hair on stage ("New Perspectives"). As with the earlier example of a contemporary Custer killing Indians with piles of paperwork, Alexie here paints a portrait of a white Western legend that now does damage to Indians in the business world rather than on a battlefield. To further the parody, Alexie is critical of the fact that Indians should have to pay to see their culture on display; this is, indeed, a scalping of the most notorious variety. Alexie wants his readers to see history and all of its misconceptions about the Indian and White relationship in an ironic, yet extremely honest light, so we are forced to question the legitimacy of, and dependence on, the white version of historical events.

This co-dependent relationship between the Indians and a white man found in "Evolution" is what Kimberly Blaeser claims authors are doing in order to "soften [the audience's] resistance to 'betrayals' of historical dogma" while also attempting to "incite the audience's own re-reading of history" (Blaeser 164). This parody of Bill can be seen as a tool of Alexie's to provide that important re-reading of history. Bill, like Custer and

Columbus, takes on a different meaning when viewed through the Indian lens. Here the comedy serves to ridicule the actions that Buffalo Bill has been lauded for by white American interpretations of history. Alexie's poem falls into what Blaeser terms a "playful reversal" of what we expect. This type of "playful reversal" can "overturn the enshrined account of history," while authors who draw upon this theme work to "arouse in a reader an awareness of the way that history can and has been possessed" (Blaeser 167). Even Freud comments on this type of historical re-viewing calling it an "unmasking" or "a procedure for making things comic with which we are already acquainted--the method of degrading the dignity of individuals by directing attention to the frailties which they share with all humanity," such as the desire for power and the easy acquiescence of those lacking the power. Further, Freud believes this "unmasking is equivalent to an admonition" (Freud 170). Alexie is, no doubt, finding fault with everyone in this poem, both the powerful and the powerless.

Additionally, adding another level to this discussion related to Bill's purchasing and displaying of Native

American culture for his own profit, Blaeser finds that "these stories challenge readers to reconsider the readily accepted treatment of the remains of primitive cultures as museum objects and the implied hierarchy that allows or endorses such practice" (Blaeser 164). Because Indians are stuck in a society that requires them to give up their human dignity for purposes of survival, they willingly pawn even their "skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin." We are shown the loss of cultural structure that cannot even hold the people together any longer due to the dependence on this white man. When Bill has taken everything, he then "closes up the pawn shop," sealing out the possibility of Indian repossession of their property, and, as in the old days of broken treaties, Bill "paints a new sign over the old," thus glossing over his exploitation and even indicating how history has been glossed over and truths hidden.

Alexie perceives the dysfunctional behaviors as Whites and Indians attempt to co-exist, and he is attempting to, in satiric fashion, "undeceive the self-deceived. . . . In achieving so much--in enlightening the foolish without destroying them--it accomplishes the

purpose which comic drama is uniquely capable of bringing to pass" (Hoy 23). After all, reading Alexie's work is not a comfortable thing for Whites to do, but the humorous undertones of his writing and the way he shares the responsibility for the dysfunction between Indians and Whites can open a dialogue and increase understanding of the problems we face. Since the parody and irony Alexie employs in "Evolution" is aimed at all the involved parties, Indians and Whites alike, Alexie "can evade the conflict, relieving the stress . . . [with] laughter. He may enable [the reader, White and Indian] to adjust incompatible standards without resolving the clash between them" (Sypher 45). It may be that Alexie, in discussing this devolution involving both cultures, is using his comic writing in a very specific fashion:

> Comedy can be a means of mastering our disillusions when we are caught in a dishonest or stupid society. After we recognize the misdoings, the blunders, we can liberate ourselves by a confident, wise laughter that brings a catharsis of our discontent. . . . If we can laugh wisely enough at ourselves and

> others, the sense of guilt, dismay, anxiety, or fear can be lifted. Unflinching and undaunted we see where we are. This strengthens us as well as society. (Sypher 46)

Alexie's humorous treatment of these themes which address the problem of dependency as an outcome of the White/Indian conflict serves the clear purpose of reminding readers that the dysfunctions of our society continue to create problems. Yet, with the comic moments, we see a will toward survival, and, more importantly, the potential toward an understanding between the two cultures, and a need to find a peace and resolution in order to live together in ways that are beneficial and meaningful for both cultures. Literary critic Ron McFarland reflects on Alexie's writings and claims that, though any author's writing that touches on such hurt "could give way to bitterness," Alexie "makes the pain and anger bearable for the reader" not due to the "hope, love, and compassion" of his writings but more so because of the humor found within Alexie's texts (McFarland 260). Cyrus Hoy, though writing about classical literature, makes a good point relative to Alexie's satire:

> When faith in the ideal collapses under the accumulated weight of the evidence which exposes it as illusory, when a person is forced to recognize the truth about himself and others (the truth being that human purposes are neither unmitigatedly pure nor eternally steadfast) then we are confronted with a situation, in art as in life, wherein the forces of comedy and tragedy are equally and ever so delicately poised. (Hoy 56)

When the characters of Alexie's works come up against life's difficulties caused by the collision of cultures, they suffer the pain of the experience. Alexie lays his criticism at the feet of those deserving criticism, while proving to the world that, because of the laughter behind the pain, Indians will survive. These ideas behind Alexie's writings and their purpose also relate to Keith Basso's claim that when a writer juxtaposes the behaviors of the Indian alongside that of the whiteman, we can see the behaviors of the latter as "an image of ineffectively guided behavior, of social action gone haywire, or an individual stunningly ignorant of how to comport himself

appropriately in public situations" (Basso 48). Lincoln likewise discusses the Native American need to witness the misdeeds of the whiteman in an atmosphere of humor, along with "a good dose of sarcasm, resigned laughter, and a flurry of ironic rez jokes" in order to "exorcise the pain, redirect their suffering, draw together against the common enemy-cultural ignorance" (Lincoln 5).

This idea of working against cultural ignorance rather than finding the enemy to be wholly white Americans, allows white readers to come to Alexie's literary dinner table and partake, perhaps creating an understanding of this cultural conflict that may reduce the pain and lead to a relationship from which all can benefit. But, by far, Alexie's goal in writing about this conflict that began with the arrival of Columbus and continues to this day is to uplift Native Americans and to inspire them to regain dependence, end passivity, rebuild cultural traditions and communities, while envisioning a better life. Alexie's honest evaluations peppered with his use of humor can accomplish these goals. John Lame Deer explains it best:

> For a people who are as poor as us, who have lost everything, who had to endure so much death and sadness, laughter is a precious gift. When we were dying like flies from the white man's diseases, when we were driven into the reservations, when the Government rations did not arrive and we were starving, at such times watching the pranks of a heyoka must have been a blessing. We Indians like to laugh. (qtd, in Lincoln 58)

Sherman Alexie, through his use of humor, offers this satiric medicine for his people's survival, to inspire hope within them, and to attempt to release some of the bitterness that so obviously exists because of the cultural collision between white Americans and the indigenous peoples of this land.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SURVIVAL: REBUILDING TRIBAL UNITY AND IDENTITY

In addition to an analysis of the complex problems found on Indian reservations, Sherman Alexie's poetic vision also turns its focus toward equally complex solutions to those dilemmas. Thus, as we have uncovered more of that proverbial iceberg, we cannot help but look for the positive outcomes that will not only salvage the relationship between IndianS and whiteS, but rebuild Native American communities by making them strongly independent in American society.

Therefore, Alexie first spends writing time looking at the various ways Native American tribes have lost their sense of community, their cultural ties, and those experiences that bind the people on the reservation around common goals, dreams, and a way of life. Victor, in the short story "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," voices Alexie's attitude toward this loss of tribal connection when he wonders, "Whatever happened to

the tribal ties, the sense of community?" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 74) Unfortunately, Alexie's character is at a loss because he "realizes he cannot turn back toward tradition and that he has no map to guide him toward the future" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 134). The lessons, the values, the cultural concepts that generation after generation pass down that should strengthen tribal communities have, in Alexie's view, been lost and/or tainted by assimilation, alcohol, poverty, fear, hunger, need, bureaucracy, and just a plain old sense of giving up. If a young person has "to figure out what it meant to be a boy, a man . . . Indian," when "there ain't no self-help manuals for that last one," then something important has been lost (Alexie, Lone Ranger 211). Yet Alexie, in his work, seeks to move beyond this sense of loss. He utilizes various modes of the comedic to express hope for the rebuilding of his people's community.

Critic John Lowe claims that "a great deal of Native American literature centers on irony" because--and he quotes Native American poet Duane Niatum here--"complete survival is at stake, survival of the traditions and survival of what [the Indian] represents as a people"

(Lowe 196). We can easily relate this notion of Lowe's to Alexie's use of irony when discussing his people's struggle for communal survival. For example, there was a time in the Native American tradition that Indian men were warriors, heroes of their people, who protected and provided for the tribe. Young men were taught their traditional roles and then assumed them with pride. However, Alexie writes of the warrior of today as something quite different from the strong, capable and noble Indian of the past. When he writes, in his short story "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," of "two Indian boys who wanted to be warriors," he claims that "it was too late to be warriors in the old way. All the horses were gone." But Alexie holds out hope for the tribal community when he continues the tale of these two boys who "stole a car and drove to the city. They parked the stolen car in front of the police station and then hitchhiked back home to the reservation." Times change, traditions are lost, and two young boys with the desire to transition into manhood, yet without the ancient warrior ways of becoming men, must reveal their bravery and make the passage into adulthood in more modern ways. So "when

they got back, all their friends cheered and their parents' eyes shone with pride. 'You were very brave,' everybody said to the two Indian boys" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 63). The loss is evident because the two boys couldn't participate in their ancestors' warrior ways, yet the ironic humor of this situation--the boys stealing a car rather than taking wild horses on a warrior's journey, arriving at manhood via grand theft auto rather than by counting coup--provides the situation with humor and thus hope: there is still a way for the young to participate in their culture's traditional life passages.

Of course Alexie is not asserting that his people ought to go out and steal cars to reclaim their heritage, but the ironic presentation allows for a close look at the past tribal victories alongside the present, where Indian communities are struggling to find ways to create new tribal victories. This attempt to reinvent tribal honor is Alexie's way of envisioning a brighter, stronger communal future, and the irony is what communicates this. His target audience in this reinvention of tradition would primarily be the Indian reader, who would be affected by this commentary about the loss of tradition, but who is

also being asked, by Alexie, to find other ways to bring tradition back. Lincoln calls this a "dialectical inversion" or a "ritual transformation" which he claims lies at "the heart of Indi'n humor" (Lincoln 10). Alexie, as we shall see further, is the master of this transformation, usually presented as an ironic juxtaposition of past and present. If his people cannot maintain community without the traditions of the ancients, he suggests, then Indians must find other ways of coming together. If he had read Alexie, Critic Cyrus Hoy would have deemed this episode "a fine display of the incongruity of human intention and human deed" (Hoy 5). Because this incongruity--stealing a car rather than re-claiming stolen horses as in the traditional manner--is, as Hoy claims it is, "the essence of comedy," then we can see Alexie's purpose in giving us two extremely disparate images in this context (Hoy 5). Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that "laughter is simply the sudden perception of incongruity between our ideals and the actualities before us" (qtd. in Corrigan 26). Thus, we can expect that Indians reading Alexie's text could laugh and learn from this perceptive ironical suggestion about

the reclamation of tradition even if it is done via modern vehicles. Furthermore, it is through this act of desperation born out of the loss of tradition and the disempowered feelings Alexie attributes to his Indian characters that this theft of a car is transformed into an act of resistance.

Resistance, of course, requires an understanding of the issues surrounding the meaning and potential of tradition. Alexie utilizes the warrior as a symbol of survival as he explores the problems related to this breakdown of communal bonds. Alexie explains, in his prose piece "Warriors," what life on the reservation really was like for young boys struggling with their cultural identities as the traditional ways of passing down the sacred and significant get lost on the modern reservation. He explains,

> Fistfights were common among the Indian boys. . . . We were kids searching for some way to demonstrate our physical strength, courage and leadership abilities. We desperately wanted to be traditional Indian warriors. Generations earlier, we might have hunted deer, battled

> against neighboring tribes and the United States Calvary, sung traditional songs together, and war-danced in the same circle. However, in the absence of these traditions, we brutalized each other and established a hierarchy of contemporary warriors. (Alexie, <u>One Stick</u> 42-43)

With the loss of warrior culture, this is one way Indians can rebuild their traditions and thus create honor.

In this example, Alexie finds an ironic antidote to this loss of tradition by juxtaposing the warrior-ideal and the world of modern sports as he writes about "a reservation Little League baseball team called the Warriors." He continues to explain that "Indians recognize irony when we see it. During that summer [when Alexie was a youth on the reservation], irony played third base" (Alexie, <u>One Stick</u> 44). Again, the irony found when these two incongruous, thus ironic, juxtaposition of ideas--traditional Native American experiences juxtaposed with baseball and fistfights--work together to instruct Indians to find ways to rebuild and re-bond, so tribal communities can survive and flourish regardless of the cultural loss. Readers could see these attempts at

restoring tradition and culture as being somewhat pathetic, considering that this author is making the claim that baseball and adolescent brutality can somehow replace the warrior legends of Indian history. Yet, Alexie's use of humor is not working here in the service of criticism. He is attempting to illustrate the various means by which Indians can still come together "as a team" to offer young Indians those opportunities for passage into manhood, for coming together as a unified people, and for rebuilding that which has been lost.

As the previous example suggests, Alexie's goal is to show his Indian audience that there is a way to re-unite. Yet, he also wants to prove, via his ironic humor, that static traditional ideals are not the way to rebuild Indian communities. In fact, Alexie often devalues the attempts to maintain the ancient traditions. Consider the way, in the prose piece "Special Delivery," that he writes of a storyteller named Thomas Builds-the-Fire who "was a storyteller that nobody wanted to listen to." The reader is told that "that's like being a dentist in a town where everybody has false teeth" (Alexie, <u>Business</u> 39). Thomas tells so many stories--symbolic of the Indian tradition of

storytelling--that "the other Indians hid when they saw him coming, transform[ing] themselves into picnic benches, small mongrel dogs, a 1965 Malibu with no windshield" (Alexie, Business 39). There seems to be little to no point in keeping a tradition alive if the community runs from that tradition. Through the character of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, Alexie is parodying a stereotypical image of the traditional ritual storyteller to make the case for finding other ways to create tribal unity. Even Thomas sees himself in an ironic light. While he knows that Victor's father is going to leave before anyone else knew and calls partly upon tradition to explain how he knows, he offers an ironic twist: "I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt it in the sunlight. Also, your mother was just in here crying" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 61). Thomas mentions a sacred, traditional way of knowing things, yet it is really the secular or the provable fact, that Victor's mom was just in the store crying, that explains how Thomas really gets his knowledge. This juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular gently parodies the former, but in the process offers the hope, through humor, that Indians can still

maintain a sacred and traditional way of knowing, even if it is tainted by the modern ways of the world. Indians should be allowed, as Thomas' character illustrates, to re-envision tradition. Viewing that tradition through the lens of parody is a valuable criticism of those who insist on living in the past while tribal communities fall apart. It is Alexie's hope that new traditions can re-unite those communities, and in laughter, all can accept the gentle reprimand and re-envision the possibilities.

Readers of Alexie's works might muse over the reasoning behind his use of the sacred in this seemingly disrespectful and perhaps even somewhat blasphemous way. Yet, it can be maintained that this combination of such spiritual, sacred ideals with the secular and modern adaptations of tradition on contemporary reservations is actually a preservation of something essential to Indian culture. As discussed earlier in the presentation of Basso's work, those parodies of behavior that may appear as criticisms are meant as humorous jabs at the flaws of humanity in an effort to highlight the ways that change can actually uplift a people. Kenneth Lincoln argues that the parodic element in Indian humor actually strengthens

Indian communities. In his view, which Alexie seems to prescribe to as well, the reliance on past traditions hasn't been the key to communal unification. When Alexie combines the "sacred and profane" or the spiritual and the secular, Lincoln would say that a "bisociation" or "having things both ways" occurs, and this is what "characterizes much ceremonial Indian humor" (Lincoln 38). This is a "permitted disrespect" which allows for the conversation to occur "without bitterness" (39) in the hopes of a cultural and communal reformation. We can certainly see this as Thomas, himself, in the above example, combines both the sacred and the secular means of knowing in a manner that allows for the traditional to exist in an updated, modernized way. This is the hope that Alexie has for Indians: that the loss of ancient traditional ways won't defeat his people, but that they will find new ways to rebuild and re-unite, and his parodic humor sends the message without condemnation.

In addition to addressing the need to reinvent tradition, another major theme in Alexie's work is the absence of heroes in Indian society. Here, Alexie turns to other comic modes, reflecting the fact that the lack of

heroes represents, for him, a more complicated threat to survival. When dealing with Indian heroes and tribal leaders and their significance to tribal unity and survival, Alexie moves toward a more aggressive call to action. In the short story "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore," Alexie uses black humor and a touch of irony to share his memories of life on the modern reservation where tradition and heroism are hard to find. Though we read of Native American heroes such as Crazy Horse and Leonard Peltier who fought to keep their tribal communities whole and strong, in Alexie's story those are not the heroes of today. Leadership in the form of heroes is critical for Indian survival, according to Alexie, because "Indians need heroes to help them learn how to survive" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 49). After all, a community of people grows stronger when there are role models to provide inspiration. Native American tribes historically have had these leaders, yet life on the reservation has caused a change in this communal necessity. This story speaks of the dysfunction found on contemporary reservation communities because of the loss of heroes who guide, inspire and unite.

The black humor in this tale expresses a tone of bitterness because of this loss of reservation heroism; therefore, it is appropriate to begin the analysis with a discussion of Alexie's ideas regarding this loss that are not as obviously humorous as earlier examples. It can even be rather difficult to spot the humor because of the overwhelming bitterness in Alexie's tone. (Of course, that is the way black humor often functions as a comic mode.) One of the characters on this reservation who stands as a hero to the community is Julius Windmaker, a young man with a last name that connotes elements of Indian tradition and the sacred found in Indian society. While he was once the local basketball star, he ends up "in the backseat" of a tribal cop car for throwing "a brick through a BIA pickup's windshield" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 49). This action is not really one that is synonymous with his honorable name, and yet, like the young men discussed previously in this chapter who steal cars and fistfight for tribal supremacy, there is a rebelliousness here that indicates a desperate need. Something is missing in the society of these young people. It is a constant struggle to become and remain heroic on a

reservation, and the defiance illustrated in this scene is an understandable response to frustration related to an ill-defined method of passing into manhood. The difference between this tale of Julius and the humorous depiction of the young men who steal a car is important: This topic of lost heroes is one that Alexie sees as a more significant issue in the survival of Indian communitie; therefore, he tackles it with a bit less humor and a more aggressive attack on the system that breaks these heroes. While the car theft worked to show Alexie's hope that tribes can and will find ways to unify despite the loss of historical traditions, this scene of the rebellious hero is quite simply a bitter lashing out at a societal band-aid that really offers no hope. The defeat seen in Julius' action clearly indicates the low level of respect reservation Indians have for the BIA. This white American organization, in Alexie's view, is another broken traffic light--the title of the story symbolically suggests a dysfunction beyond a mere traffic signal--not functioning on the reservation but rather contributing to a loss of hope and feelings of frustration. While some of this criticism is aimed at the white community for its

failed efforts on reservations, Alexie clearly has much to say to Indians about the nature and need of heroism. The BIA is a failed and broken system, according to Alexie, but so is the Indian community that allows the dysfunction to destroy its leaders.

Julius' broken image as hero gets further examination by Alexie as the basketball star plummets into despair. As Victor and Adrian, the story's narrators, sit on the porch, which they do daily for, it seems, a lack of nothing else to do, they see Julius "stagger down the road . . . at two in the afternoon . . . drunk as a skunk" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 50). This is the Julius who "had that gift, that grace, those fingers like a goddamn medicine man," who "scored sixty-seven points" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 45) in the big basketball game in Spokane. But he can't continue as a hero in a broken culture. He drinks and ends up "at the end of the bench, hanging his head" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 51). He becomes another one of those "reservation heroes . . . who never finished basketball seasons" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 47). In fact, in the end, Julius Windmaker doesn't live up to the grand nature of his ancestral name; he makes wind on a symbolic

lower level as "he groaned and farted" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 53). Heroic dignity is demolished with this image, and it's Alexie's use of black humor, which can also be seen as burlesque because of the baseness of the humor, which conveys a deeper understanding of this incident. While Julius could be a healer--he has "fingers like a goddamn medicine man"--he, instead, contributes to the illness of his society as he turns to alcohol and falls from honor on the basketball court. This is no fallen warrior on a battlefield, which would carry a strong sense of honor with his death. Rather, it is a drunk, who is certainly no warrior, farting away his chances for honor and turning his heroism into a tragic farce. The black humor works in such a way as to create a relief from the bitterness of such losses while exposing a very real problem in Indian society. However, there is no denying the anger in Alexie's tone as he satirically reminds his audience of the dangers of giving up on heroic aspirations.

The humor of this situation does not take the edge off of the criticism. Alexie clearly has some pretty strong ideas about the behavior of heroes and their

importance in Indian society. While some of his work is a gentle nudge toward change because of the choice of comic mode, the use of black humor in this story is not meant to be gentle at all. He exposes a very real truth about reservation communities; with the loss of the warrior/hero and the effects of that loss come the dysfunction and destruction of Indian tribes. Alexie's insistence that change is necessary is not tempered by his humor: the importance of that change is actually fueled by the bleakness of these scenarios. Northrop Frye has written about the various phases of comedy pointing to the fallen hero who "does not transform a society, but simply escapes or runs away from it, leaving its structure as it was before." Julius has done this in Alexie's story as he runs away and hides in an alcohol bottle leaving his community with one more fallen hero to contend with. Frye writes that there is a "more complex irony . . . when a society is constructed by or around a hero, but proves not sufficiently real or strong to impose itself." In this way, we see "a hero's illusion thwarted by a superior reality" (Frye 95). In this case, the superior reality could be seen as the overwhelming influences of alcohol, a

lack of community unity, the loss of cultural continuity, or any other tragic condition that makes a reservation hero fall from grace. Julius could not, in his weakness, transform his community as the warrior/hero archetype, thus his fall is also the fall of his community. Alexie is insisting that the survival of Indian communities relies on the strength of the heroes of those communities. Those heroes cannot be weak, alcoholic, or sick, and Alexie's use of this dark comic mode confirms his desire to put an end to the failed heroes found on some reservations.

Julius isn't the only fallen hero in this tale: another is Silas Sirius, a character with a name that suggests a heavenly, sacred significance. He was a star. He "made one move and scored one basket in his entire basketball career." But "he flew the length of the court, did a full spin in midair, and then dunked" the ball. He literally "flew, period" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 47). Again, as Sirius is a star, the brightest in the sky, actually, Silas was a "real ballplayer," but that "damn diabetes got him" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 48). Silas was a memory, and in the way of the Native American oral tradition of passing

essential values from one generation to the next, it was important that "a reservation hero [be] a hero forever." Alexie writes that a hero's "status grows over the years and the stories are told and retold" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 48). But when these heroes like Silas, a true fallen star, and Julius fall prey to the modern problems of reservation life, it feels to the people of the community "like a funeral and wake all rolled up together" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 51). The end of these heroes robs the people of hope as Victor and Adrian remember "all of [their] heroes, ballplayers from seven generations," and the way "it hurts to lose any of them because Indians kind of see ball players as saviors" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 52). If saviors can't save, but instead fall victim to the same fates many normal Indians fall victim to--poverty, alcoholism, diabetes, and lack of motivation--then what will become of the Native American community?

In his darkly comic presentation of failed and fallen heroes, Alexie highlights a point made by other critics regarding the emotional impact of failure. Cyrus Hoy, in his writings about the use of comedy in situations many would deem tragic, finds that this idea of the failure of

heroes "is the greatest irony of life: that man can envision an ideal of good, can passionately desire to achieve it, and yet fails to live up to it" is a "failure [that] can occasion either tears or laughter: tears in recognition of the fact that this is the way life is, laughter at the folly of those who fail to recognize that this is the way life is" (Hoy 6). Alexie's use of the various comic modes deals with this in a manner that is critical to both the white and red audience as, philosophically, all of humanity can strive to achieve the higher ideals that make heroes, but we all fail, as well, and this is a human trait we share. Since Indians need heroes, according to Alexie, to provide an image of hope, strength, and community, the failure of a hero should cause great consternation because, as Alexie is maintaining, this hero is needed to save the culture. His writings use humor to remind his readers of this fact without bringing too many of the tears Hoy speaks of. Despite the loss of heroism and honor, a certain self-knowledge can be attained through these misadventures; it can, in fact, "lead ideally to a fine enlightenment from which" all involved "cannot but benefit" (Hoy 6). That is

Alexie's hope in these texts. His work both condemns the actions that lead to these losses and humorously identifies the causes that really can be overcome if communities are strong enough to find other ways to build a tradition and other ways to create and maintain heroes and honor.

One of the strongest images of this loss of heroes and its devastation to the tribal community occurs in the opening scene of this same story as Victor and Adrian play a game of Russian roulette. When Victor holds "the pistol to [his] temple," he "was sober but wished [he] was drunk enough to pull the trigger" (Alexie, <u>Lone Ranger</u> 43). It is at this moment that the two notice "that the only traffic signal on the reservation had stopped working" (Alexie, <u>Lone Ranger</u> 44). When the heroes fade away, the community structure is lost. As stated earlier, this malfunctioning signal symbolically illustrates the dysfunction of modern reservation life. Here we see two men who don't have the strength to rise above the dysfunction of their community, so they exist somewhere between apathy and suicide. Again, the black humor is evident as Alexie combines the hopelessness of suicide

attempts with a malfunctioning street light. His criticism, however, is not solely aimed at Indians. He explains that "it's hard to be optimistic on the reservation" as heroes fall from fame. But their fall isn't only due to the weaknesses of the failed heroes. It's hard to be a hero when adversity torments the spirit. Alexie ironically comments on the strength Indians have to "survive the big stuff" such as "mass murder, loss of language, and land rights." However, it is much harder for them to survive "the white waitress who wouldn't take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 49). It's the heroes, according to Alexie, who teach survival, who create a feeling of unity in the community, and inspire a culture that will survive and thrive for future generations even amid the indignity perpetuated by white culture. The bitterness of black humor is evident, pointing a large critical finger at the way Whites have contributed to this significant loss. The traffic signal is representative of white culture because its appearance on reservations most likely came from white intervention. And yet, the signal doesn't work: white influence has left its mark both on the landscape and

symbolically as a reminder of the dysfunction white society has perpetrated on Indian culture. Tribal culture, like the heroes of this story, like the broken traffic signal, gets broken and destroyed so that even suicide seems to be a viable way out. Alexie doesn't just find fault with Whites, however: we can see that he criticizes his fellow Indians too who choose suicide, or the escape route, rather than making attempts at new heroic deeds.

In light of the example discussed here, it is fair to wonder about reservation life and what it holds, then, for these characters and their community. No longer do the Indians have the dignity of the great warriors of the past; in this tale they prowl the streets of the reservation, "little warriors looking for honor in some twentieth century vandalism" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 44). Again, though, Alexie uses irony and these incongruous ideas mentioned earlier, to illustrate the need for a reinvention of those traditions that brought honor and unity. In the story after a year elapses, Victor and Adrian still sit "on the same front porch in the same chairs." All they did "in between" (Alexie, Lone Ranger

50) was eat, sleep and read the newspaper. Their motivation, it appears, much like the motivation to repair the traffic signal, or rebuild their community, has dissipated along with their hopes for something better, along with their cultural solidity. After all, "what's the point of fixing [a traffic signal] in a place where the stop signs are just suggestions?" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 52) There is a momentary concern regarding traffic accidents should the light not be repaired, but when only "one car an hour" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 48) passes by, what difference does it really make? On this reservation the notion of salvation, symbolically represented by a malfunctioning street light whose dysfunction doesn't even matter, is also superfluous. Because the Indians have been robbed of their culture, they have lost their heroes and their motivation. They've given up, and Alexie sees this as a failure of the Native American community. But again, he has the desire to save his Indian heritage and strengthen the communities of his people. Alexie stated once in an interview with Laura Baratto in 1995 that "most of [his] heroes are just decent people. Decency is rare and underrated." He said, "I think my writing is somehow

just about decency. Still if I was keeping score, and I like to keep score, I would say the villains in the world are way ahead of the heroes. I hope my writing can even the score" (Baratto). We should assume that Alexie is speaking of the villains who brought the street light and won't fix it (white bureaucrats) as well as the villains who continue to sit back, give up, and lose faith, looking for ways out rather than ways to rebuild. Alexie is demanding, using his black humor, that these "decent" people see themselves as capable of action, of taking heroic challenges and rising to the occasion to rebuild their communities as the leaders of old would have done.

Oddly enough, despite this seemingly hopeless situation, Alexie's conclusion to this story suggests that he really does believe there can be a rebuilding--a reparation of the malfunctioning street signal, if you will--of his people's community. There is a ray of hope at the end of this dark story in the idea that new heroes can appear to bring life and hope back to the people. Although Julius Windmaker has lost his heroic status to become a "bum," a new "little warrior" appears on the scene, a third grader "with scarred knees, wearing her

daddy's shirt" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 53). The shirt is a symbolic reminder of the traditions that generations of Indians used to pass on as it comes from her father. This child named Lucy "is so good that she plays for the sixth grade boys team," and the hope is expressed that "she makes it all the way" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 53). In a final symbolic moment that occurs after Adrian and Victor see this girl walking down the street, Adrian takes his empty cup and throws it across the yard where it "revolve[s], revolve[s], until it [comes] down whole to the ground." While these two reservation miscreants watch this cup, which is empty now (of hope?), "the sun rose straight up . . . and settled down behind the house" affirming that there is great possibility ahead (Alexie, Lone Ranger 53). In the same manner that the sun revolves around the earth to always rise and bring a new day, this cup revolves before landing in the yard, whole. Symbolically this action represents Alexie's hope for a better future and a stronger community not marred by dysfunction but instead revolving around the heroes that were and the heroes that are to be, keeping alive that which supports, inspires, and motivates. Alexie leaves

the reader of this tale with a sense that all is not lost, that even though the traffic signal doesn't flash red anymore, and possibly never will again, and the new hero could just as easily fall short as the old heroes have, we still get a feeling there is hope here in the re-creation of a new hero. Alexie wants his Indian readers to keep fighting and not give up or give in to those things which cause dysfunction, and, most importantly, he wants his readers to find inspiration for community building in any place they can.

We could envision this ending symbolically, calling it the "we-must-live" ending which, on the one hand, "assumes a note of quietly desperate urgency," as Cyrus Hoy maintains regarding darkly humorous works that end with this hopeful note. He claims that these endings "rally adherents to the cause of life, and give everybody a feeling of hope. . . . They will work harder in the future, and tomorrow will be better" (Hoy 307). Certainly readers will leave this tale with a sense of sadness as well as hope, but Alexie's goal is to leave his Indian readers "beyond despair." According to Hoy, this still allows for an ending that is "beyond tragedy" because "the

incongruities of human nature--sublime and ridiculous, noble in intention but ineffectual in action--have been too strenuously insisted on, and too explicitly demonstrated, for tragedy. The sense of life going on . . . keeps the end of these [stories] from despair" (Hoy 309). This is all too true of Alexie's tale because we are left knowing that heroes will come and go, but the community will survive and find ways to keep going despite the losses.

The recurrent theme in Alexie's writing that brings together these issues is basketball. In his work, even though Indians can't be warriors any longer, through basketball they can find a unifying element, something that brings them together communally. Ironically this unification of people is not found any longer in the sacred and traditional cultural practices of Native Americans. This reflects Alexie's complex attitude toward tradition. But why has Alexie chosen this particular athletic endeavor--basketball? Critic Philip Heldrich maintains that "laughter combined with such present-day traditions as basketball . . . can help to bring the tribe back together, renewing a sense of custom, ritual, and

community." He writes that Alexie utilizes this contemporary sport for this purpose. Tribal members must find something to replace their lost traditions, so they "celebrate community by creating new rituals" (Heldrich 54-55). Alexie also seems to see basketball as a vehicle for stressing the beauty of contemporary Indian life and people. As Alexie himself writes, "Basketball is like this for young Indian boys, all arms and legs and serious stomach muscles. Every body is brown!" In fact, according to Alexie, "there is nothing as beautiful as a jump shot / on a reservation summer basketball court" (lines 6-7), and those young Indian boys who "can run / up and down this court forever" can even "leap for a rebound / with [a] back arched like a salmon, all meat and bone / synchronized, magnetic, as if the court were a river, / as if the rim were a dam, as if the air were a ladder / leading the Indian boy toward home" (lines 15-20). The reverence for natural beauty and the simile comparing an Indian boy to a salmon making its way home is juxtaposed with the beauty of athleticism to communicate Alexie's message: basketball has great potential as a re-invention of Indian tradition.

Alexie writes most compellingly of basketball and its importance to tribal culture in his five-part poem entitled "Why We Play Basketball." It is clear that there is something significant in the game:

> We were Indians who wanted to play basketball. Nothing could stop us from that, not the hunger in our thin bellies, not the fear of missed shots, not the threat of white snow. (Alexie, Summer 21)

The game means so much more than just a game: it means "war, often desperate and without reason" (Alexie, Summer 24). Again we envision this image that Alexie draws on to make his point about the need to re-invent the warrior archetype in modern civilization. It represents a bringing together of a people who "play because [they] believe in [their] skin and hands. These hands hold the ball. These hands hold the tribe" (Alexie, Summer 25). The perceptive reader will see that much can interfere with tribal tradition and Indian unification. However, Alexie writes of the strength that comes from this new traditional bonding. He claims that nothing can stand in the way of the fierce drive to hold his people together,

not hunger, not fear, and not white snow, all things that a white reader could acknowledge as being related to white oppression and white influence on Indian culture. It is critical, in Alexie's view, that something--here it is basketball--represent a war against the fracturing of the Indian community, and in this respect, it represents a place where heroes can emerge. Even if the tribal heroes, as with the drunk ballplayers from "Traffic Signal," "never finish high school" or "never finish basketball seasons," even if they play drunk, "they have an uncompromised status, since the basketball hero acts as a common symbol which binds together the community" (Heldrich 55). We also see Alexie's subtle irony in his basketball tales. It is basketball, not a uniquely tribal traditional event, that provides the communal ties that offer hope. Alexie is definitely attempting to supplant his new, modernized version of tradition to replace those that have been lost in an effort to give his people inspiration. If basketball is seen as a typically American sport, then Alexie's choice of modernized tradition is fascinating in that it reconciles the Indian community's place in the larger community that is America.

This reveals a larger irony; after all, Indians are the true Americans. In this way, Alexie's choice of symbol not only offers hope to Indians, but also reminds white Americans of the original community that was once Indian only.

In other works of Alexie's, he writes that "Basketball is a series of prayers" (Alexie, Summer 42). Even when an Indian stays away from the game for any length of time, he can return to it because "the old feelings and old moves are there in [his] heart" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 127). In fact, the game, metaphorically speaking, is so significant that Alexie writes "that basketball should be our new religion." He goes one step further to indicate how it could renew the spirit of the tribe and bring back the important traditions that hold his people together when he explains that "a ball bouncing on hardwood sounds like a drum. . . . an all-star jacket makes you one of the Shirt Wearers." Then he asks, "Do you think it's any coincidence that basketball was invented just one year after the Ghost Dancers fell at Wounded Knee" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 147). Again we see Alexie combining the ideas of the past with the modern

concept of basketball to, in an ironic fashion, utilize the incongruity of an athletic event as a balm to cure the hurts left after the massacre at Wounded Knee. Obviously Alexie knows it's ridiculous to contemplate that basketball, or anything really, could heal the history of hurt, but the irony of this contemplation is what helps his Indian peers to rise above the despairing impression that this hurt has left behind on nations of Indian people. As mentioned previously, this hurt can be assuaged through the humorous lens Alexie looks through in order to emphasize his hope for renewal and a rebirth of the tribal spirit of community.

In the end, it isn't just survival that is required, but a change, a hope, a unification of a people that Alexie hopes to inspire with his writings. Alexie is sure his tribal culture will survive despite everything that deters that goal. His use of humor is the proof of his belief. He writes, "Do you believe laughter can save us? All I know is that I count coyotes to help me sleep" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 152). The traditional Indian trickster archetype of the coyote is used in a suggestive way to offer the expectation of a tribal communal future.

Coyote is a creature who loves to laugh. "He's survived the holocaust, as have Indians, and both laugh. . . . Coyote is scruffy, spunky, satiric . . . and he loves to laugh at the moon and man" (Lincoln 132-133). Coyote is also "an animal personification of the comic will to survive" (Lincoln 134). In this sense, Alexie's use of this symbolic creature is a highly appropriate way to conclude this discussion. The fight is still alive within the human spirit: this is what provides hope. Knowing that there is a future that contains tradition and community is what leads to that hope. Alexie wonders,

> Can you hear the dreams crackling like a campfire? Can you hear the dreams sweeping through the pine trees and tipis? Can you hear the dreams laughing in the sawdust? Can you hear the dreams shaking just a little bit as the day grows long? Can you hear the dreams putting on a good jacket that smells of fry bread and sweet smoke? Can you hear the dreams stay up late and talk so many stories? (Alexie, Lone Ranger 148)

Even though this generation of Indians lives with the notions "of HUD house, of car wreck and cancer, of commodity cheese and beef," there are those "who carr[y] dreams in the back pockets of their blue jeans" (Alexie, Lone Ranger 142). Even though "the reservation is more than pain," it is "double happiness, too when . . . the fancydancers or the basketball players or the comic book collectors [are] all dreaming of a life larger than this one . . . between magic and loss . . . between tipi and HUD house." Alexie writes powerfully, "I can stand up . . . through your destruction . . . through my destruction . . . through our destruction . . . and I'll make fists, furious" (Alexie, First Indian 43-44). This is the strength, the pride, the spirit that Alexie wants to infuse into the hearts of Native Americans everywhere, so communities will grow strong again, rebuild and re-bond, and find new traditions to pass on to future generations. Kenneth Lincoln can sum it up best:

> We've survived a shared struggle and come together to laugh about it, to joke about what was and where we have come, even if the humor hurts. It is a kind of personal tribalism that

> . . . composes itself in extended kin and clan,
>
> and ends up defining a culture. (Lincoln 63)

Alexie's tales and poetry hit hard truths aimed at Whites and Indians alike, but, as he states himself, "Humor is the most effective political tool out there because people will listen to anything if they're laughing" (West par 38). And if they're listening, they're learning, and if they're learning, they could be inspired to begin changing. Sherman Alexie wants this above all else.

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