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**Stereotypical Self-Images of Native Americans
in the Novel *Reservation Blues*,
and Short Story Collections
The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,
and *The Toughest Indian in the World*
by Sherman Alexie**

Master's thesis

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PREFACE

The initial idea for this thesis originated in a surprising discovery that regardless of the fact that Sherman Alexie is probably one of the most widely known and acclaimed Native American writers of today, and also an individual who tends to be very keen on public performances and appearances in media, expressing his personal views in interviews in the manner that frequently verges on political incorrectness, the burning issue in Native American press as well as in his writing, the stereotyping, seems to have been overlooked by the majority of interviewers, critics, and researchers.

Hence, the primary aim is to analyze a selection of stereotypical images of the Native Americans on the example of the characters in Sherman Alexie's prose works and organise the discovered stereotypes into groups, each including also a general overview of the historical development of the particular stereotype and mapping the basic characteristics, patterns of behavior, appearance, and attitudes of the representatives of one stereotype or another. In this discussion, the thesis concentrates mainly on three books by Alexie, published during the last decade of the 20th century and is relying on two collections of short stories - *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) – and the novel *Reservation Blues* (1995).

Several characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto ...* stories and *Reservation Blues* overlap, being present also in Alexie's earliest works, such as his debut collection of poetry and stories, *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992), although each work involves, additionally, characters of its own and a shift of focus while representing and narrating a character's story. *The Toughest Indian In the World* presents an entirely new set of characters, a generation of late 20th-century success-stories, thereby offering a more contemporary and updated outlook on the Native American 21st-century reality, yet raising the issue of another, newly emerged form of Indian stereotype, and moving away from the reservation as the setting, towards large cities and socially, professionally, and ethnically more diverse urban community.

At the core of the research lies a close reading of prose by Sherman Alexie with a special attention to character analysis within the framework of social and cultural study of Native American history. Since the stereotypical images that have influenced the self-perception of the Native Americans have been created and labeled largely by Anglo-American society, a selection of illustrative examples will be provided from relevant (mass) culture. An analysis of these examples from the perspective of cultural theory and cultural semiotics is provided in a separate chapter. In addition, the necessary discussion of the theoretical aspects, i.e. the part of the research belonging to the realm of cultural studies, included an analysis of stereotypes as a social phenomenon (the patterns of their origins, impact on society, etc.).

With the exception of the initial two chapters, one providing an overview of Sherman Alexie and the suitability of his works for a study of stereotypes, the other entangling with the stereotypes as a phenomenon in the key of cultural studies, the overall structure of the paper enables to follow the diachronic timeline in the evolution of representation of Native Americans and map the changes occurred within Native as well as Anglo-American society from that particular aspect. Each chapter discusses one particular model of Native stereotype and analyzes the most typical formula in its appearance, behavior and characteristics of the stereotype on the example of Alexie's characters, as well as provides a brief history of the stereotypical representation:

1) The Flat Indian characters represent colonial attitude towards the Native Americans, depicting them as primitive people. Alexie has constructed the stereotypical representation predominantly by means of newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, and other types of text in mass media, and thereby commented on some events in the story line from the perspective of stereotyped attitude towards the Native American population.

2) The Warrior. The second stereotype could be characterized as an over romanticized representation of all Native Americans as the descendants of warlike bands. The warrior archetypes are typically described as heroes with breath-taking stature in appearance, a higher degree of courage, pride, and inexhaustible steadiness of mind. Good examples of the stereotype are the former Soviet Bloc Western movies featuring Gojko Mitic, and also some of the late 20th-century Hollywood productions.

3) The Mentor. The third group concentrates on the overly romanticized icon of a Native American as a know-it-all exorcist, a spiritual leader and a medicine man as if a role congenial to all individuals with Native background. That kind of stereotype became especially popular in the 1960s in connection with the New Age movement. Thomas Builds-The-Fire emerges as one of the main characters in both Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues* and short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, as well as in his first poetry collection *The Business of Fancydancing*. Thomas Builds-the-Fire represents the prototype of an Indian seer, the psychic and the storyteller.

4) The Political Bum. The Political Bum can be viewed as a negative alteration of the Warrior-type stereotype - the difference lies in the nonexistence of the dignity and stoicism attributed to the Warrior representation. The common marker for this stereotypical image could be deliberate self-destruction through alcohol. These a(anti)social types have found their way of exhibiting their protest against Anglo-American world through their refusal to live up to the generally appraised social standards, through (to a certain extent) intentionally self-imposed unemployment, often spending their days drinking and hating the "white America". Their acts of hatred manifest have given rise to a derogated image of Native Americans among the non-Indian society, and dangerously shaken the ethics of their own people. Alexie provides an abundant gallery of that sort of characters, young and old, male and female, all hopeless and wrathful (e.g., most of the background characters).

5) White Collar Redskin. The recently emerged young generation of educated, success stories as lawyers, businessmen, and artists of Native American origin form the fourth group. As a new phenomenon, arisen mainly since the 1990s, these contribute especially to the characters in Alexie's latest collection of short stories, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, in which Alexie examines the possibility for remaining Indian while accomplishing a certain level of wealth and social status.

NB!

The categories of the stereotypes are coined by the author of the thesis and are not meant to be in any way offensive, despite the somewhat politically incorrect labeling used. Instead, the names have been construed so as to be as illustrative and explicit as possible and underlining a general marker for the images belonging under the given group of stereotypical representation.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

In the thesis, the following abbreviations have been used in the place of the full titles of Sherman Alexie's works:

<i>BFD</i>	<i>The Business of Fancydancing</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Reservation Blues</i>
<i>Tonto</i>	<i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven</i>
<i>TIW</i>	<i>The Toughest Indian in the World</i>

INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of the thesis is to analyze a selection of stereotypical images of the Native Americans on the example of the characters in Sherman Alexie's prose works. In this discussion, the thesis concentrates mainly on three books published during one decade: *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was published in 1993, *Reservation Blues* in 1995, and *The Toughest Indian in the World* in 2000.

Several characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (henceforth in the thesis referred to as *Tonto*) stories and *Reservation Blues* (*RB*) overlap, being present also in Alexie's earliest works, such as his debut collection of poetry and stories, *The Business of Fancydancing* (*BFD*)(1992), although each work involves new characters of its own and a shift of focus while representing and narrating a character's story within the story or collection of stories.

The Toughest Indian In the World (*TIW*) as the more recent publication involves an entirely new set of characters, quite suitable to the changed situation and corresponding to the up-dated set of issues that Alexie puts forward in this particular collection of short stories. Now the reservation residents have been replaced by a generation of the late 20th - century success-stories - lawyers, writers, architects - thereby offering a more contemporary outlook on the Native American 21st -century reality and, yet, raising the issue of another, newly emerged form of Indian stereotype - the considerably well-off up-and-coming White Collar Redskin.

Although the study into Alexie's writings forms the backbone of the thesis, in a broader sense the research provides a diagram of the development in the most typical representations of Native Americans in the period ranging from the 19th century to the present time, thereby dealing with Native American studies on a more general plane and including illustrative material from American film classics, literature and mass culture.

The theoretical foundation relies on cultural studies and cultural theory and, to a marginal extent, cultural semiotics. The former theoretical aspect makes use of publications by acknowledged Native American authors (Paula Gunn Allen, Vine Deloria Jr., Simon Ortiz, Duane Niatum), the latter concentrates more on the scientific explanations of the working mechanisms in the emergence of stereotypes as such, their impact on people's identity, etc.

In most general terms, the methodology can be described as a qualitative research in Native American studies with interdisciplinary approach. The research method has been selected on the grounds of its place in the field of cultural studies where it has been favored for its concentration on cultural meanings through participant observation, including interviews, focus groups, textual analysis, and the like (Barker 2000:27).

Alexie seems to use the stereotypical images as a metaphor and a tool to describe the need for establishing an authentic ethnic identity, independent from the limited and largely generalized imagery generated by mass media and mass entertainment industry, on the verge of the 21st century. Sherman Alexie's straightforward statements in various interviews abide the revelation of his underlying intention to break free from these constraints of stereotypes that, upon a collision with each other, have influenced the Native American self-conscious negatively and led to a confusion among the Indians trying to (re-)define themselves as a cultural minority within an ubiquitous Anglo-American civilization.

It is necessary to point out right in the beginning that Alexie's characters cannot be taken for a prompt and clear-cut exemplary material or a direct quotation of the well-known stereotypes and the typical Indian representations *per se*. Predominantly they should be considered as forming a thought-provoking basis for the discussion of stereotypical images. Alexie provides the reader with a set of components, but the

summing up has been left open to be the reader's own responsibility; he gives hints, but avoids to articulate "the correct answer" or to impose "the right solution" on the audience. However connected with the stereotypical images, the characteristics, appearance and behavior of the characters have been given an ironical twist by the writer, and it is the very 'twist' that abides the foundation of the problematics in this thesis.

In many ways the thesis can be regarded as belonging to and dealing with the sphere of cultural studies. At that, the general approach is relying on the definition of culture proposed by Stuart Hall ("Cramsei's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" in D. Morley and D.-K. Chen (eds). 1996. *Stuart Hall*. London: Routledge, 439¹): "By culture /.../ I mean the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society. I also mean the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life." In a word, culture deals with the shared social meanings expressed in the various ways in which people perceive the world. All these aspects as ingredient elements of culture as well as of formation of identity form the main point of departure and interest throughout the thesis.

Methodologically, a research in Native American literatures seems to be a complicated procedure that, in addition to the ordinary process of investigation of the materials available, requires also, at some point, certain choices to be made on the basis of a subjective ethics and individual attitudes. Unlike in many other disciplines, Native American literature is still wanting an acknowledged, reliable and working methodology for research. For example, Paula Gunn Allen, the prominent writer and scholar of Native American studies, has suggested that the methods used in American Indian studies inevitably vary due to the interdisciplinary character of this particular field of research (Allen 1986: 6). The diversity of Indian social roles, such as the difference in the locales

¹ Quoted in Barker 2000: 8.

with different realities in everyday lives and living conditions increases the complexity of developing a universal and simultaneously appropriate theoretical formula in methodology.

The most prevalent point of view among the Native American literary (and cultural) theorists as well as writers seems to be that the existing Western or Anglo-American theoretical canons and paradigms are non-applicable and inappropriate for a proper treatment of Native American literature and/or culture. For example, Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop* claims that the (non-Indian) students learning traditional American Indian literatures tend to apply the terms “primitive”, “savage”, “childlike”, and “pagan” to these literatures simply because they approach them in terms familiar to them, failing to recognize the unsuitability of the general literary concepts in this case, as they serve quite different assumed purposes; for example the Native American authors have, as a rule, never been setting a pure self-expression as a goal of its own for their writing (Allen 1986: 54-55).

This relatively radical approach voiced by P. G. Allen, denouncing all western canons, can be regarded as a justified one when it comes to the traditional, i.e., older literary heritage of the Native peoples of North America including legends, ritual- and myth-related songs and stories; what the so-called Western understanding perceives as ‘literature’ is somewhat of a wider notion in Native American literary tradition, it entails much more for the aboriginal peoples of North America than a mere self-expression of the author’s individual creative talent or his/her skills in using intertextual references. For the Native Americans, as a rule, literature in its traditional meaning cannot be regarded separately from the religious, mythical, and historical elements, both collectively as well as individually (i.e., for the author, if there exists one, and for the listener/reader). The trouble with the non-existence of suitable theoretical methodology occurs also in the case of some of the contemporary writers who consciously follow the traditional principles in their

writing.

In the criticism and research on most of the contemporary writers, however, the above-mentioned rigid and off-putting approach can be questioned. One of the aspects that should not be overlooked is the aspect that the predominant number of the most acknowledged Native American authors, Sherman Alexie among others, have received their education at non-Native high schools and universities and have attended Creative Writing, Literature, or American Studies programs under the supervision of Anglo-American professors. Consequently, their innocence in terms of unawareness and of having managed to remain intact by the most widely spread theoretical “Western” streams of thought in theory and literary criticism can be considered more than unlikely. There is no doubt that the contemporary Native American writers are part of the general American scene of fiction and poetry; to build barriers by claiming otherwise is a mere expression of an over-romanticized view based on the atmosphere of the emergence of the Native renaissance of self-awareness.

Theoretically speaking, it can be argued that Sherman Alexie and his writing allow a discussion of the issues from the postmodern perspective. Many of the things incorporated in postmodern writing, such as the subjectivity of history and blurred genres or negativized rhetoric including elements of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy, antitotalirization – all of which are mentioned, for example, by Linda Hutcheon in her *The Poetics of Postmodernism* among the characteristic traits of the Postmodern theory - are found also in Native American works. Sherman Alexie, who has paid an equal tribute to the mass media alongside with the traditional Native American elements in his writing, serves as a good example of a symbiosis of the Postmodern and the traditional. Thus, many aspects in postmodern approach do bear at least some degree of relevance for the research on Sherman Alexie’s writing.

It must be noted, however, that due to the presence of traditional symbols as specifically Native elements, some postmodern aspects should be treated with certain theoretical reservation and cultural caution. Namely, many aspects that Hutcheon emphasizes as characteristic traits of the postmodernist approach, can also be regarded as ancient Indian elements, such as the interest in and involvement of the past, the blurred dividing line between truth and fiction, fragmented timeline, multiple narrators, to name only a few examples. When dealing with works of a contemporary Native author, these overlaps cannot be attributed to postmodern influence with certainty, since the elements have been present in Native literature long before the Postmodern came into existence. Another question, of course, is whether the contemporary authors use the elements because of their knowledge of the traditional Indian literary traditions or because they have been exposed to the postmodern traditions. For example, Hutcheon refers to narrative, especially novel, as *the* genre of Postmodern and, therefore, the focus of attention for discovering the postmodern phenomena in literature. On the other hand, narrative is also profoundly established in Native storytelling tradition. One of the main characters of Alexie's prose works is a typical storyteller, Thomas Builds-the-Fire (a more detailed discussion follows in the Chapter on the Mentor stereotype), who provides an illustrative case here: should he be seen as a traditional Native American archetype of a storyteller or a postmodern conveyor of the narrative focus?

Of the aspects of postmodernism according to Linda Hutcheon that seem of little relevance to Native American contemporary writing on the example of Sherman Alexie's works can be mentioned the non-existence of a sharp contrast between the notions of truth and untruth, history and fiction (cf. the concern with the opposition in Postmodern theory). Another point to bear in mind that has a special tradition-conditioned importance for Native American writing is the meaning of history within the context of the so-called

Indian time, which presumes that all moments in past, present and future are intertwined and interdependent, thus making the postmodern reviewing of past from a contemporary situation impossible – time cannot be divided into separate temporal segments.

However, there are more of aspects that allow a postmodern reading of Alexie's writing than not. 'Contradictory', 'political', 'historical' as some of the key-terms in postmodern theory emphasized in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* can also be used to describe the overall impression when reading Alexie (or many other Native authors).

One of the aspects that deserves attention is the use of parody as a typical weapon used in the ex-centric writing. Many Native American authors have underlined the importance of humor for survival, and Alexie has not been any exception. The parody eases the burden of having been seen as a victimized ethnic group for decades, if not centuries. Alexie builds up a parody of Native self-identity and the media-conditioned, stereotyped vision of Indians as an ethnic group by using easily recognizable images from Western classics to American and European history with a certain twist. The twist is allowed by a contemporary outlook that enables to play with the past as well as current elements by approaching them from different surprising angles, creating a parody by means of including old and well-known elements in seemingly absurd situations, or as Hutcheon describes the phenomenon in postmodernism, by creating 'difference in the heart of similarity' (Hutcheon 1988:11). Yet the understanding of timeline - the traditional Indian time - sets a crucial difference here. In traditional view, the time is a circular movement in which each moment is connected to another in the past as well as in the future. The western linear temporal perception, to make a generalization in order to illustrate the radical difference here, serves as a notably more fertile soil for creating an ironical element out of an incorporation of the 'old' as generally the mind is set for the future, without looking back.

A number of stories in the short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, as well as the novel *Reservation Blues* can be considered as falling into the category of historiographic metafiction or at least involving several elements characteristic of the historiographic metafiction as presented in Hutcheon's book. Alexie's fictional characters include and frequently speak of many famous figures of American history, such as Oglala warrior chief Crazy Horse and his adversary General Custer. But more importantly, the author consciously rewrites the history by turning certain 'historical facts' upside down or simply narrating them from an unorthodox point of view (e.g., in the short story "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire", a pony giving an eye-witness account of a battle scene between Indians and the military forces). Alexie involves historical characters, but positions them into different time, different situations, or simply approaches their deeds from a notably different perspective, challenging certainties in a most postmodern way; such is the case in *Reservation Blues* in which the prominent figures of the American military history Mr. Armstrong, Mr. Sheridan, and Mr. Wright, running the recording studio Cavalry Records and being the producers for the all-Indian rock'n'roll band Coyote Springs, have been brought into the contemporary world and placed into the entertainment industry.

Logically enough, one of the most directly relevant aspects in postmodern theory with respect to the Native American cultural studies is the concept of what Hutcheon has named the ex-centrics (Hutcheon 1988, especially Chapter 4: "Decentering the Postmodern: The Ex-Centric", 57-73), among whom belong also the racial minorities. Many aspects emphasized to describe the issues or characteristics in literature (or theory) with regard to the black writing or feminist writing, applies equally well to Native American culture and its theoretical treatment, such as W. E. B. DuBois' reference to a "double consciousness" (Hutcheon 1988:44) characterizing the ethnic (or gender)

minorities within dominant culture, or Terry Eagleton's assertion of the discursive nature of 'truth' as subject to the existing power relations, ideology, etc (Hutcheon 1988: 178, 184). Stereotypes combine in them both aspects – they set up a double consciousness of the imposed image and internal identity, and, secondly, allow a manipulation through the power relations as being typically ideologically loaded.

There can be a number of parallels drawn between the characteristic concerns and elements in Native American literature and culture as well as those of other marginalized groups (African Americans, feminists, etc). Two of the most notable elements present in Alexie's work and also underlined by Linda Hutcheon as the hallmark of the ex-centrics, are a fascination with 'freaks' as the characters (e.g., Alexie's geeky storyteller Thomas Builds-the-Fire compulsively telling stories that no-one wants to listen) and the interest in the regional, even peripheral (with the exception of the collection *TIW*, the setting of most stories by Sherman Alexie is Spokane Indian reservation).

Hutcheon's assumption that postmodernism is 'the most over- and underdefined' term there is in the cultural theory (Hutcheon 1988:3) could be said just as well about the Native American writing today. With an increasing interest in different kinds of minorities, the research in Native American cultures has become a mainstream enterprise. Although especially the scholars with Native American background are juxtaposing what is viewed as the 'characteristic' and traditionally meaningful in tribal literatures with the Anglo-American or European traditions, so far an established methodology of how to approach critically the Native American literature is still to be discovered. Until then, the existing theories must do and will do - at least when applied to contemporary writers and while keeping a watchful eye for traditional elements existing side by side with the postmodern ones.

THE PROSE OF SHERMAN ALEXIE – A SUITABLE BASIS FOR DISCUSSING NATIVE AMERICAN STEREOTYPES AND IDENTITY

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, can be considered one of the most prominent contemporary Native American writers today. His work has received an equally laudatory feedback both from the literary critics, as well as the Native American and also non-Native reading audiences, and his writing having turned into bestsellers and award-winning books is a clear evidence of the fact.

Sherman Alexie was born in October 7, 1966 in Wellpinit, Washington. The Spokane Indian reservation that serves as the setting for many of his literary works, including the works discussed in the given thesis, is the author's familiar home reservation. First and foremost it is the reservation of Sherman Alexie's childhood years, as he left for studies in a white Catholic school, then college, and eventually moved to Seattle, being by the time already a published and acclaimed writer.

The more notable milestones of his success as a writer include the following prizes and nominations: the National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1992, the collection of poetry entitled *I Would Steal Horses* by Slipstream Publications followed. 1992 Notable Book of the Year by *The New York Times Book Review*, winner of the *Slipstream's* fifth annual Chapbook Contest, citation winner of the PEN / Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction and the 1994 Lila-Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award.² The turning point was *The New York Times Book Review*, 'the epitome of all reviews', which hailed Alexie's book of poems and stories, *The Business of Fancydancing*³, which was chosen in

² Available at <http://www.gc.maricopa.edu/Honors/alexie.html> (The homepage of Glendale Community College), accessed January 12, 2001.

³ Banks 1995.

1992 by *The New York Times Book Review* as its Notable Book of the Year⁴. The collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* in 1993 and his first novel *Reservation Blues* released in 1995 by Atlantic Monthly Press followed.

Alexie has also received awards for his poetry, starting from his first book of poetry, *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992), in which he combined the short story form with poems. The author himself has claimed in various interviews that he considers himself primarily a poet – “Poetry is my first love. Fiction is an arranged marriage.”⁵, and in fiction prefers himself as a short story writer rather than a novel writer.⁶

The abundance of materials on Alexie as a writer and the number of articles is significant. The key words used most often to describe Alexie’s writing tend to be “virtuoso of vocabulary”, “vivid imagery”, and “irreverent humor”⁷. Most of the reactions to his writing or his persona bear a praising tonality; many articles (among which is perhaps the most notable acknowledgement to the role of the writer is the special issue on Sherman Alexie of the *Studies in American Indian Literatures (SAIL)*, Vol 9, No 4, Winter 1997, Series 2) entangle a diverse selection of various topics discovered in his writing. Taking into account the overall interest among the critics in the author and the attention paid to his works, it is more than surprising to note that both the question of stereotypes and their impact on the Indian conscious and identity seem to have been overlooked. So, for example, the afore-mentioned special issue of *SAIL* sets its main focus on such topics as the use of *doppelgängers*, magic and memory, popular culture, rock'n'roll and blues, whereas ethnic identity and stereotyping have been marginally mentioned.

⁴ West and West 1998.

⁵ Campell and Dailey 1998.

⁶ Online interview with Sherman Alexie. Available at <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/com.../transcript.asp?userid=2UK192519J&eventId=218>, accessed January 12, 2001.

⁷ Banks 1995.

It is an even more surprising observation due to the fact that Alexie himself has a tendency to raise this issue in a very straightforward manner when interviewed. As a rule, his answers tend to exhibit a great concern with the Native American self-esteem in the cultural sense, intertwining it with the topic of stereotypes. At that he seems to approach the stereotyping done with an obvious disapproval, whereas he rarely spares neither non-Native American nor Native American population. For instance, in response to a stereotyped question regarding his Indian background and its influence on his writing, the author replied:

That sort of question assumes that Indians have limited lives, or that there are only nine kinds of Indians. Every moment that happened in Shakespeare happens in my tiny little reservation, every day. Writing about Indians and being an Indian actually makes me original and eccentric. As far as I've known, there is only one loud-mouth, arrogant Indian writer.⁸

Similarly easy to detect are the hints toward this issue of prejudiced representations in his prose works, as the chapters analyzing the various stereotypes of the given thesis intend to prove.

Another aspect encouraging to a study into stereotypes on the basis of Sherman Alexie's prose, is not only his interest in the issue, but also its coincidence with the foci of the postmodern interest in the marginalities, and the same goes for Alexie's writing techniques. Namely, the postmodern pattern, according to Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of the Postmodernism*, is to install an issue and then undermine it. A similar technique can be observed in the Alexie's usage of the stereotypical representations of the Native Americans. In his prose, Alexie consciously makes use of certain well-recognizable and over-exploited characteristic traits while presenting his main characters, but the nature of his stereotypical images is a deconstructed one, reminding somewhat of Cubistic painting – elements recognizable, yet disarrayed and combined in an unusual manner. He has

⁸ Online interview with Sherman Alexie. Available at <http://www.barnesandnoble.com.../transcript.asp?userid=2UK192519J&eventId=218>, accessed January 12, 2001.

dismantled the one-dimensional images of Native Americans familiar from the western movies or elsewhere in the mass media, and combined these elements with a human touch, with obviously more realistic portrayals that are more identifiable for reservation-residents as well as urban Indians.

Clearly this intention to undermine the more or less one-dimensional images exhibits a didactic as well as ideological element – didactic as serving to improve the ethnic identity and ideological as dealing with the power relations embedded in stereotyping. In both cases a postmodern approach is applicable - “postmodern teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their meaning,” (Hutcheon 1988: xii-xiii) and “questions from within” the conventions of the existing representational discourse (*ibid.*: xiii). Alexie makes the validity and truthfulness of the generally established versions of American history (the ‘quest to the west’) doubtful and underlines the influences of the stereotype imagology created by entertainment industry and mass media on the individual self. Among the postmodern theories, especially in those of the ex-centric political focus, especially Eagleton’s emphasis on the discourse of representation can be well used to discuss the stereotypical representations of Native Americans, as it enables to theorize over a possible discourse of representation as expressed by stereotyping. The sense of a self-consciousness and self-reflexivity while criticizing the stereotypical self-images the Native Americans have accepted and internalized is easily detectable in Alexie’s prose. Breaking the conventions of stereotypical representations, he intends to amend the Native identity and self-awareness by distancing it from a sense of stereotypical ‘otherness’ and striving for a sense of ‘plurality’ (Hutcheon 1988:65).

It can be and has been debated how much relevancy to a literary analysis the personal background of a writer actually bears. Especially with respect to many of the

Native American authors, there exists the danger that the author's background information tends to be overestimated with critics, such would be the cases of discussing the traditional native American issues in connection with a contemporary and "non-Native" works, the discussion arising mainly on the grounds of the fact that the author has Native American origin, even though he or she has little contact with the traditional worldview of his/her people. The workings of a stereotype are functioning on a similar pattern.

However, when it comes to Sherman Alexie, the author who has complained about reviewers and critics as missing his point of view, and has summarized it as "I'm Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian"⁹, an overview of the culture and traditional life ways of his tribal background seems appropriate. Furthermore, Alexie has also expressed this point when he states, "I'm one individual heavily influenced by my tribe. And good art doesn't come out of assimilation - it comes out of tribalism."¹⁰ Similarly, also Paula Gunn Allen in her Introduction to *The Sacred Hoop*, has described the creation of a contemporary Indian writer to be a mixture of Native American influences combined with the modern, global and/or American tendencies:

Structural and thematic elements from the oral tradition, usually from the writer's own tribe, always show up in contemporary works by American Indians, and elements from contemporary, non-Indian works sometimes show up in contemporaneous tribal social literature. (Allen 1986: 4)

Relying on the regional divisions as suggested in *The Native Americans: The Indigenous People of North America* by Colin F. Taylor and William C. Sturtevant (1996: 194-249), with a Coeur d'Alene father and a Spokane mother, Sherman Alexie's Native American background can be mapped as belonging to the Plateau and Basin cultural region, and more specifically, to the Plateau area. It is a region that was once characterized by a strong hunting and gathering traditions, and where salmon provided an important

⁹ In Banks, 1995.

¹⁰ In Williams 1998.

staple food; nowadays, the dams built on the rivers have diminished the former bountiful fishing waters to marginal resources and the contemporary life is lived in the region as in anywhere else. On the one hand, today the modern lifestyle and, in the further American history, the various legal acts have reduced the opportunity and need to sustain the traditional masculine roles of a hunter, fisherman, and warrior. Certain longing for the traditional history can be traced quite clearly in Alexie's writing. Namely, one of the concerns the writer has expressed in his prose is what might be called a concern with male situation in contemporary Indian communities. To quote Alexie:

In Indian cultures in particular, men have lost all their traditional roles within society./.../ Those traditional masculine roles - /.../hunter, warrior - they're all gone./.../Driving a truck for the BIA is simply not going to fulfill your spiritual needs, like fishing for salmon or hunting for deer once did, so in some sense Indian men are much more lost and much more clueless than Indian women.¹¹

The thesis will be treating this issue in greater detail in the Chapter "The Warrior" on the example of Victor, the character in *Tonto* exhibiting most clearly such confusion and inner conflict between the traditional urges of self-assertion and the non-existence of the chances to act out his masculine role as a hero.

On the other hand, Alexie is devoting much of the room in his books, especially in the *Tonto* short story collection, to the man's role in the family as a symbol of distances between people and a lack of expressed feelings of love between husband and wife, father and son, brother and brother¹², etc, and of true friendship: "[*Tonto*] depicts the distances between people: between Indians and whites, reservation Indians and urban Indians, men and women and most poetically, between modern Indians and the traditional figures from their past"¹³.

¹¹ West and West 1998.

¹² Online interview with Sherman Alexie. Available at <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/com.../transcript.asp?userid=2UK192519J&eventId=218>, accessed January 12, 2001.

¹³ Glendale Community College Homepage. Available at <http://www.gc.maricopa.edu/Honors/alexie.html>, accessed January 12, 2001.

The “absent fathers”-theme is particularly overtly dealt with in Victor’s relationship with his father and his narrations on the father as a family member, i.e. accounts of the father’s deeds prior to his rejecting the parental role and that of husband and imposing on himself an exile as a trailer-dwelling vagabond. Alexie approaches the absence from a larger perspective, including in addition to the fathers abandoning their families to live a separate life elsewhere also the mental or sentimental absence of those fathers staying home:

“I think you’d find the same thing in every ethnic or racial community, that it’s fathers who are missing./.../Brown artists - African American, Chicano, Indian, and so on - write about fathers who physically leave and don’t come back. White artists deal with fathers who leave emotionally, who sit in the chair in the living room but are gone. It’s a theme that resonates. The actual physical presence of the father varies with ethnicity, so the idea of a father leaving is nothing new for me. My father did leave to drink but he always came back. So for me it was a way of exploring that feeling of abandonment. ¹⁴

Naturally, the symbol of absence and spiritual detachment is closely related to the social problematics of reservation life, but is just as valid in the urban environment. Alexie is referring to the impact of low social esteem stemming from unemployment and inner insecurity arising from a confused cultural identity, the low ethnic esteem or a radical, self-destructive form of ethnic patriotism.

Stereotypically speaking, Sherman Alexie himself can be considered a kind of a trickster-storyteller, who demonstrates his irreverence towards everything and has a good sense of absurdity and black humor in his depiction of his characters. In the role of a literary trickster, he is ridiculing stereotypes: “The other side of Indian spirituality is its traditional and sanctioned irreverence: the sacred clowns and tricksters whose absurdity and black humors complement its sense of harmony and order.” (Rothenberg 1991:XVI). Within this context, Rothenberg underlines especially the “survival of that sense-of-balance” as a cornerstone for an “act of healing”, and in many aspects this is the very trademark that Alexie's writing can be characterized by. Having provided the reader with

¹⁴ West and West 1998.

recognizable stereotypical representations of Native Americans, he simultaneously undermines the images by making bitter fun of them. Maybe here lies the reason why Sherman Alexie's prose has often been treated as humorous writing. Indeed, in comparison with his poetry (e.g., the *BFD* collection), this point of view bears some grounds. On the other hand, his humor, although every now and then truly hilarious and light-hearted and sincere, seems rarely serving the function of sheer fun and simple entertainment. Much more frequently the humorous scenes involve a combination of tragedy and laughter, in which a bitter or plainly an unpleasant experience will be overcome by means of releasing jokes. Similarly, Alexie's first novel *RB* has been described as being simultaneously as "at once painful and comical, realistic and magical in an ultimately redemptive symphony"¹⁵.

The use of humor by Alexie becomes much more comprehensible when to approach it from the Native American perspective. Namely, humor is/has been widely used by Indian peoples to deal with life and it has a long history that can be illustrated and proven by the tradition of the North American Indian trickster stories. According to Paula Gunn Allen, it is this spirit of the trickster-creator that "keeps Indians alive and vital in the shabby and tricky of their lives - which needs to be treated with laughter and ironic humor" (Allen 1986:40). In an interview to the *Cineaste* magazine, Sherman Alexie has acknowledged the relieving, but also simultaneously an up-on-arms function in his own wry humor, serving as a social or even political commentary¹⁶:

Humor is the most effective political tool out there, because people will listen to anything if they're laughing./.../ There's nothing worse than earnest emotion and I never want to be earnest. I always want to be on the edge of offending somebody, of challenging one notion or another, and never being comfortable not only with myself, or with my own politics or my character's politics, or their lives, but with everybody else's. Humor is just about questioning the status quo, that all it is. ¹⁷

¹⁵ Glendale Community College homepage. Available at <http://www.gc.maricopa.edu/Honors/alexie.html>, accessed January 12, 2001.

¹⁶ Williams 1998.

¹⁷ West and West 1998.

Trickster stories go far back in Native American tradition and the trickster figure, in the form of the Coyote or other, performs an eminent role in most of the Native traditions across North America. Although the trickster's name and minor details vary with different cultures, the figure as such prevails as a Pan-Indian phenomenon. On the one hand, Coyote can be considered a supreme master of word power, but just as well he might be seen as half fool, half creator, a God-like creator of the universe and humankind as well as an Evil God and a Devil-like God's adversary, renowned for greediness and salaciousness. Yet the seemingly wicked qualities of the trickster serve eventually the interests of the humankind.

The traditional Native American trickster figure emerges as the embodiment of transformation and wandering, being neither unequivocally human nor animal. Simon Ortiz in his book entitled *A Good Journey* (1984: 15-18) refers to the role of the American trickster as a symbol both of exile or wandering and of a dream-of-home, forming a solid connection to Alexie's fascination with the absent fathers theme. As the very symbol of continuity and survival, the trickster has an amazing capacity of recovering from anything. Coyote may appear as dead, but then he reappears and survives as an embodiment of a continuous metamorphosis and energetic change, of a cosmic force including everything. A parallel with the development of the Native American identity in the course of history can be drawn here – it has been just as many-sided, diverse, and occasionally contradictory as the trickster figure.

The Commentary chapters of *Shaking The Pumpkin* (Rothenberg 1991:367) include a substantial analysis of the question of the good and evil features of Coyote. Firstly, the phenomenon of trickster's character is linked both to the necessity of identifying oneself in terms of place and origin, as well as to the desire to gain awareness or even to “enjoy the very thing that scares us with the threats of madness, loss of self, and alike” (*ibid.*). Secondly, people need to ridicule their ordinary behavior by breaking (vicariously at least)

its hold on them: to punch holes in established authority (i.e. the way things are) so as not to be its forever-silent victims. The trickster guides the way to all this in his being peculiarly irreverent towards everything, introducing confusion everywhere he wanders. And, last but not least, the trickster is also a creator, enabling to explain the dangers inherent in reality itself.

Many Native American authors tend to emphasize, in various contexts and while commenting on various topics, that Indian spirituality is traditionally irreverent, since such irreverence is a way to survive, and the trickster figure exemplifies this feature well. Native tricksters are irreverent towards sex, family bounding, sacred things, and life. A Coyote story may include humorous elements and Coyote appear as a comical character – for example, the South Western cultural groups in particular depict Coyote as a buffoon. Yet it must be underlined that a trickster usually tells stories with a certain purpose in mind. Sometimes he is self-destructive, sometimes foolish. On the other hand, the trickster may perform heroic deeds and be the savior, creator or the initiator of a certain process or progress. In general, a trickster is connected with the notions of transformation, power of word, and life energy as a token of continuation.

According to the American Indian tradition, the trickster is closely associated with words and typically portrayed as a manipulator who achieves his goals by means of his verbal skills. To put it differently, Coyote is the master in making use of the great power existing in words, and Alexie uses the same weapon in his writing when he allows a glimpse of the complex reality, including critical and soothing tones, of the lives of his characters as a summary of the Native American battle for identity *vs.* stereotypes.

In fact, there are no clear stereotypes among Alexie's gallery of characters, all of whom have been given a stereotypical nuance and yet remaining an ordinary human being, therefore becoming a dramatic illustration of an individual torn between the controversies

of the stereotypical and the original self. It is hardly probable that the author has presented such combination as an ideal balance of stereotypes and the “real people”. The combination, however, enables the audience to discover the stereotypical convictions until then taken for granted, and help to discriminate a fable from the reality. Simultaneously, he also provides the reader to take a deeper look into oneself: “All those people running around in our poems, our stories, our novels, our essays are merely little parts of us dressed up in masks,” says Sherman Alexie.¹⁸

In this particular aspect, the technical devices, such as the structure and timeline of the narrative become important. Alexie’s prose is, as a rule, rich in the cases of fragmented narrative with different patterns of time leaps, such as between childhood-adolescence-adulthood-childhood, or from different ages to another within the time span of one’s childhood. For example, the short story “Every Little Hurricane” in *Tonto* consists of Victor Joseph’s childhood memories from the age of nine and five, narrated in the past tense, i.e., referring to the memories as a flashback. Similarly, the development of the relationship of Victor and Thomas is being presented by means of non-chronologically arrayed memory bits (at the age of 10, 12, 15, adulthood) ranging from the two boys being best friends when very young to fistfights when teenagers to ignoring each other as adults, in the story “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” (*Tonto* 59-76).

Such non-chronological structuring that is much favored with Native authors in general, not only relates to the traditional storytelling methodology and a reflection of the ancient tradition of aboriginal literatures. The importance of the structural design lies above anything else in its function as a reference to the split identity of the Native American characters between their traditional and the contemporary mass culture. Paula Gunn Allen has discussed the phenomenon from different angles in *The Sacred Hoop*, in

¹⁸ Banks 1995.

the chapter “The Ceremonial Motion of Indian Time: Long Ago, So Far” (Allen 1986: 147-154) and emphasized the multi-layered meaningfulness of the question of time in the works by Native American authors:

While the time structuring used in novels by American Indian writers is a technical problem, it is also a factor in the ultimate significance of the book. It determines which kind of consciousness will be reflected in the novel - western industrial consciousness or Indian consciousness. (Allen 1986: 150-1).

Allen empowers the time references in Native writing with a guiding role on the path towards a deeper understanding in the covert messages related to the cultural self-identification, be it of the author or the given character.

Chronological time structuring is useful in promoting and supporting an industrial time sense/.../ Chronological organization also supports allied western beliefs that the individual is separate from the environment, that man is separate from God, that life is an isolated business, and that the person who controls the events around him is a hero. (Allen 1986: 149)

Allen also points out that many of the earlier novelists, such as D’Arcy McNickle and Mourning Dove, typically used the timeline of the “western consciousness”. According to Allen, these novelists’ structural choice aimed at providing the readers with as easily readable books as possible. On the other hand, thereby they also “furthered the stereotyping tendencies of American readers and made their version of Indians conform to the version of those who see Indians as dying victims of the white man’s world” (Allen 1986: 151). In that sense, the combination of the alternating temporal approach (or consciousness) is a healthy step forward, including both the traditional and modern, complying thereby with the contemporary reality for Native people. Sherman Alexie's works are perhaps more easily accessible as a reading material for the regular reader, as these provide a good hybrid form to start out on one's journey into the world of Native American literature, than compared to the extremely visionalist and fully fragmented writings by some other Alexie's colleagues.

Also, Allen describes such option of construing a hybrid, or a compromise, on the example of James Welch’s style, which can be characterized by an almost chronological

narrative line, complemented by frequent flashbacks and notably recurrent “surrealistic methods of solving the problem posed by differing Indian and white understandings of the relationship and nature of time and event” (Allen 1986:152). Allen mentions the use of dream or a quasi-dream sequences together with flashbacks as main tools for furthering the plot “in ways that make an Indian’s experience comprehensible to white readers” (*ibid.*). Sherman Alexie’s time constructions include both of the time structures. In the light of Allen’s remarks, it becomes a crucial aspect in character analysis, since Alexie typically makes use of the fragmented narrative in cases of the ‘traditional’, imaginary and poetic scenes only, whereas the passages (even complete short stories) describing the harsh reality of reservation life tend to favor the chronological, or the so-called ‘industrial’ timeline.

Another Paula Gunn Allen’s point in *The Sacred Hoop* (Allen 1986: 152-153, 222-244) deserves to be mentioned here, namely her discussion of another aspect of literary theory - the non-existence of a clearly outlined main character. She argues that even though the non-Indian readers and publishers usually expect to have one protagonist, an eminent hero who has been set nicely on the foreground and supplemented by a gallery of background characters, the Native writers tend to refrain from giving one of their characters the role of dominance over other characters. To put it differently, the Native American authors avoid setting up a hierarchy among the characters in their works and rarely divide them into clearly outlined and recognizable heroes, villains, and chorus. Similarly, the structure of the narrative tends to jump from event to event and shift from one focal point to another. In the case of such traditional stories, the primary unifying device is, in addition to the presence of certain character in a series of tales, the relationship that the story bears to the ritual life of the tribe (Allen 1986:147-154). In other words, where in a regular Anglo-American literary work the reader becomes exposed to a “personal story” of the protagonist, including the related events and imagery to underline

the main action, there a reader of a work by Native American author is likely to find a personal story as part of a larger picture, of a collective story. Allen has articulated the difference between the western and traditional Indian stories as follows: “In the western mind, shadows highlight the foreground. In contrast, in the tribal view the mutual relationships among shadows and light in their varying degrees of intensity create a living web of definition and depth, and significance arises from their interplay” (Allen 1986:224).

By the same token, in the three works by Sherman Alexie analyzed in this thesis, it is difficult to spot only one protagonist or a single line of relationship development. The narrator changes from one story to another, and so does the focus, shifting from one character to another, so that having completed the reading of *BFD*, *RB* and *Tonto*, a deeper insight into a number of characters, into their personal histories, individual development, and an understanding of the degree of interrelatedness of the characters has been gained. Once again, Alexie exhibits a tendency to make use of a combination of the traditional and the industrial, as if a conciliation between these two seemingly opposing literary traditions.

According to Allen’s classification in the *Sacred Hoop* chapter “Stealing the Thunder: Visions for American Indian Women, Tribes, and Literary Studies” (Allen 1986: 262-268), Alexie belongs among the masculine writers with his concurrent extinction theme and a sense of despair and hopelessness. These traits oppose the feminine focus, which, according to Allen, would typically include the element of a faith in survival:

Strange things begin to happen when the focus in American Indian literary studies is shifted from a male to a female axis. One of the major results of the shift is that the materials become centered on continuance rather than on extinction. This is true for both traditional tribal literatures and contemporary poetry, fiction, and other writings such as autobiography, journals, “as-told-to” narratives and mixed-genre works. The shift from pessimism to optimism, from despair to hope is /.../ dramatic. (Allen 1986: 262)

The Native American traditional stories are expected to affect, bringing the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with reality, restoring the lost identity, and returning a sense of dignity. The same goal must be embedded in Sherman Alexie’s stories

as well, especially taking into consideration the individualism-bound attitude and undermining of stereotypes, and, his attempt to foster the humane image and thereby the identity of the Native Americans.

Sherman Alexie himself has acknowledged the traditional/contemporary symbiosis in his works. In the interview to the *Cineaste* magazine, he was asked about the impact of mainstream American popular culture on his artistic creativity, and the writer's response revealed that the author recognizes the influence of the contemporary mass culture on his writing without any pretension: "I'm a thirty-one year old American, as well./.../ I think a lot of Indian artists like to pretend that they're not influenced by pop culture or Western culture, but I am, and I'm happy to admit it" (West and West 1998). He grounded this on the idea that the popular culture might serve as a *lingua franca*, a cultural currency, by stating that he uses the elements of pop culture as "a way to bridge the cultural distance between the characters in my movie and the non-Indian audience." (*Ibid*).

Alexie's hatred for and fascination with stereotypes seems to bear resemblance to a love/hate relationship: "The author /.../ is as voracious on his love of American pop culture as he is conscious of his native roots, and he's as exasperated by New Age liberals who co-opt Indian traditions as he is by more run-of-the-mill forms of stereotyping" (Williams 1998). Ridiculing the stereotypical images of the Native Americans can be regarded as the main driving force of his works that has been given titles playing with the Indian stereotypes, such as the Lone Ranger and Tonto, which is recognizably the 'Cowboys and Indians' -cliché. This fascination also gave rise to the title of his movie based on his short story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" from the short story collection "*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight In Heaven*".

This Is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona was also the working title of the film and was replaced by the title *Smoke Signals* only later. Alexie has commented on the

change of the title as follows, drawing on the stereotypical sound of the latter: “I liked [*Smoke Signals*] because, first of all, it calls to mind the clichéd stereotype of a big-cheeked Indian, standing on the plain.” (Williams 1998). The deepest theme of the movie *Smoke Signals* has been regarded to be “the simple longing to be truly accepted and understood” (*ibid.*).

Usually it is the 20-year old Thomas Builds-the-Fire who has been regarded as the central character in the *Smoke Signals* (e.g., Interview “Talking with Sherman Alexie”, conducted by Sharon McRill)¹⁹. Thomas seems to have made Victor Joseph, whom he has known all his life, although with whom they have ever been on quite friendly terms, into his heroic ideal, because Victor has a more powerful body, a tall and athletic figure. Victor and Thomas will have to go on a journey in order to retrieve Victor's deceased father's remains, and the trip they make together is forming the background for a discussion of the themes related to the meaning of friendship, family, and understanding. As for the use of autobiographical elements in the movie and/or elsewhere in his writing, often many critics have expressed contradictory opinions in the matter, although those treating Thomas as an embodiment of Alexie himself seem to be outweighing the ones who set their bets on Victor. When in the above-mentioned interview Alexie was asked with which character he most closely identifies himself, his reply was: “Thomas of course. I'm taller than Thomas. But you know, I identify with Thomas, the geeky storyteller, that's still what I am.” (*ibid.*)

An attempt to classify Alexie's writing is a complicated affair that poses many questions. For example, does Alexie's writing bear certain marks of a traditional literature? Most probably we are dealing with a combination of the traditional elements and contemporary, “global” elements here. Allen (1986:72-75) divides traditional literature into two basic genres - ceremonial and popular literature, but it is not equivalent to the

¹⁹McRill, Sharon. Talking with Sherman Alexie. Available at <http://go.borders.com/features/skmv99018.xcv>, accessed January 12, 2001.

Western prose/poetry distinction. According to Allen, ceremonial literature “includes all literature that is accompanied by ritual actions and music and that produces mythic (metaphysical) states of consciousness and /or conditions” (1986:72). In the western sense, ceremonial literature may appear both as prose or poetry, but it includes also a sacred element, i.e. “something that /.../ is filled with an intangible but very real power or force, for good or bad.” (*ibid.*). The ceremonial literature is typically aimed at holding a society together, “create harmony, restore balance, ensure prosperity and unity, and establish right relations within the social and natural world /.../, and validate their sense of reality, order, and propriety” (Allen 1986:73). The popular genre, on the other hand, includes popular tales and songs (e.g. jokes, lullabies, corn-grinding and ditch-digging songs) that celebrate more commonplace experiences, and may serve either as humorous, soothing, pedagogical, or entertaining purposes. Alexie has succeeded to bring these two genres together in his prose and poetry, and provides, thereby, a possibility to treat his writings on three different levels – the traditional, the popular, or the two combined.

STEREOTYPES AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

Raymond Williams (*The Long Revolution*, 1961)²⁰, the British cultural theorist whose primary interest was the relationship between culture and society, came up with a definition of culture, following the concept of culture as a reflection of the economic and social conditions, but also being a system that expresses the meanings, ideas and behavior of a certain group. According to him, the aim of a cultural analysis should be to clarify and identify the meanings expressed in art, learning and behavior. At this the way in which the given group perceives the world, their world-view, or what Williams termed ‘the structure of feeling’ (i.e., a shared set of values and attitudes) are crucial elements. The structure of feeling forms the basis for attitudes of one particular group toward another group, and together with language, it sets the cornerstone for communication within the group.

Thus, a study into the Native American stereotypes, both imposed and internalized, exemplifies well the interrelatedness (although not necessarily a coincidence) of the internal identity, the image bestowed from without by the dominant culture, and the symbiosis of these two among the representatives of an ethnic and cultural minority. In the light of the Giles and Middleton’s statement below, it can be concluded that the construction of a stereotypical image may be regarded as an act of power:

Discourses of gender or race - the ways in which sexual and ‘racial’ differences are defined, talked about, represented visually - create the conditions in which men and women experience their lives. If we see culture as ‘the production and circulation of meaning’ then culture is a significant site for the formation of discourses by which one social group or community (a sex, ‘race’, nation or society) legitimates its power over another group or community. (Giles and Middleton 1999:25).

Identity is certainly not a novel topic in the field of cultural studies as it has fascinated the researchers and theorists as a central theme since 1990s (Barker 2000:165).

²⁰ In Giles, Judy and Tim Middleton. 1999. *Studying Culture: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 18-25.

Upon summarizing the general views regarded valid in the contemporary paradigms of cultural theory, Barker underlines the element of subjectivity as a constituent part in the formation of identity and differentiates the concepts of self-identity (the conception of ourselves) and social identity (expectations and opinions of others), and claims that in order to study identity, both subcategories of identity should be combined (*ibid.*). A study into Native American stereotypes that have been created by the non-Native media and become fostered and internalized by the very people stereotyped - the Native Americans - themselves necessarily insists on incorporating both the created and actualized internal and external images.

On the one hand, identity is the image a person chooses to create of oneself, of one's beliefs, attitudes and emotions, but on the other, it can also be acquired from external influences (e.g., the above-mentioned 'structure of feelings'). Giles and Middleton (1999: 32-35) understand identity as the interface between a private sense of the self, including personal beliefs and values, conscious and unconscious feelings arising from personal experiences and desires, rational and irrational motivations, and those factors that constitute the social context in which these feelings and motivations (e.g., age, ethnicity, sex) are experienced. The personal arguments, again, reinforce the subjectivity because of the emotionally charged coloring that identity includes.

The given thesis relies on the list of categories of identity provided by Giles and Middleton (1999:31), although the categories listed should not be regarded as all-inclusive. The relational categories by Giles and Middleton can be summarized as follows:

- Social aspect (sex, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, sometimes also skin color);
- Physical appearance (hair color, skin color, eye color, body shape, physical disabilities, height, kind of clothes worn, etc):
- Personality (lively, quiet, shy, a loner, etc);

- Nationality;
- Religion;
- Family relationships (mother, father, niece, grandfather, etc.);
- Occupation;
- Cultural aspect (interested in music, politically committed, etc).

In this thesis, these categories have been merged into three categories for the purpose of studying the stereotypes as follows: appearance (includes the social appearance as well, i.e., the non-physical aspects such as occupation, etc.), character (personality), and behavior. According to Barker, taste, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles are ‘signs’ that denote the identity (Barker 2000:166), hence the significance of the subcategory ‘Appearance’ in the thesis as well. Barker defines identities as “wholly social constructions,“ which”cannot ‘exist’ outside of cultural representations and acculturation” (Barker 2000:165). Therefore it seems justified to rely on the presumption that there exists an immediate connection between stereotypes (as originated from without) and identities (as an inner self-image), and aim at the given thesis to study identity as a phenomenon while studying the stereotypes, simultaneously.

One of the important aspects in the identity relevant to the given research is its nature as a volatile concept that may undergo changes in the course of time, with changes in social spheres and attitudes, etc., which seems to work analogically in the case of stereotypes. Giles and Middleton (1999:34) emphasize in their discussion of the essence of identity the fact that the identity positions within which a person locates oneself or becomes located by others are never neutral and equal, as the very act of naming is an act of power with one party defining another from their own position of knowledge, world-view, and the like (e.g. an European names an African ‘a non-European’ on the basis of his binary logic).

In addition to cultural paradigms, identity is connected with social and material circumstances. Giles and Middleton (1999:35-36) have illustrated such dependence through an example of the 18th - and 19th -century attitude toward black people as socially marked by their color as 'inferior' to white people and therefore treated as less human. Also, the symbolical marking (representation) of femininity, for example, in the 19th century, was marked by a tiny waist, etc. Giles and Middleton suggest that the "symbolic markers are vital to the construction and maintenance of identities and differences and are inextricably intertwined and interdependent with social processes and practices" (1999:36).

Giles and Middleton as well as Barker in their summary of the general concepts of cultural studies agree unanimously upon the necessity of a differentiation between the essentialist and non- (or anti-) essentialist perspectives on identity (Giles and Middleton 1999:36; Barker 2000:166). The essentialist approach assumes that the identity is a fixed set of 'true' and authentic characteristics that are not liable to change in the course of time. These characteristics are shared by all members of the given group (e.g. ethnicity) and are regarded as intrinsic or inherent in the group, and are being reflected in the essence of identity. A non-essentialist approach, on the contrary, disagrees with the absolute definition of identity, and questions the concept of a 'true', rigid identity. It rather considers identity a relational and contingent phenomenon that depends on the symbolic marking of one group as different from another. When Giles and Middleton emphasize the impossibility of rigidity, then Barker goes into further explanations and argues that its changeability derives from its relatedness to the particular time and place (Barker 2000: 166). For Barker, identity is 'not a thing but a description in language' (*ibid*). In the case of stereotypes, however, it is possible to differentiate the stereotypes as such (a fixed, one-dimensional label), which can be regarded as the element of the essentialist side, and the

changing nature of stereotypes in a due course of time (e.g., from Political Bum being replaced by White-Collar Redskin) as an example of the non-essentialist approach.

One of the factors that contributes to the construction or re-modeling one's sense of self, the identity, is the impact of representation generally used. Giles and Middleton (1999:55) have claimed that "cultural representations offer forms within which we can choose to narrate ourselves and our lives in order to produce a sense of identity and meaning." Although the extent in which one really has been given an opportunity to *choose* can be disputed, the quote expresses well the significant influence of representations for the sense of self.

Representation, which Barker defines as 'how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us' (Barker 2000:8), forms the central part of cultural studies. He draws attention to the cultural representations and meanings as materialized in and being part of sounds, objects, images, books, magazines and television programs, and validates his claim with the argument that all these materialized representations "are produced, enacted, used, and understood in specific social contexts." (*ibid.*) Furthermore, Barker points out the importance of an exploration of the textual meanings for the studies of representation. It is interesting and also relevant to this particular thesis that Barker acknowledges the role of representation production with profit making as the main motive and driving force (*ibid.*). In a broader sense, the discussions of stereotypical representations have also been attributed the role of a manipulative weapon undermining the self-awareness of a particular group. It is a matter of securing a superior position in a hierarchy, because those in power determine which interpretation should be taken for truth.

One of the aspects that should not be overlooked for the purpose of studying a culture is the use of language of the particular cultural group of interest. Cultural studies have argued that language is a signifying system, i.e., not neutral medium for the formation

of meanings and knowledge about an independent object world ‘existing’ outside of language. Language gives meaning to material objects and social practices, which are brought into view by language and made intelligible in delimited linguistic terms (*ibid*). In this case, Alexie makes often use of the reservation idiolect (e.g., ‘rez’ pro ‘reservation’, ‘enit’ pro ‘isn't it’, etc.), frequent use of swear words and vulgar expressions as to underline the setting and social (occasionally, also ethnic) background of his Indian characters. On the other hand, the newspaper articles or historical evidence (e.g. letter by Colonel George Write, dated 1858 in “The Trial of Thomas Builds-The-Fire” (*Tonto* 96-97) have been provided in the according tone and style and an appropriate vocabulary has been used.

At the present time when our basic needs for existence undisputedly include TV set, stereo set, daily, weekly or monthly newspapers and magazines, and an easy access to the World Wide Web, it is the media that can be claimed to have become the true sovereign of the contemporary world and the most powerful disseminator of information. Mark Gottdiener has summarized in his *Postmodern Semiotics: Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life* Baudrillard’s acknowledgment to media as a central source for image casting and image controlling:

For Baudrillard the media has so pervaded our everyday life with the ideological myths /.../ that reality itself does not exist. We are all trapped in a *hyperreality* which is defined as a universe of images. Every object, every image merely operates as a second or higher order sign function of mythical proportions. How we label people and objects is now what counts rather than the things themselves or their functional denotations. Within this realist world, we live by feeding off the images that the media constantly produces. (Gottdiener 1995: 23)

Hence it is only logical that mass media can be accused of fostering the stereotypes, similarly to other images. Moreover, we can approach stereotypes as a two-fold functional tool – political weapon connected to re-enforcing a hierarchical pattern, and on the other hand, a reflection of the cultural beliefs and conventions of the given society or cultural

group. An even more radical idea has been articulated by Paula Gunn Allen (1986:192), as she blames the media, among other things, for promoting the aggressive conduct via promoting stereotypes, leading to domestic violence against women. Yet here it should be remembered that wife-battery can hardly be the entire content of an Indian stereotype, and it is more generally bound with other social issues, such as alcoholism. In one way or another, Allen has recognized the harmful role of media images among the Native American population:

Images of Indians in media and educational materials profoundly influence how we act, how we relate to the world and to each other, and how we value ourselves. They also determine to a large extent how our men act toward us, toward our children, and toward each other. The popular American image of Indian people as savages with no conscience, no compassion, and no sense of the value of human life and human dignity was hardly true of the tribes /.../ But as Adolph Hitler noted a little over fifty years ago, if you tell a lie big enough and often enough, it will be believed. Evidently, while Americans and people all over the world have been led into a deep and unquestioned belief that American Indians are cruel savages, a number of American Indian men have been equally deluded into internalizing that image and acting on it. Media images, literary images, and artistic images, particularly those embedded in popular culture, must be changed. (Allen 1986:192-193)

Allen goes even further, and does not spare the Native American authors from some disparaging remarks either, and blames them for falling frequently for the superficial images and, thereby, for fostering stereotypes. In her essay collection *The Sacred Hoop* in the chapter “This Wilderness In My Blood: Spiritual Foundations of the Poetry of Five American Indian Women” (Allen 1986:165-183) she accuses many Native American writers of including into their poetry and fiction the white-generated stereotypes “with no apparent sense of the source of those images” (Allen 1986:179), and in the chapter “A Stranger In My Own Life: Alienation in American Indian Poetry and Prose” (Allen 1986:127-146), she criticizes them for fostering the political consciousness in the form of romanticizing the Native American images.

Allen seems to support the general aims of the younger generation of American Indian writers, whose political activism derives from a sense of alienation and their works

stem from a desire to be heard. She brings out a fascinating regional tendency that especially the authors from the Southwest typically fall for a romanticized image, whereas the Native authors of the Plains background opt for more brutal and degrading tones in their portrayal of Indians; Alexie belongs, geographically and content-wise to the latter grouping. What Allen reprimands is the consequential creation of clear oppositions, such as the noble and persecuted red man (in rare cases - a woman), who has been portrayed as an innocent victim of a fate he was and is powerless to meet, *versus* the greedy and ignorant white man (rarely a woman) who is absolutely evil at heart. Allen argues that “the pain and anxiety engendered by not having a secure sense of place and identity cannot be assuaged by reducing a multifaceted history and many human interactions to one-dimensional or cartoonish stereotypes.” (Allen 1986:132). According to her, the contemporary American Indian writers tend to portray Native Americans as either victims or romantic heroes. In the first case, it is a helpless, innocent, highly exotic victim (pro: complex, intelligent human being). In the other case, when discussing the over-romanticized stereotype of a noble innocent red man instead of a human being with personal shortcomings and weaknesses, Allen poses a rhetorical question, “If we are so smart, why did we lose two whole continents?” (*ibid*).

Although the feelings of protest in the Native communities against the superficial and one-dimensional representations by the mass media and entertainment industry have not reached its peak as yet, remaining to a large extent the concern for the writers, artists and Native American newspaper editors, the situation is somewhat different when it comes to the mascots and names of sports teams, where the debates about the eligibility and ethical issues concerning the names, such as Washington Redskins, for example, frequent regularly in at least Native American press (e.g., in the national biweekly newspaper *Indian Country Today*).

Giles and Middleton (1999:47) draw attention to the fact that a number of social and cultural theorists have referred to contemporary societies as characteristically suffering from the crises of identity in recent years. In their opinion, the upsurge of various social movements that rely on identity politics has paved the way to the popularity of identity as an issue, using it as a weapon to establish their rights:

Feminism, the black civil rights movement, gay and lesbian movements have used a sense of collective identity as women, black people, homosexuals /.../ to challenge subordination and oppression. Some strands of these movements base their politics and strategies on the uniqueness of a particular identity. (Giles and Middleton 1999:50)

On the other hand, identity being an inexhaustible discussion topic and a matter of ideological or political manipulation, the term and its meanings have become somewhat blurred. A similar idea has been voiced by Kobena Mercer in the article “Welcome to the jungle: identity and diversity in postmodern politics”²¹:

Just now everybody wants to talk about ‘identity’. As a keyword in contemporary politics it has taken on so many different connotations that sometimes it is obvious that people are not even talking about the same thing. One thing at least is clear - identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is disputed by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.

All of the discussion of stereotypes as phenomenon above has been bearing a negative and reprimanding undertone so far. But in the relation between stereotypes and identity can be found positive traits as well. Allen, who otherwise is sharply critical regarding any media images, brings out a good example of the possibility for an encouraging effect imbedded in the stereotypical representation. The Kevin Costner’s film *Dances With Wolves* that became very successful nationally and internationally is a clear example of a romanticized Indian representation, of course. Yet Paula Gunn Allen ascribes an upsurge of ethnic pride to this very movie, and reveals a connection between the

²¹ in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. 1990. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 43. Quoted in Giles and Middleton 1999: 47)

increasing numbers of Native American population in national census in the period from the 1980s up to the early 1990s, when she states:

The number of Indian people reported almost doubled. This surge is partly attributable to better canvassing, organized and carried out by native community leaders in urban Indian enclaves under the direction of the U.S. Census Bureau. But even more, the increase can be credited to a new willingness of lost Indians to identify themselves. It seems that the restoration of Indian dignity, culture, and tradition has encouraged these dramatic events. Some respondents to a *New York Times* query said that *.../ Dances With Wolves* provided them with the sense of pride and safety they needed to publicly affirm their Indianness. (Allen 1986:X)

Despite this example, over-romanticized representation remains still a mere superficial stereotype, be it as positive and idealized as it may. Paula Gunn Allen herself claims that alienation and idealization go hand in hand, when she states in *Sacred Hoop* while discussing the flaws of Native American writers:

Idealization of a group is a natural consequence of separation from the group; in other words, it is a by-product of alienation. Based on denial, it arises from a split-off element from context. In literary terms, decontextualization of tribal elements that are recombined to suit a nontribal perceptual mode gives rise to alienation as the dominant theme of literature of and about American Indians. (Allen 1986:129)

A self-image that is stereotypical is even more destructive than a stereotypical attitude towards another group, since it distracts from seeing the whole picture including the individual variables and nuances. As a generalization of a group, it undermines the self-identity on the personal level, obstructing the consideration of individual characteristics. The difficulty lies in the thin line between having a group identity (which is desirable and with a fostering effect for an ethnic and cultural minority) and being stereotyped as a group (based on the limited information coming from outside the group) that is easily missed.

Because identities are both bestowed as well as chosen, this may give rise to conflicting identities. To contemplate on the differences in the Western and Native American cultures and worldviews leading to internal confusion and insecurity has been a favorite, and seemingly inexhaustible, topic for many Native American authors. Paula Gunn Allen is no exception, confessing that a contemporary American Indian suffers from a fragmented worldview due to “a dual perception of the world: that which is particular to

American Indian life, and that which exists ignorant of that life. Each is largely irrelevant to the other except where they meet - in the experience and consciousness of the Indian.” (Allen 1986:161).

Jeffrey Weeks in the article “The value of difference” (in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart. 1990: 88-9. Quoted in Giles and Middleton 1999: 50-51), emphasizes the natural urge for identity especially in the situation where the conflicts occur between different communities or even within an individual upon the collision of two different cultures:

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality /.../ Identities are not neutral. Behind the quest for identity are different and often conflicting values.

But in the case the identity is based on a stereotype, there will be little room left for individuality.

In the case of the negative stereotype, it also has proven a driving force for self-destruction (e.g., see the Chapter on Political Bum). Due to an inferiority complex, the people with low self-esteem have a tendency to become more attentive to external opinions of their “real essence” and internalize the shallow depiction from without, starting to live up to the stereotype and thereby fostering it by themselves even more. “Identity /.../ is not only experienced at the level of the individual. Collective, ethnic and national identities are important ways in which people negotiate a sense of belonging and, often allied to this, political solidarity.” (Giles and Middleton 1999:45). On the other hand, stereotyping has a harmful effect as it prevents from seeing a human being behind the stereotypical image.

Barker argues that individualism and a belief in one’s “uniqueness and self-consciousness which is widespread in western societies is not shared to the same extent by people in cultures where personhood is inseparable form a network of kinship and social obligations” (Barker 2000:165-166). Hence, it can be proposed that the cultures whose

people are more collective-minded are also subject to the group identity, and most of the Native American cultures certainly can be considered collective-minded. This aspect gives some explanation also to the question, why the Native American stereotypes have received such a fertile soil in the people and have become part of their self-identity.

Therefore it can be concluded that both positive as well as negative stereotyping alike equally function to reinforce the sense of 'otherness' and increasing a feeling of difference, although in the case of Native American minority the goal is to reconcile the two contrasting worldviews and come to terms with history, that is, to become incorporated into the society as an equally 'normal' and complex constituent part among other ethnoses.

THE FLAT INDIAN

The first stereotype discussed in the given thesis portrays the era of colonial attitude towards the Native Americans as primitive indigenous people. On the other hand, it is just as much applicable to the culturally ignorant (Indians as the Other) and deliberately narrow-minded (e.g. racist opinions) attitudes that continue to exist. The 'flat' in the name of this grouping is a direct borrowing from the literary theory as a term initially used by E. M. Forster (Cuddon 1999:321) to distinguish between the so-called round characters *versus* flat characters, the latter being typically two-dimensional characters who do not undergo any kind of development or alteration throughout the story and whom the authors have failed or avoided consciously to provide with a psychological depth, a deeper insight into his/her personal development, or any other human(e) quality.

It needs to be brought out with a special emphasis that in comparison with the other stereotype groups presented in this thesis (Mentor, Warrior, Political Bum and White-Collar Redskin), the Flat Indian is probably the one with a most immediate connection to media and the one most affected by the course of history. Moreover, it can also be seen as having a considerably wider time-span in terms of its existence than the rest of the (more specific) stereotypes.

Illustrative material derives from various cases of Indians typically depicted as robot-like, cruel and threatening action antiheroes in classical Western movies, the unassuming descriptions of Native bands in James Fenimore Cooper's novels, and somewhat more sympathetic, empathetically depicted, and yet considerably shallow portrayals of the non-altering personalities of the idealized "noble savages" ranging from the Gojko Mitic's films to the contemporary Hollywood productions (best example being Kevin Costner's full-length feature film *Dances With Wolves*).

An even clearer example of a one-dimensional, ridiculous, yet dangerous portrayal of an Native American can be seen in the Tom Sawyer's adventure stories by Mark Twain in the character nicknamed Injun Joe. Twain has created a character so thoroughly evil, bloodthirsty and unpredictable, that Indian Joe can well be used by parents to threaten their children in order to make them behave properly. Little information is actually given to the reader about the cartoonish character's own thoughts, the scenes he appears in are mostly accounts of his actions – stabbing a number of people to death, robbing graves, being cruelly vindictive, lying constantly, and consequently hiding from the officials and the rest of the community due to his criminal background, finding an undignified and lonely end when entrapped in cave.

What is also noteworthy about Twain's villain character is the use of offensively colored 'Injun' instead of 'Indian'. Of course, the terminology used to differentiate between races, among such terms also the word 'Indian', is a controversial issue. On the one hand, the term certainly has a racial overtone, and many Native Americans have protested against the use of the word in media and elsewhere. On the theoretical side, also Henry Louis Gates Jr., an American scholar in African American studies, claims 'race' a linguistic construct, which he regards as a 'dangerous trope', rather than a biological characteristics (quoted in Giles and Middleton 1999:35). And yet these opinions can be disputed. Why, then, a notable number of Native Americans prefer to call each other Indians, and so does Alexie – when he uses the politically correct 'Native American', there is usually a case of some ironical remark or connotation? Are they, the Native Americans, calling each other Indians, thereby fostering the racial stereotype? Or is Gates overreacting in terms of danger in the use of a racial term?

Most probably the attitude toward this "I-word" is somewhat similar to Estonians and Estonian former belonging to the Soviet Union. Should a foreigner identify Estonia or

Estonians with our Soviet Union experience, most people would feel irritated or offended, typically jumping to the conclusion that the foreigner using such reference is either dumb or ignorant of history. At the same time, there are a number of articles or radio programs that deal with this period in history with a wide range of attitudes, from comical memories to tragic personal accounts, plus scientific treatments of the impact of the period on the future and on the status quo. Both for the American Indians and the ex-Soviet Estonians, such labeling seems to be a sensitive issue when it comes from without.

Currently a notable number of supporters are involved in the ongoing battle with racially colored and stereotyping sports team mascots (e.g., typically including the words such as Chiefs, Red, Indian, Warriors, etc) in the Native American press. The success has been gained already and some of the names of sports teams and/or their logotypes have been altered, and the practice that the Native American activists have been demanding, an agreement and approval for the use of such name with a tribal leaders or some other official representatives of Native community, has become a practice.

Entertainment industries, especially the filmmakers, have their own share in promoting stereotypes among both Native Americans as well as non-Americans, equally. It is a powerful tool for creating standardized representations and stereotyped images already by the extensive range of productions, a varying extent of background research done by the scriptwriters, producers and other crew members, etc. It can be said that the Indian themes have been quite popular material for film-makers throughout the 20th century – earlier the westerns movies, later mysteries, various comedies, television series – where the Indian elements have featured more or less frequently in almost every genre. Alexie, who turned four of his *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* short stories into a road movie called *Smoke Signals*, has sarcastically commented on the Hollywood's love for Indian

topic that has been on an upsurge over the recent decade as follows: “It seems that every white person in Hollywood has a pet Indian project” (Williams 1998).

On the other hand, Native American film-makers and actors have become more visible and active since 1960s themselves aiming to “combat ethnic stereotyping” and “undo the misinformation about Native Americans that has accumulated over many generations.”²² Alexie’s film *Smoke Signals* is no exception – the film pattern is claimed to be “to break with the expected ethnic response.”²³ The author declares his film even revolutionary because of the portrayal of Indians and their central role in the film:

What is /.../ groundbreaking about the film is that the characters in it are Indians, and they’re fully realized human beings. They’re not just the sidekick, or the buddy, they’re the protagonists. Simply having Indians as the protagonists in a contemporary film, and placing them within this familiar literary and cinematic structure, is groundbreaking.

According to Sherman Alexie, many of the films that are generally considered to include less flattened representations and seen as a step forward in terms of stereotyping, still had their drawbacks. In the above-quoted interview to *Cineaste* magazine, he expresses his criticism about the Indian-made *Powwow Highway*:

It trades in so many stereotypes, from standing in a river singing, to going up on a mountaintop to get a vision, and the generic AIM [American Indian Movement] political activism. Every stereotypical touchstone of a contemporary Indian art film is there /.../There’s the scene with /.../ Buddy Red Bow, where the police car’s coming, and Buddy has a piece of metal or something in his hand. He jumps in the air, and there’s this brief flash of shot of him dressed in the full costume of an Indian warrior, throwing a tomahawk, and I just thought, “Oh God!”.

Surprisingly enough, in the same interview, Alexie prefers the ordinary Hollywood production of *Thunderheart* in comparison with *Powwow Highway*:

Thunderheart is better in terms of its representation of contemporary Indians. Except for John Trudell changing into a deer. I’ve never seen an Indian turn into a deer. I mean, I know thousands of Indians, I’ve been an Indian my whole life, and I’ve yet to see an Indian turn into an animal! And I know some very traditional Indian folks. (*ibid.*)

²² West and West 1998.

²³ *ibid.*

In the same interview that appeared in the Fall'98 issue of *Cineaste* magazine Alexie has explained the decision to name the film "*Smoke Signals*", which has a stereotypical ring to it, as a very conscious, multi-layered choice. On the surface level, the stereotypical title makes people "think of Indians in blankets on the plains sending smoke signals, so it brings up a stereotypical image that's vaguely humorous". Secondly, the title helps to understand without difficulty the film being about Indians. But the third level unveils the meaning of the film as being about "calls of distress, calls for help".²⁴

A special attention in this chapter deserves to be paid to the fact that Alexie's writing technique and creative decisions reveal his apparent refusal to include such type in the form of active or actual characters in the stories. Rather, he has chosen to incorporate the phenomenon of Flat Indian representation predominantly by means of newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, and other types of announcements in mass media. Those artificial media texts which the author has imitated frequently serve a commentary purpose and allow to comment on certain events in the story line from the perspective of stereotyped attitude towards Native American population. Especially rich in the examples of such technique is his novel *RB*, in which the role of media and entertainment industry promoting stereotypes can be regarded as forming an individual storyline throughout the book. Besides, it is a novel about entertainment industry, the music business.

What tends to be characteristic of such newspaper clips in Alexie's prose is the aspect that the subject or the (anti-)hero of the news is hardly ever given a chance to express his/her own version of the commented event – the news or an article consists mainly of an outsider's superficial version subordinated to personal subjective opinions and impressions of what happened. It must be pointed out that Alexie's addressee of criticism, that is, the media or the journalists, is not necessarily non-Native American. In other

²⁴ *ibid.*

words, he attacks superficial commentary and prejudiced report in the most general sense, not American nation-wide mass media or reservation newspapers as such.

As mentioned above, the historical element and influence in the case of this stereotype has an excessive role and its history can be traced back to the very first writings and descriptions of Native Americans that according to Paula Gunn Allen appeared in the fifteenth century already (Allen 1986:222):

The process of creating an American Indian world-that-is-not began with earliest Anglo and European travelers and raconteurs, who took all manner of tales about American aboriginal life back to England and Europe (or, later, back to the white colonial settlements). These stories were/.../partial, they reflected the values and perceptions of the travelers and their world-view, and they were bereft of context. /.../The conventions developed through these accounts continue to inform present political, social, creative, religious, and educational writing about American Indian life, past and present. And these conventions are followed in one-way or another by Indian and non-Indian writers alike. (Allen 1986:128)

In the course of history, the Native American representations have undergone certain changes – from being curious and exotic aboriginal peoples fascinating for the interested observers, to being ignored and forgotten ‘Vanishing Americans’. Paula Gunn Allen has stated in her new preface to *The Sacred Hoop* the following observation: “To many, portrayal of Indian people as victims/.../ is the most compelling part of the contact story” (1986:XI). By the ‘many’ she obviously bears in mind the Native Americans themselves, although over the recent decades can be noted also a stereotypical sense of a so-called ‘white guilt’ spreading among the non-Native Americans.

Vine Deloria Jr. in his book *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* in “Chapter 1: The Indian Movement” (1994: 4-24) provides a historical overview of the status of the Native Americans over the last hundred years. He distinguishes between two periods in the white attitudes toward Native Americans: until 1890, and the 1890s-1960s. He describes the first period image of American Indians as a symbol for “the vast wilderness and frontier that Americans wished to tame”(Deloria 1994:8), exercising thus a central role in American domestic affairs, whereas from the 1890s until the 1960s the Native Americans

were considered either extinct or becoming extinct, being the ‘Vanishing Americans’: “Most people believed that tribes had largely been exterminated. There were token Indians present at Columbus Day and Thanksgiving celebrations and some Indian women sitting at the Santa Fe railroad stations selling pottery, but for most American Indians had ceased to exist.” (Deloria 1994:4).

A more exemplary evidence of the shifts in attitudes and representations is provided by means of Frederick E.Hoxie’s²⁵ comparison of the two world fairs. At the exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, a “belief in the Indians’ ‘progress’ and future” dominated, whereas by the fair in San Francisco in 1915, the Natives had become “an interesting but limited people whose future was of only marginal concern to their fellow Americans.”

Swann complements the two periods suggested by Deloria with the third one, the 1960s and early 1970s, which he characterizes as a time of “something of a resurrection of interest in the Indians” (*ibid.*). In the given thesis, it coincides most with the Mentor stereotype. However, Swann remains pessimistic of the likelihood for a cultural renaissance of Native American community, claiming that “they are still likely to be seen by most people as victims of inevitable progress, their tribal names used to sell cars and trucks, the heads of their heroes (such as Crazy Horse, who was murdered by whites) used to decorate postage stamps” (*ibid.*).

Moving from general attitudes to more representational stereotypes of the Native Americans, it is possible to summarize them as the noble savage and the howling savage as the most widely spread variants of the Flat Indian image. P.G. Allen defines the noble savage as an “appealing but doomed victim of the inevitable evolution of humanity from

²⁵ Hoxie, Frederick E. 1979. Red Man’s Burden. *The Antioch Review* 37 (Summer 1979): 340). Quoted by Brian Swann in the Introduction to the *Harper’s Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* (Harper’s 1987:XIII).

primitive to postindustrial social orders” or as “the guardian of the wilds” representing the role of “the conscience of ecological responsibility” (Allen 1986:4-5), thus regarded as a threat to the American belief in progress and evolution. Such image presupposes that the Indians have to either assimilate or perish. The hostile counterparts of the noble savage, on the other hand, “capture white ladies and torture them, obstruct the westward movement of peaceable white settlers, and engage in the massacre of innocent colonists and pioneers” (*ibid.*). According to Allen, the latter view particularly is “most deeply embedded in the American unconscious” and “dear to the hearts of producers of bad films and even worse television” (*ibid.*).

Appearance

Since the Flat Indian can be regarded as an archetype of all Indian stereotypes, his appearance may vary in details and include any of the recognizably ‘Indian regalia’, be it wearing hair in braids, headbands or single feathers, traditional clothing, riding horses, waiving tomahawks, to mention only few possible clichés. Ordinarily also the high cheekbones or a crooked nose, and long black hair have been emphasized. But Alexie, when depicting his characters, rarely underlines these elements with a special emphasis, unless related to the question of Indian identity; in this case the shape of eyes and black long hair would be mentioned.

In *BFD* story “Eugene Boyd Don’t Drink Here Anymore”, Alexie has created a striking summary of the Flat Indian’s appearance in a scene, in which a character studies his own reflection in a mirror:

He /.../ looks in the mirror behind the bar where all our faces are reflected. All us stoic Indians rehearsing for parts as extras in some eternal black and white western. Shit, used to be only whites expected Skins to have monosyllabic faces, but now, we even expect it from each other. (*BFD* 75).

‘The monosyllabic face’ is an excellent metaphor for conveying the Flat Indian’s

archetype. It expresses simultaneously the physical lack of individuality, as well as renders the (self-)criticism of the belief in Flat Indian's intellectual and emotional limitations.

Another tendency established in Flat Indian stereotype is the burden of expectations to look in a certain 'Indian' manner. This argument can be depicted on the example of a fax sent by two record company agents to their boss, in which they describe their latest discovery, the all-Indian rock group Coyote Springs. The professional potential as a rock group has been marginally mentioned and most of the analysis is based on the appearance of the musicians. The female band members, Chess and Checkers Warm Water receive an appreciative assessment, although their musical talent is by-passed: "Both would attract men, I think. Sort of that exotic animalistic thing." (*RB* 190). The drummer Junior Polatkin "is only average on drums but is a very good-looking man. Very ethnically handsome. He should bring in the teenage girls, which will make up for the looks of Builds-the Fire and Joseph." (*ibid.*). Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the lead singer, is in the agents eyes "just sort of goofy looking, with Buddy Holly glasses and crooked teeth", whereas Victor Joseph, despite being an excellent guitarist, seems a problematic case due to his scars – he "looks like a train ran him over in 1976", so the agents plan to "focus on the grunge/punk angle for him" (*ibid.*). The agents conclude their fax of evaluation on a positive note:

Overall, this band looks and sounds Indian. They all have dark skin. Chess, Checkers, and Junior all have long hair. Thomas has a big nose, and Victor has many scars. We are looking at some genuine crossover appeal. We can really dress this group up, give them war paint, feathers, etc., and really play up the Indian angle. I think this band could prove to be very lucrative for Cavalry Records. (*ibid.*)

Therefore, it can be suggested that Flat Indian category is the most appearance-bound image as compared to the other stereotypes. The Warrior, although it has a similarly pictorial appeal, includes at least certain behavioral stereotypes; in the Mentor, the stereotype relies mainly on the spiritual and magical elements, and the White Collar Redskin together with the Political Bum can be regarded first and foremost as social

stereotypes.

Character

In the case of Flat Indian, nothing or very little is revealed of the character's personal characteristics, opinions and background, and the same goes for his/her function or status in the society. The only exception of the latter aspect are the 'chiefs' although, as a rule, the word stands rather for 'an Indian' than really reflecting the person's traditional leader's role among his peers - for example, this is the exact term by which the security guards address Victor in the short story "Amusements" in *Tonto* (*Tonto* 57).

One of the most exemplary Flat Indians in Sherman Alexie's prose is Dirty Joe. It is noteworthy that Alexie has not granted him with any statement or line in the stories and Dirty Joe is predominantly portrayed in a victimized state. Dirty Joe is a silent background character, although in the short story "Amusements" (*Tonto* 54-58) he is the very character around whom the actual story hatches out. The story opens with Victor and his girlfriend Sadie discovering the passed-out Dirty Joe on a carnival midway:

Sadie and I stood over him, looked down at his flat face, a map for all the wars he fought in the Indian bars. Dirty Joe was no warrior in the old sense. He got his name because he cruised the taverns at closing time, drank all the half-empties and never cared who might have left them there. (*Tonto* 54)

With this excerpt the information given on Joe's background, personal history and other such data has been exhausted. He seems to be a mere physical body without a mind and soul, and the following event is a proof of that. Namely, instead of carrying his "temporarily dead body" (*Tonto* 55) away from the carnival, Sadie and Victor play an unfriendly trick on Joe, when all three of them have turned into the laughing stocks for the people around them and the couple seeks to escape from the center of attention, trading in Joe as a passive show piece:

We sat there beside Dirty Joe and watched all the white tourists watch us, laugh, point a finger, their faces twisted with hate and disgust. I was afraid of all of them, wanted to hide behind my Indian teeth, the quick joke.
 “Shit,” I said. “We should be charging admission for the show.” (*Tonto* 55)

Victor and Sadie end up putting Joe on a miniature roller coaster called the Stallion, which can be deciphered as a cruel mockery of Joe's Indian background, setting the unconscious man into the role of a brave rider he fails to perform for obvious reasons:

Sadie and I stood there and watched Dirty Joe ride a few times around the circle, his head rolling from side to side, back and forth. He looked like an old blanket we gave away.
 “Oh Jesus, Jesus,” Sadie screamed, laughed. She leaned on my shoulder and laughed until tears fell. I looked around and saw a crowd had gathered and joined in on laughter. Twenty or thirty white faces, open mouths grown large and deafening, wide eyes turned towards Sadie and me. They were the jury and judge for the twentieth-century fancydance of these court jesters who would pour Thunderbird wine into the Holy Grail. (*Tonto* 56)

An interesting parallel with the given scene in Alexie's short story (the passed-out Dirty Joe on the “Stallion”) and one of the sculptures by James Earl Frazier can be found, although Alexie hardly has intentionally set up the analogue between the story and the bit of a past event. Brian Swann in the Introduction to the *Harper's Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* provides an overview of the popularity of the sculpture as follows:

Indians didn't figure largely in the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, but the most prominent presentation of native life was the bronze statue by James Earl Frazier, “The End of the Trail”: an exhausted Indian slumped in the saddle of a broken-down pony. This statue won a gold medal, and was one of the Exposition's most popular attractions. (*Harper's* 1987:XIII)

Both scenes, the literary and sculptural, share an equally demeaning portrayal and the similar context of public interest depicts the readiness among the audience to enjoy the sight.

Behavior

Native American public has been just as much exposed to the mass media and film industry as any other ethnic group in the United States. Therefore they have been equally

influenced by those -- here can be found the roots for internalized stereotypes. The attack on the media is well exemplified in Sherman Alexie's prose, although he expresses his criticism in a considerably covert manner.

A good instance of such metaphoric strategy is the ironical mock-journalism used in the *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* short story "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" (*Tonto* 102-103). As the title alleges, this story draws obvious symbolic parallels with Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. Here the elements that connect the story with the Flat Indian stereotype most immediately, are the 'commentator's' reports about the trial in a local newspaper, failing to present crucial facts, presenting false facts, and quoting the non-Indian officials. It is particularly noteworthy that the actual subject of the news item, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, has been quoted on the basis of hearsay and the other tribe members are falsely accused of having caused another public incidence:

Article from the Spokesman Review, October 7, 19--.

Builds the Fire to Smolder in Prison

WELLPINIT, WASHINGTON – Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the self-proclaimed visionary of the Spokane Tribe, was sentenced today to two concurrent life terms in the Walla Walla State Penitentiary. His many supporters battled with police for over eight hours following the verdict.

U.S. District Judge James Wright asked, "Do you have anything you want to say now, Mr. Builds the Fire?" Builds the Fire simply shook his head no and was led away by prison officials.

Wright told Builds the Fire that the new federal sentencing guidelines "require the imposition of a life sentence for radically motivated murder." There is no possibility for parole, said U.S. Prosecuting Attorney, Adolph D. Jim, an enrolled member of the Yakima Indian Nation.

"The only appeal I have is for justice," Builds the Fire reportedly said as he was transported away from this story and into the next. (*Tonto* 102-103)

An analogue of such journalistic case can be found in the novel *Reservation Blues*, when the 'all-Indian' rock group Coyote Springs has deserved the attention of the mass media simply due to their non-compliance with the stereotypical expectation of the audience. The audience had expected to see inadequate, troublemaking musicians and an exotic curio experience, but to their astonishment, they heard a 'normal' rock performance similar to any other band, including all ordinary rock instruments, instead:

From The Ellensburg Tri-Weekly:

Indian Musicians Play More Than Drums

An all-Indian rock band from the Spokane Indian Reservation played for the cowboys in Toadstools Tavern last Saturday night, and nobody was injured. Seriously, the band named Coyote Springs was very professional and played their music with passion and pride.

„They knew what they was doing,“ said Toadstools owner Ernie Lively.

„I was kind of nervous about hiring Indians and all,“ Lively added. „Worried they might not show up or maybe they'd stir up trouble.“

On the contrary, Coyote Springs served up a healthy dish of country music, spiced it with a little bit o rock, and even threw in a few old blues tunes for dessert.

„I think the highlight of the night was when those Indians sang 'Mommas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys.'“ Everybody sang along with that one,“ Lively said. (*RB* 89-90)

The television as a source of misleading information becomes evident in the novel *RB*, when a new priest arrives on the Spokane reservation and expects to time-travel and enter into the world of Western movies:

Arnold came to the reservation /.../ expecting to see tipis and buffalo, since he had never been told otherwise. He was genuinely shocked when the Indians in his congregation spoke English.

“Buffalo?” asked Bessie, the oldest Catholic on the reservation. “What do you mean, buffalo? You really thought there were going to be buffalo here?”

“Yes,” he said. “I was looking forward to it.”

“Oh, father,” Bessie said and laughed. “There weren’t any buffalo here to begin with. We’re a salmon tribe/.../”

“What about the buffalo? I mean, Indians were always hunting buffalo on television.”

“It was those dang Sioux Indians. Those Sioux always get to be on television. They get everything.” (*RB* 36)

The genuine surprise of Father Arnold, that means, someone without any prior contact with the tribe (or any tribe), after finding himself in the 20-th century reservation’s unadorned and unpicturesque reality allows to measure the extent to which some images have grown inseparable from the notion of American Indians and also provide an example of how strongly established is the Plains Indians, the Sioux among the others, as an embodiment of the generalization of the diverse traditional cultures of Native Americans.

In the opening story in *Tonto* collection, entitled “Every Little Hurricane”, Victor at the age of seven recounts a New Year's Eve party at their house and compares it to a TV-show (*Tonto* 2). It is a scene that provides an example from another angle than the passage

about Father Arnold's misconceptions; Victor discloses the effect of television on a child belonging among the people stereotyped.

During the party night, Victor's uncles Adolph and Arnold get into a fistfight. Little Victor describes their fight end as follows: "Then it was over. /.../Adolph let Arnold loose, even pulled him to his feet, and they both stood, facing each other. They stared to yell again, *unintelligible* [Italics mine] and *unintelligent* [Italics mine]." (*Tonto* 3). A parallel with an average western movie can be seen without much effort in this scene. What deserves to be taken into account as a crucial detail is the feeling of detachment due to the similarity with watching another TV-broadcast, not an actual battle between close relatives as can be observed from Victor's tone when telling the story.

It is also noteworthy that the same party description by the seven-year old Victor in "Every Little Hurricane" lists and introduces several party guests in a flat manner –the names of the characters and the main "results" of their partying are mentioned:

During that night, his aunt Nezy broke her arm when an unidentified Indian woman pushed her down the stairs. Eugene of Boyd broke a door playing indoor basketball. Lester Falls Apart passed out on top of the stove and somebody turned the burners on high. James Many Horses sat in the corner and told so many bad jokes that three of four Indians threw him out the door into the snow. (*Tonto* 10)

Typically, the Flat Indian remains either passive or the acts performed by him have been left unexplained. But in Alexie's short story all others characters will be involved in other stories as well, adding more information on their character and their deeds. In the case of Arnold and Adolph, it is their only performance before the eyes of the reader and no chance is given to get a deeper insight into their lives.

Another character that serves to illustrate the Flat Indian image is an orphan child with probably a brain damage (no diagnosis has been revealed), who has been observed from his birth until age of seven in the short story "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation" (*Tonto* 110-129). The boy remains a silent

character, as he is unable to speak or walk. He depends entirely on his guardian, the I-narrator of the story, who ascribes various thoughts to the child, tries to guess the internal world of the child, projecting his own ideas and beliefs on the boy. The embodiment of Flat Indian attitude becomes especially vivid in the course of a hospital visit, summarizing much of the prejudiced attitudes toward the indigenous people throughout history: “They looked him [the child] over and said there was nothing wrong with him and that he’s just a little slow developing and that’s what the doctors always say and they’ve been saying that about Indians for five hundred years.” (*Tonto* 120).

It must be noted as well that the child bears no real name in the general sense. The original name given by his mother proved unpronounceable, and as the meaning of the name was too long, everybody started to call the child with a convenient makeshift name:

Rosemary Morning Dove named him ----- which is unpronounceable in Indian and English but it means: *He Who Crawls Silently Through the Grass with a Small Bow and One Bad Arrow Hunting for Enough Deer to Feed the Whole Tribe*. We just call him James. (*Tonto* 110-111)

The Flat Indian elements, thus, comprise of the silence, namelessness and ambiguous identity, passivity in action, and being unable to defend oneself against thoughts and beliefs attributed to him, but most importantly, the failure to undergo any development or change towards maturation.

Although the Flat Indian stereotype was historically used by the non-Native people only, in Alexie’s works it can be observed how the attitude has taken roots also among Native American themselves, thereby depicting ironically the absurd fruits of acculturation and the inner identity crises.

In comparison with the other stereotypes, the most noteworthy aspect in the Flat Indian representation that serves to summarize the entire chapter is the possibility to regard the Flat Indian, on the one hand, as an archetype for all the rest of the stereotypes and, on the other, as the best example of stereotype as such, that is, as an extremely superficial portrayal of a person or a group of people, and even so, a most viable phenomenon.

THE WARRIOR

The third stereotype could be characterized as an over-romanticized and traditionally inaccurate representation of all Native Americans as the descendants and ideological heirs of warlike bands. The warrior archetypes are typically described as heroes with breath-taking stature in appearance, a higher degree of courage, pride, and inexhaustible steadiness of mind. Good examples of the stereotype are the former western movies made in the Soviet Bloc featuring the heroic Gojko Mitic, and also some (especially of the late 20th-century) Hollywood productions, not to mention James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, although in the latter the primary hero is not ethnically Native American.

The Warrior image appears in Alexie's works as the most widely used and commonly referred stereotype in comparison with the other ones treated in this thesis. It is logical enough, though, for the Warrior can be regarded as the most frequently exhausted stereotype both in entertainment industry and media, thus the people are most likely to have been exposed to this particular stereotype.

The grounds for film industry and adventure stories exploiting and promoting the image can be easily explained – the Warrior bears a certain fascinating air about himself, providing an attractive, yet dangerous adversary to the hero or the antagonist (depending on the positive emphasis on either the white character or the Indian one). According to Paula Gunn Allen, be the image as fascinating and exotic as it may be, it also includes certain off-putting nucleus, a reference to an untamed savage and to being a burden or obstacle for the cowboys, settlers, etc.:

Popular ideas about American Indians - warriors, chiefs, colorful befeathered veterans of the wars of progress, colonialism, imperialism, or whatever one wants to call it, brave noble, dying but brave braves - hauntingly pervade the American mind, and behind them

lurks the image of the hostile, bloodthirsty savage, the redskin who howls out of the wilderness intent on the total destruction of innocent Christian families trying to build a nation founded in liberty, justice, and moral truth. (Allen 1986:262-263)

Yet proceeding from Alexie's writing, the stereotypical image has more sides to it.

On the one hand, the obvious prevalence of the Warrior as a role model for most of his characters bears certain connection with the movie warriors, and can be claimed to be the impact of the films seen. But the Native American context allows to discover also another perspective – firstly, the link to the ancient warrior cultures in the indigenous America as a cultural factor and, secondly, the association with the battles against the colonialists in the more recent past as a political factor. As one of the crucial differences between Alexie's Warriors and those in the films, the Alexian heroes are entirely free from any hostile features. Their main characteristics seem to center around bravery, honorability and pride, which are the qualities the characters try to act out in order to attain the Warrior's image.

However, it should not be overlooked that since the characters in Alexie's stories belong, on the basis of their traditional culture, to the Plateau Indian subgroup, their desire to become heroic warriors means a desire to follow the principles of their neighboring cultural region, the Plains Indians. Therefore, Alexie is not striving for establishing a traditionally accurate image, he rather emphasizes the need to be recognized and acknowledged among the fellow Indians and fellow citizens of the US. In this perspective the Warrior sounds undoubtedly more glamorous than the Fisherman, which would be more accurate to the Spokane and Coeur d'Alene peoples in terms of their ancient traditions. Of course, here can be seen some traits that have been called by Paula Gunn Allen as the "noble savage convention" (Allen 1986:129) that is intrinsic in the "Romantic Fallacy", an idolized self-image that the Native authors frequently may fall for:

Whites are not the only writers trapped in the Romantic Fallacy, as I term it: a week spent sampling entries in the proliferation of anthologies, journals, and literary magazines devoted to American Indian writing and in perusing a few of the many American Indian novels will assure a reader that Indians are without fail innocent and magical beings who have run afoul of fate and that the ways of tribal life were simple, stark, and pure, guided

by a few simple philosophical principles and a transcendent comprehension of the laws of the universe which the Indians, in their simple but pure way, adhered to unfailingly. (*ibid.*)

Still, to accuse Sherman Alexie of this weakness seems slightly inept, because the idealized are not the characters themselves, but only the image they have of a true Warrior, for example Crazy Horse, the recurrent idol for Victor Joseph in his secret dreams of becoming a Warrior.

The other possible significance of the Warrior image in these books might be related to encouraging the tribal unity, a cooperation of the people like in a war band, and the Musketeerian “all for one, one for all”-motto, since Alexie’s concern with the lack of collective spirit among the Native Americans has been especially clearly exposed in the *TIW* collection.

As briefly mentioned above, in the Warrior’s stereotype is imbedded an opposition to an enemy, such as in the widely spread Cowboys and Indians– cliché. Already the title mascots for Alexie’s short story collection, the Lone Ranger and Tonto, provide a hint to the centrality of the Warrior’s stereotype in Alexie’s works. Even the other stereotypes, the Political Bum and the White-Collar Redskin are in many ways rooted in this image, although the measures, ideals and patterns vary; in the case of the Bum, the ideological warfare bears political coloring, and in the case of the White-Collar, it reveals more social undertones.

Alexie has made Tonto fistfight with the Lone Ranger, thereby changing the original situation in the popular Lone Ranger stories of the radio and television program. The Tonto of the radio show was a loyal Indian sidekick to his iconographic white master, the Lone Ranger²⁶. Not to mention the considerably unappealing meaning of Tonto’s

²⁶ Cox, James. 1997. “Muting White Noise: The Subversion of Popular Culture Narratives of Conquest in Sherman Alexie’s Fiction” in *Studies in American Indian Literatures (SAIL)*, Vol 9, No 4, Winter 1997, Series 2.

name in Spanish, the representation as an inferior follower seems to be what Alexie has in mind in setting them into a combat.

Appearance

On the basis of the film *Smoke Signals* and Alexie's writing, it can be observed that throughout his works mostly resonates the obligation to look stoic in order to maintain one's Warrior appearance. In the *Smoke Signals*, the handsome macho Victor Joseph (who in the written work, both in *Tonto* as well as in *RB*, serves as the best example of striving for the Warrior ideal) is determined to behave as a real Indian, and the real Indian to him means a Warrior-type of image. Every now and then in the film, he admonishes his companion Thomas Builds-the-Fire to "get stoic - a demeanor he thinks involves looking like you just killed a buffalo" (Williams 1998). Another example of the stoic-ideal is included in the *Tonto* collection, where in the shot story "The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor" the husband makes fun of her wife's 'Tonto face' appearing on her face prior to some argument between them: "My wife ignored me, gave me a momentary stoic look that impressed me with its resemblance to generation of television Indians. "Oh, what is that?" I asked. "Your Tonto face?"" (*Tonto* 154-155).

Victor Joseph is the most clear-cut example of the Warrior's stereotype in the three works analyzed in this thesis. His appearance serves as the best example of a Warrior. Victor is physically well built (a trait he occasionally misuses when bullying his friends), before turning into a drunkard and moving closer to the Political Bum representation, he used to be a promising basketball player, an activity as close to a modern version of being warrior as possible under the circumstances on the reservation. But the main characteristic feature about Victor's looks is his scars.

In the "Crazy Horse Dreams", certain shortcomings in Victor's appearance in terms of his warrior image become revealed: "She was quiet. She stared hard at him, trying to

find his features among the shadows, formed a picture of him in her mind. But she was wrong. His hair was thinner, more brown than black. His hands were small. Somehow she was still waiting for Crazy Horse.” (*Tonto* 40). An especially ironical portrayal of Victor’s appearance as regards his traditional warrior ambition is provided in *RB*:

Victor was the reservation John Travolta because he still wore clothes from the disco era. He had won a few thousand dollars in Reno back in 1979, just after he graduated from high school. He bought a closet full of silk shirts and polyester pants and had never had any money since then to buy anything new. (*RB* 12).

Victor’s best friend, his only friend for that matter, Junior Polatkin, is less obsessed with being a warrior, focusing more on the visionary side of Indian identity. However, in *RB* he has been described as having excellent looks to coincide with the stereotype ardently wished by Victor. Junior was “a tall, good-looking buck with hair like Indians in the movies, long, purple-black, and straight, Junior was the president of the Native American Hair Club. (*RB* 13)

Since the warrior potential finds little application in the contemporary world, except for the basketball tournaments, the youngsters on the reservations find other ways to look like warriors. A more contemporary reservation warrior-wannabe imagology is exemplified in Victor and Junior in the short story “A Drug Called Tradition”: “We /.../ jumped into Junior’s Camaro. The engine was completely shot but the exterior was good. You see, the car looked mean. Mostly we just parked it in front of the Trading Post and tried to look like horsepower warriors.” (*Tonto* 13).

The more up-dated version of the appearance of a contemporary Warrior can be provided on the basis of the description of a hitchhiker, a professional fighter in the short story “The Toughest Indian in the World”, whom the I-narrator describes at their first meeting as follows:

He looked the way Indian hitchhikers usually look. Long, shaggy black hair. Brown eyes and skin. Missing a couple of teeth. A bad complexion that used to be much worse. Crooked nose that has been broken more than once. Big, misshapen ears. A few whiskers masquerading as a mustache. /.../ He was tough. He had some serious muscles that

threatened to rip through his blue jeans and denim jacket. (*TIW* 26).

The narrator soon elaborates on the portrayal and intertwines romantic tones to his revised description of the boxer, bringing him much closer to an experienced warrior's ideal: "He was beautiful and scarred. So much brown skin marked with bruises, badly healed wounds, and tattoos. His long black hair was unbraided and hung down to his thin waist" (*TIW* 32). On the basis of an interview it can be claimed that this fistfighter presents Alexie's own ideal for a modern warrior as an embodiment of bravery and self-confidence, because "he is completely comfortable with himself, and all of his identities"²⁷, which include being homosexual and Indian, left-handed and dyslexic. For Alexie, he is the embodiment of the word 'tough': "The word 'tough' gets tossed around so much in reference to Indians, with the warrior idea of tough, and I just wanted to broaden the definition of what an Indian warrior could be."²⁸

Character

Victor Joseph is the character who most overtly seeks to be a warrior as becomes revealed in the Thomas Builds-the-Fire's vision of Victor in *Tonto* short story "A Drug Called Tradition", and in *RB*, when the band members of Coyote Springs are selecting a name to the band and Victor proposes the name Bloodthirsty Savages (*RB* 44) and claims the rock group to be a "warrior band" (*RB* 77).

In the *Tonto* story, Thomas offers a visionary story to Victor, whereby Victor has been given an opportunity to live his dream of becoming a Warrior by entering the vision and stealing successfully a pony from the Others. He dreams of himself as a courageous and skillful horse-stealer (to steal a horse was rather a sports variety with the tribe, not a

²⁷ Online interview with Sherman Alexie. Available at <http://www.barnesandnoble.com.../transcript.asp?userid=2UK192519J&eventId=218>, accessed January 12, 2001.

²⁸ *ibid.*

criminal offense as we see it today), hoping “to be a hero and earn [his] name” (*Tonto* 15). Victor’s vision of stealing horses depicts the interdependence of the qualities of courage and respectfulness. In addition, it also refers to the old Indian tradition, especially viable among warlike tribes, according to which a young man coming of age was expected to earn a name as a way to build an honorary reputation to oneself; thus the desire to become a warrior translates as a nostalgia for the long-gone times.

The sharp conflict between the dream of being a warrior, and the dream of courage and the reality has been exemplified in the internal conflict of Victor, torn between a wish to accomplish heroic deed and the fears inside his mind: “There was so much that Victor feared, so much his intense imagination created” (“Every Little Hurricane”, *Tonto* 7). The contradiction becomes reconciled in the above-mentioned vision of his moment of courage: “Crawling more quickly now, I make my way to the corral right between the legs of a young boy asleep on his feet. He was supposed to keep watch for men like me. I barely touch his bare leg and he wipes at it, thinking it is a mosquito.” (*Tonto* 15).

Behavior

The fistfighting theme opens the short story collection “*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*” and, furthermore, the title story of *The Toughest Indian in the World* speaks about a hitchhiker, a professional fighter. Connected with the warrior-image on the one hand, Alexie attributes the act of fighting also to the self-destructive tendencies deriving from the despair and social failures, poverty, and low self-esteem and the issue of a changed position of Indian men in contemporary world.

The first story entitled “Every Little Hurricane” depicts Victor’s childhood memories when nine- and five-year-old boy. The first memory segment is of Victor at the age of nine and records his emotions while witnessing his uncles’, Adolph and Arnold’s fistfight at a party: ““Adolph and Arnold are fighting again,” Victor’s mother said. Adolph

and Arnold were her brothers, Victor's brothers. They always fought. Had been fighting since the very beginning." (*Tonto* 2). As time goes by and Victor reaches adulthood, he together with his friend Junior Polatkin have become "two of the most accomplished bullies of recent Native American history" (*RB* 13), who still are characterized as "fragile as eggs, despite their warrior disguises" (*RB* 16). For Victor and Junior, to act violently is a manifestation of their excess of unused heroic potential:

Victor roared against his whole life. /.../ He wanted to steal a New York cop's horse and go on the warpath. He wanted to scalp stockbrokers and kidnap supermodels. He wanted to shoot flaming arrows into the Museum of Modern Art. He wanted to lay siege to Radio Music Hall. Victor wanted to win. (*RB* 230).

The inability to exercise what they define as their warrior potential leads in many ways to the violent behavior. Alexie has included several segments of schoolboys turning aggressive because of a fallacious dream of warriorhood. Below are selected three different excerpts including the possible affairs the Alexie's warrior wannabes have been described engaging themselves. The first is about Victor at the age of ten, when the warrior ideal was still more bravery-centered than physical power-related, the second is a commentary section about a group of Indian children passing, and the third is a memory of Junior Polatkin from his first grade at school.

Thomas closed his eyes and told this story: "There were these two Indian boys who wanted to be warriors. But it was too late to be warriors in the old way. All horses were gone. So the two Indian boys 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 reservation. 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. *Very brave.*"

"Ya-hey," Victor said. "That-s a good one. I wish I could be a warrior." (*Tonto* 63)

They were off to cause trouble somewhere, I'm sure. Little warriors looking for honor in some twentieth-century vandalism. Throw a few rocks through windows, kick a dog, slash a tire. Run like hell when the tribal cops drove slowly by the scene of the crime. (*Tonto* 44)

But the little warrior in me roared to life that day and knocked Frenchy to the ground, held his head against the snow, and punched him so hard that my knuckles and the snow made symmetrical bruises on his face. He almost looked like he was wearing a war paint. But he wasn't a warrior. I was. And I chanted *It's a good day to die, it's a good day to die* all the way down to the principal's office. (*Tonto* 172)

All three examples were taken from *Tonto* collection; a decade later, in the *TIW* stories, the warfare and fighting seem to have become old-fashioned and more and more replaced by education and professional success, giving way to the image of new kind of warriors. One of such examples is Junior (although he fails in this mission): “I was special, a former college student, a smart kid. I was one of those Indians who was supposed to make it, to rise above the rest of the reservation like a fucking eagle or something. I was the new kind of warrior.” (*Tonto* 188).

Alexie, although glorifying the Crazy Horse and the self-assertion conveyed in the warrior image, has voiced certain traces of criticism concerning the attitude to act like a warrior of the movies through some of his female (sic!) characters in the *TIW* collection. A good example is the following quote: “Sara looked at Low and wondered yet again why Indian men insisted on being warriors. *Put down your bows and arrows*, she wanted to scream at Low, at her father, at every hypermasculine Injun in the world.” (*TIW* 144). Obviously, Alexie aims at warning against the possible negative outcomes that may eventually prove harmful for the disciples following their ideals due to the inexistent possibilities to live out the warrior in the young Indian boys.

Victor’s father seems to be an established role model for him in being a warrior. In the moving depiction of the father through Victor’s eyes, the son’s love is evident for his parents. When he perceives her mother as having the almost magic qualities, as the backbone of the whole family, then the father, on the other hand, seems to be for Victor the idol, whose inability to live up to his role causes pain to the five-year-old Victor. For example, in the short story “Every Little Hurricane” in *Tonto*, little Victor recounts a ‘tiny storm’ (*Tonto* 5) at Christmas time, when the father cried because he had no money for presents, ashamed of his inability to fulfill his and his family’s dreams.

But more importantly, his father, having fought in Vietnam, has in Victor's eyes justified himself as a true warrior and a survivor. In the short story titled "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock", he confesses to his father: "My generation of Indian boys ain't ever had no real war to fight. The first Indians had Custer to fight. My great-grandfather had World War I, my grandfather had World War II, you had Vietnam. All I have is video games." (*Tonto* 28). He feels a need to continue the tradition, but cannot find any way to make it happen.

Linked to the experienced warrior's impression, Victor admires his father's capability to survive. In the story "Because My Father..." mentioned above, Victor remembers the toughness, nearly immortality of his father after he got into a motorcycle accident:

Then one night my father wrecked his bike on Devil's Gap Road and ended up in the hospital for two months. /.../ The doctors said he could have died easily. In fact, they were surprised he made it through surgery, let alone those first few hours when he lay on the road, bleeding. But I wasn't surprised. That's how my father was (*Tonto* 32-33)

His father becomes an even more admirable ideal for Victor since he has been officially called a warrior in the media, his picture having been reprinted throughout the country. The photo was shot during a pacifist demonstration during the Vietnam war:

In the photograph, my father is dressed in bell-bottoms and flowered shirt, his hair in braids, with red peace symbols splashed across his face like war paint. In his hands my father holds a rifle above his head, captured in that moment just before he proceeded to beat the shit out of the National Guard private. (*Tonto* 24-25)

The father's pictures in various papers were gathered into a scrapbook. Victor remembers different headlines and captions for the photo as follows:

My favorite was run in the Seattle Times. The caption under the photograph read DEMONSTRATOR GOES TO WAR FOR PEACE. The editors capitalized on my father's Native American identity with other headlines like ONE WARRIOR AGAINST WAR and PEACEFUL GATHERING TURNS INTO NATIVE UPRISING. (*Tonto* 25)

All these things taken together, the shock Victor went through when his father abandoned his family (*RB* 57) as a result of feelings of failure is understandable. When father left, Victor's vision of himself altered, he channeled the disappointment into brutal aggression and started drinking.

Sherman Alexie's writing is rich in references to history. So the historical figure of Crazy Horse occupies a special place in the short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* as well as in the novel *Reservation Blues*. He, one of the most famous of Native American leaders in their resistance to the American troops in the 19th century, has become the symbol of Indian struggles for independence. Logically enough, young Victor of the *Tonto* idolizes Crazy Horse, "that great Indian warrior, that savior, that Christ-figure" (*TIW* 138), who serves for him as another role model besides his own father. One of the stories about Victor bears the title "The Crazy Horse Dreams" and concludes with the words "He [Victor] wished he was Crazy Horse." (*Tonto* 42).

There are many legends of the courageous behavior of Crazy Horse, also known as Tashunka Witko, in the name of the welfare of his people. Dee Brown in his prominent account of the Native American resistance history from the Indian perspective entitled *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (1970 (2001)) portrays him as the symbol of the last hope for Indians in retaining their lands, especially the Mount Rushmore, the sacred place for many Sioux tribes as the emergence site of this world.

Crazy Horse belonged among the Oglala Tetons, a band of Sioux Indians of the Great Plains, known as horse riding tribe with warfare traditions. When the Civil War broke out, the leader was Red Cloud, whereas the Oglala Crazy Horse was 'still too young to be a warrior' in his teens, although already 'intelligent and fearless' (Brown 1970:10). The first heroic deeds Brown mentions with respect to Crazy Horse, are from 1866, when

the young Oglala acts in cooperation with Gall, a younger Hunkpapa Indian, and Hump, a Minneconjou Indian, in inventing 'decoy tricks to taunt, infuriate, and then lure soldiers or emigrants into well-laid traps' (Brown 1970:132). The year brought Crazy Horse the position of a leader in the collective Indian fight of about two thousand warriors from different tribes, such as the Cheyennes, the Arapahos, and the Sioux tribes, against the American Army commanded by Captain William J. Fetterman, in which the battle at Peno Creek (*aka* the Fetterman Massacre among the white men and as the Battle of the Hundred Slain among the Indians) consisted initially for the most part of cunning out the Bluecoats (Brown 1970:134-136). As a result, all American soldiers were killed, and the casualties among the Indian warriors were substantial as well, amounting to 200 dead and wounded, but was the worst defeat experienced by the government troops in their Indian warfare. The battle, however, became a public relations campaign tool, used especially by Colonel Carrington, who considered the incident a good example of the savagery and in an essay claimed that "the Indians were compelled by some paganistic belief to commit the terrible deeds" (Brown 1970:137). Ironically, Brown regards the Fetterman massacre a mere imitation of another battle, the Sand Creek Massacre, in which the roles were the opposite. Brown observes: "The Indians who ambushed Fetterman were only imitating their enemies, a practice which in warfare, as in civilian life, is said to be the sincerest form of flattery" (*ibid.*).

The warrior leader career of Crazy Horse continued through the Battles of Rosebud and, what is probably the best known, at Little Bighorn, as the peak of the duel between Crazy Horse and General George Armstrong Custer (Brown 1970:283-88 and 289-297). Custer was killed in the struggle and the Little Bighorn became to note the last successful war battle for the Indians. Therefore can be said that the recurrent Crazy Horse dreams in *Tonto* symbolize the desire of being a warrior, a hero, that means, of being respected. As

one of Alexie's characters confesses, "Deep in the heart of the heart of every Indian man's heart, he believes he is Crazy Horse." (*TIW* 53).

THE MENTOR

The third group concentrates on the overly romanticized icon of a Native American as an exorcist, a spiritual leader and a medicine man as if a role congenial to all individuals with Native background. That kind of stereotype became especially popular in the 1960s most likely in connection with the New Age movement, and led to an outburst of interest in Native American worldview, indirectly enabling the cultural revival of Native American literature and ethnic self-esteem.

The more recent examples of the stereotypical Mentors can be found in Carlos Castaneda's popular witch books, in Oliver Stone/Quentin Tarantino's film *Natural Born Killers*, as well as the frequent featuring in the episodes of a number of TV series (e.g., paranormal activities-centered *The X-Files* and *The Legacy* – the titles of the series alone say enough). These characters typically have been portrayed so as to underline the Native Americans' cooperation with the world of spirits, and mostly fall in to two separate categories being either good or evil with their purposes. In some cases, it gives the character a negative, even threatening aura of an adversary of ordinary life, in other cases, the Mentors are called for to help with their ability to communicate with spirits, or simply to provide a spiritual or moral guidance to – as a rule - the white heroes or heroines in trouble.

The character Thomas Builds-the-Fire who emerges as one of the main characters in both Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues* and short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, as well as in his first poetry collection *The Business of Fancydancing*, can serve as the example of this stereotype. Thomas Builds-The-Fire is an intriguing mixture of comical and tragic features, and represents the prototype of an Indian seer, the psychic and the intelligent on reservation. His almost uncontrollable storytelling

weaves poetical tones into the grim and unadorned reality, which can be described as that of sense of alienation, food, drugs, unemployment, and alcoholism against which the only weapon available is the power of imagination. His own puzzled journey to discover (his) Indianness underlines his role as the spokesman for Alexie's message to the audience.

Appearance

As a child, Thomas Builds-the-Fire had been “the weakest Indian boy on the whole reservation, so small and skinny, with bigger wrists than arms, a head too large for its body, and ugly government glasses. When he grew older and stronger, grew into an Indian man, he was the smallest Indian man on the reservation.” (*RB* 14). Although the physical power of Thomas is strikingly weak, throughout the storyline of Alexie's work and by means of Thomas's own stories, he appears as one of the strongest characters identity-wise and emotionally.

On the opening pages of the novel *RB*, the reader gets a glimpse of Thomas in a more detailed manner. The description reveals how, in fact, the character's appearance reflects his strong belief in the traditional values of his people, a salmon people, but it also underlines his standing among the others as somehow different than the rest:

Although the Spokanes were mostly a light-sinned tribe, Thomas tanned to a deep brown, nearly dark as the black man. With his long, black hair pulled into braids, he looked like an old-time salmon fisherman: short, muscular legs for the low center of gravity, long torso and arms for the leverage to throw the spear. Just a few days past twenty two, he carried a slightly protruding belly that he'd had when he was eight years old./.../ he wasn't ugly, though, just marked by loneliness /.../ Indian women had never paid much attention to him, because he didn't pretend to be some twentieth-century warrior, alternating between blind rage and feigned disinterest. (*RB* 4).

Thus, reaching adulthood, Thomas has become a “crazy Indian storyteller with ratty old braids and broken teeth” (*Tonto* 66). This is the appearance the Mentor for his peers has for most of the stories in Alexie's books. The ironic contrast between his rich internal and meager external characteristics creates another paradox of the stereotyped

image. It must be mentioned that Thomas himself is comfortable with his looks, so he cannot be claimed to be making efforts to look in accordance with an Indian Wise Man.

Character

The characteristic traits that portray Thomas Builds-the-Fire are all entirely positive. Again and again, he shows his inclination to act kindly to everybody around him and be as helpful to them as he can. And yet, being considered simultaneously also a nuisance because of his permanent storytelling and a traditionalism, which are not the traits highly appreciated by many of his fellow reservation residents, he, a “half magician on [his] mother’s side and half clown on [his] father’s” (*Tonto* 66), is an outcast in his community. Especially Victor and Junior demonstrate their disapproval of his traditional habits. For them, Thomas’s “Indianness” seems to touch a sensitive nerve, as the two are suffering from suppressed warrior’s ambitions.

The traditionalism in Thomas shows in his personal ethics or codes of behavior, summarized as “polite and traditional” (*RB* 4), but just as much in his deeds: “For thousands of years, the Spokanes feasted, danced, conducted conversations, and courted each other in certain ways. Most Indians don’t follow those rules anymore, but Thomas made the attempt.” (*RB* 4-5). In various situations, Thomas makes efforts to fix the problem in a conventional manner as the first resource:

“Lets decide it the old way,” Thomas said because he tried to be as traditional as the twentieth century allowed.

“What’s that?” Victor and Junior asked because they were as contemporary as cable television. (*RB* 49)

The confrontation between Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor and Junior can be witnessed throughout the *RB* novel and for the most part of *Tonto* collection. Victor and Junior appear as the opposite to Thomas: instead of Thomas-like politeness and kindness, they take their pleasure in bullying and aggression, instead of Thomas’s preaching and

following the traditional codes of conduct, they take pains with retaining their outward image as denying the traditions, instead of a strong internal identity and recognition of one's background like Thomas, they feel confused and choose to concentrate more on their physical might as a compensation.

Occasionally, the actions taken by Thomas may seem old-fashioned or disturbingly non-contemporary for the surrounding people. In a scene of *RB*, the Coyote Springs, the band that was gathered together by Thomas and where he performs the role of the lead singer, is traveling by airplane. None of the group is experienced in flying, and before boarding the plane, Thomas's companions feel insecure, craving for some encouragement. Typically, Thomas Build the Fire tries to save the situation in a traditional way:

Everybody looked at Thomas for help.

"Victor," Thomas said, "I brought an eagle feather for protection. You can have it."

"Get that Indian bullshit away from me! /.../ That ain't going to do nothing," Victor continued, in a lower volume. "It's just a feather. Hell, it fell off some damn eagle, so it obviously wasn't working anyway, enit?"

Victor was being as logical as a white man. (*RB* 218)

Similarly typical is Victor's way to cope with the unpleasant circumstances. As a first resource, he opts for his usual escape starting a drinking binge on board. But when the turbulence shakes the plane, he eventually accepts Thomas's help:

"Hey, Thomas," Victor slurred, "do you still got that eagle feather?"

"Sure," Thomas said and handed it to Victor, who held it tightly in his hand and whispered some inexpert prayer. The rest of Coyote Springs looked to Thomas for help, so he produced an eagle feather for each of them. (*RB* 219)

One of the most significant aspects that differentiate Thomas from the rest of the characters is his ability to unite the traditional side and the contemporary reality, and help them to discover or face their real self:

It is now. Three Indian boys are drinking Diet Pepsi and talking out by Benjamin Lake. They are wearing only loincloths and braids./.../It is the twentieth century and plane are passing overhead./.../They all want to have their vision, to receive their true names, their adult names./.../So they decided to build a fire and breathe in that sweet smoke. They have not eaten for days so they know their visions should arrive soon. Maybe they'll see it in the flames or in the wood. Maybe the smoke will talk in Spokane or English./.../The boys sit

by the fire and breathe, their visions arrive. They are carried away to the past, to the moment before any of them took their first drink of alcohol. (*Tonto* 20-21)

In “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” (*Tonto* 69), Thomas tells about the vision he had at the age of thirteen. The message of the vision was to make people take care of each other. Therefore, part of his activities can be regarded as remaining true to his tribal mission and following the role imposed on him by the vision. Not only is he showing a role model to the others, he is equally involved in educating them. Thomas tells the words of wisdom, acts as a guide to the others, explains the Indian time to Victor and Junior: - “*There are things you should learn*” (*Tonto* 21) – and seeks to help them to reconcile the traditional and the contemporary in their lives. And hopes to save the “little country he was trying to save, this reservation hidden away in the corner of the world.” (*RB* 16)

Ironically, he seems to be on terms with the modern life more than Junior or Victor. He maintains a healthy lifestyle and does not drink, reading books instead (*RB* 75). At times, he exhibits resourcefulness in using less tradition-bound means as well. For example, in *Tonto* short story “A Drug Called Tradition”, Thomas Builds-the-Fire proves himself as an expert in fixing mundane problems (e.g., he seats himself in an empty refrigerator to fill it), but can also afford to host “the second-largest party in reservation history” (*Tonto* 12), having received a considerable sum of money “from Washington Water Power because they had to pay for the lease to have ten power poles running across some land that Thomas has inherited.” (*Tonto* 13).

Even if one might expect it from a Mentor’s stereotype, Thomas Builds-the-Fire accounts not for much of an environmentalist. He runs accidentally over a rabbit by car in the short story “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”- although he believes the animal committed suicide – and never preaches the over-exploited “All my relations”- cliché. On the other hand, an excellent example of what an environmentalist type of a

Mentor appears like can be found in the short story “Jesus Christ’s Half-Brother is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation”. There is the narrator’s description of the World’s Fair in Spokane, where “In one little corner there’s a statue of an Indian who’s supposed to be some chief or another. I press a little button and the statue talks and moves his arms over and over in the same motion. The statue tells the crowd we have to take care of the earth because it is our mother.” (*Tonto* 129).

Other Mentors in Alexie’s works beside Thomas Builds-the-Fire include two women. Firstly, Big Mom, a mysterious and powerful spiritual leader living on top of a mountain near the reservation, whose magic powers begin to resonate especially in the *RB*. In *Tonto* collection, a similar reverence has been felt toward Norma Many Horses, a woman respected by everybody, a rodeo queen and a “cultural lifeguard” (*Tonto* 199), who sets a role model with her lifestyle, being an eager defender of justice and traditional values:

“Everything matters,” she said. “Even the little things.”
But it was more than just some bullshit Native religion, some fodder for the crystal-happy. Norma lived her life like we should all do. (*Tonto* 200)

Furthermore, it deserves to be mentioned that both Norma Many Horses and Big Mom like and support Thomas, protect him from others when necessary, and, lastly, talk to him.

Behavior

Approaching Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s role from the traditional perspective, he emerges as a spiritual leader, almost as a shaman, as well. Such role has been well outlined in *Tonto* story “A Drug Called Tradition”, in which his presence allows each of the three characters (Thomas, Junior, Victor) to have a vision of one of their companion’s ideal traditional roles, which also coincides with the romantic stereotypes of Native Americans.

On the other hands, Thomas undermines his image as a Mentor by making fun of his companions at first, and only later proceeding to the real visions:

“Victor,” Thomas said. “I can see you. God, you’re so beautiful. You’ve got braids and you’re stealing a horse. Wait, no. It’s not a horse. It’s a cow.”

./.../ “Why the fuck would I be stealing a cow?” I asked.

“I’m just giving you shit,” Thomas said. “No, really, you’re stealing a horse and you’re riding by moonlight. Van Gogh should’ve painted this one, Victor. Van Gogh should’ve painted you”. (*Tonto*, 14-15, “A Drug Called Tradition”)

The definition of vision as a cornerstone for many Native American cultures and religions has been provided by Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop* chapter “Something Sacred Going on Out There: Myth and Vision in American Indian Literature” (1986:102-117), according to which “Vision is a way of becoming whole, of affirming one’s special place in the universe, and myth, song, and ceremony are ways of affirming vision’s place in the life of all the people.” (Allen 1986:116).

It is interesting to note that before entering the vision story, all three disagree with the vision of themselves at first. Similarly, when Junior narrates Thomas in the role of a traditional spiritual leader who leads a ceremonial dance ritual, Thomas also states that he does not dance (*Tonto* 16). The Junior’s vision of Thomas, nevertheless, depicts Thomas Builds-the-Fire as performing the Ghost Dance and representing the broken traditions that he is the last to keep alive:

*They’re all gone, my tribe is gone. Those blankets they gave us, infected with smallpox, have killed us. I’m the last, the very last, and I’m sick, too./.../ I’ll dance a Ghost Dance. I’ll bring them back. /.../ I dance one step and my sister rises from the ash. I dance another and a buffalo crashes down from the sky onto a log cabin in Nebraska. With every step, an Indian rises. With every other step, a buffalo falls./.../My blisters heal, my muscles stretch, expand. My tribe dances behind me. At first they are no bigger than children. Then they begin to grow, larger than me, larger than the trees around us. /.../We dance in circles growing larger and larger until we are standing on the shore, watching all the ships returning to Europe. All the white hands are waiving good-bye and we continue to dance, dance until the ships fall off the horizon, dance until we are so tall and strong that the sun is nearly jealous. We dance that way. (*Tonto* 17)*

The passage comprises a number of traditional elements, including Ghost Dance, buffalo, drums, and - taking into account the preceding information provided in the story - also the use of hallucinogeneous substances. The ritual that takes place in the story reminds

largely of the Ghost Dance, a tradition originating from the Plateau region and later spreading in the form of a Ghost Dance religion among all other tribes and regions in the Native America. The meaning of Ghost Dance, as preached by its initiator Wovoka, was a promise of an Indian messiah coming, the return of the buffalo, and a restoration of Indian rights. The customary elements of the Ghost Dance were suggestion, autohypnosis as well as the use of peyote cactus to induce the trance (Stingl 1981:306).

The same quotation with the scene of Ghost Dance could just as well be interpreted as Thomas Builds-the-Fire would be performing the role of a healer. Thomas emerges as a leader of a healing ceremony by means of his stories, especially taking as the point of departure the P.G. Allen's definition of healing ceremonies as provided in *Sacred Hoop*: "Healing chants and ceremonies emphasize restoration of wholeness, for disease is a condition of division and separation from the harmony of the whole" (Allen 1986: 60-61). Furthermore, Thomas even uses his skills, i.e., his stories, to mend his car: "The blue van, repaired by an honest mechanic in Ellensburg and a few stories that Thomas whispered into the engine" (*RB* 90).

In connection with the Native American Mentor or shaman, one cannot pass the trend among the non-Indian people to turn the entire Native American culture into their object of fascination. Ever since the New Age movement, although the tendency existed marginally before, there have been lots of wannabe-Indians. Alexie has made bitter fun of those people.

When the rumors of a new Indian band Coyote Springs begin to spread, many of the wannabes congregate to their rehearsals and concerts.:

White strangers began to arrive on the Spokane Indian Reservation to listen to this all-Indian rock and blues band. A lot of those New Agers showed up with their crystals, expecting to hear some ancient Indian wisdom and got a good dose of Sex Pistols covers instead. (*RB* 41)

Two white women, Betty and Veronica, bookstore owners from Seattle, who had “long blonde hair and wore too much Indian jewelry /.../ turquoise rings, silver feather earrings, beaded necklaces” (*RB* 41) were among those arrivers. They soon turned into the groupies of the Coyote Springs, thus representing a vivid caricature of the wannabe Indians. Thomas, giving an interview in a radio show as the leader of the Coyote Sprigs, describes the girls as follows, disclosing some notes of contempt:

Look at them. They got more Indian jewelry and junk on than any dozen Indians. The spotlights hit the crystals on their necks and nearly blinded me once. All they talk about is Coyote this and Coyote that, sweatlodge this and sweatlodge that. They think Indians got all the answers. (*RB* 158)

As it turns out, the girls’ main mission is to try to get involved with Indian men, and they succeed at that with Victor and Junior. Veronica’s compliment to Victor reveals the superficiality of her affection to the young man: “You’re the best. I mean, you’re an Indian and a guitar player. How much better could it be?” (*RB* 43). In Thomas’s opinion, as revealed in the same radio interview, the mixed couples are a kind of war with one’s own suppressed identity, “using each other as trophies. Junior and Victor get to have beautiful white women on their arms, and Betty and Veronica get to have Indian men” (*RB* 158).

A conversation between Betty, the wannabe, and Chess, an Indian woman, ends almost in an argument. Chess is trying to break the idolized image of all Indians as Mentors, referring to the austere side of reservation life and Indian reality:

“White people want to be Indians. You all have things we don’t have. You live at peace with the earth. You are so wise.”

“You’ve never met Lester Falls Apart, have you?” Chess asked. “You’ve never spent a few hours in the Powwow Tavern. I’ll show you wise and peaceful.” (*RB* 168)

But the girls are persistent and decide to move to reservation and closer to their imagined Indian wisdom. Of course, they feel disappointed as an outcome, when the local Native people do not accept them as one of them, and the reality of reservation life turns

out to be less romantic as they imagined:

“What?” Chess asked. “Can’t you handle it? You want the good stuff of being Indian without all the bad stuff, enit? Well, a concussion is just as traditional as a sweatlodge.”

“This isn’t what we wanted.”

“What did you New Agers expect? You think magic is so easy to explain? You come running to the reservations, to all these places you’ve decided are sacred. Jeez, don’t you know *every* place is sacred? You want your sacred land in warm places with pretty views. You want the sacred places to be near malls and 7-Elevens, too.” (RB 184)

Alexie himself has often criticized the wannabe-attitude spread among the non-Indian people and is especially harsh to the Native Americans that trade the traditional religion or culture for cheap popularity. When Thomas and Chess discuss about the wannabe-issue, they almost voice Alexie’s personal opinion, stating that the entrance to the exclusive Indian club should be guarded more:

“Like I was saying, everybody wants to be an Indian. But not everybody is an Indian. It’s an exclusive club. I certainly couldn’t be Irish. Why do all these white people think they can be Indian all of a sudden?”

Thomas smiled.

“You know,” he said, “I’ve always had a theory that you ain’t really Indian unless, at some point of your life, you didn’t want to be an Indian.” (RB 169).

In *RB*, Thomas confesses that he cannot lie (RB 22). And yet he tells stories that sometimes turn the history upside down, distort the reality, and revert facts, creating new realities. Indeed, the American Indians can be considered as being very lenient in their attitude towards the notion of truth in the western sense. From the American Indian perspective, there is no clear division line running between the factual truth and a made-up story, at least not in the same manner as it exists in the Western tradition, in which the *written* records serve as the principal criterion for an event to be taken seriously or become rejected as an “un-truth”. For the western mind, stories are these recollections that cannot be supported by any documented evidence on black-and-white, and, respectively, the events with evidence materials are granted the authority of a factual (historical) truth. Native American culture as an oral tradition recognizes no such distinction between story and history - written records as actual proofs were unknown to them. A clearer distinction

is made only between a story and a lie, which corresponds to the differentiation between truth vs. lie and story vs. history in the western culture. The term ‘lie’ is used by the Native Americans to denote an act of telling something for the purpose of personal gain, whereas ‘story’ has a connotation of survival and continuity.

Therefore, the Native American understanding of the notion of truth differs dramatically from ours. The Native people treat(ed) any story as something true. Once articulated, any word or story created a reality of its own, consequently being always true, whether in the world of mind or daily life. The latter is an arbitrary differentiation, though, since there is no striking opposition between the realms of mind and the so-called reality. In Native American culture, a story is to be perceived in heart not in head and truth may have many forms. One of the most prominent and widely acknowledged Native American scholars, N. Scott Momaday, has formulated the Native American attitude in the following manner: “In the oral tradition stories are not told merely to entertain or to instruct; they are told to be believed. They are realities lived and believed. They are true” (Momaday 1997: 68). Thus, the key is to follow the Indian customs and believe what you are being told, and it becomes a reality. And it proves that Thomas Builds-the-Fire never lied.

However, Thomas gets repeatedly punished for his storytelling:

Thomas Builds-the-Fire walked through the corridors of the tribal school by himself. Nobody wanted to be anywhere near him because of all those stories. Story after story. /.../ Thomas Builds-the-Fire told his stories to all those who would stop and listen. He kept telling them long after people had stopped listening. (*Tonto* 72-73)

Nobody on the reservation ever hired him to work (*RB* 23), he is being frequently bullied by Victor and Junior, who “often tried to beat those stories out of Thomas, tied him down and taped his mouth shut. They pretended to be friendly and tried to sweet-talk Thomas into temporary silences/.../ But none of that stopped Thomas, who talked and talked.” (*RB* 15). He gets punished by the court and is an outcast in the community because of his storytelling, earning a reputation of “a misfit storyteller” (*RB* 5).

On the other hand, Thomas remains just as stubborn in continuing to follow his mission and carry on telling his stories, in spite of the negative attitudes and despite the seeming hopelessness to break these attitudes: “Thomas repeated stories constantly.” (*RB* 15). He pays little attention to the unenthusiastic reception of his work on the reservation: “I’ve spent my whole life being ignored. I’m used to it,” he claims in *RB* (*RB* 212). Until there was no other audience, he “shared his stories with pine trees because people didn’t listen.” (*RB* 28):

Thomas thought back to all those stories he had told. He has whispered his stories into the ears of drunks passed out behind the Trading Post. He had written his stories down n paper and mailed them to congressmen and game show hosts. He had climbed up trees and told his stories to bird eggs. He had always shared his stories with a passive audience and complained that nobody actively listened. (*RB* 212)

Although let on otherwise, his stories seemed to be necessary and mending for the people around him:

“Just one time when I’m telling a story somewhere, why don’t you stop and listen?” Thomas asked.
 “Just once?”
 “Just once.” /.../
 That was all Victor had ever wanted from his whole life. (*Tonto* 75)

In the above-quoted scene, Victor is reluctant at first, but ultimately acknowledges his need for some tradition and admits the importance that Thomas carries on the reservation.

One time Thomas got arrested for having once “held the reservation post master hostage for eight hours with the idea of a gun and also had threatened to make significant changes in the tribal vision” (*Tonto* 93). During the consequential trial, Thomas is accused of a contradictory felony summed up as a “serious storytelling fetish accompanied by an extreme need to tell the truth. Dangerous” (*Tonto* 93, “The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire”).

Before the trial, he had already “surrendered and agreed to remain silent” (*Tonto*

94): “Often he closed his eyes and stories came to him quickly, but he would not speak. He nodded and laughed if the story was funny; cried a little when the stories were sad; pounded his fists against his mattress when the stories angered him” (*Tonto* 94). It is important to mention that at the trial Thomas decides to represent himself, breaking thereby his oath of silence.

As a result, he becomes convicted to prison for killing two soldiers about a century ago, like he told in one of his stories when sitting in the witness stand. Altogether, he tells the court three different accounts of Native American history, but reverts the past events for the favor of Indians, turning massacres into a triumph: “Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s stories climbed into clothes like sand, gave you itches that could not be scratched. If you repeated even a sentence from one of those stories, your throat was never the same again.” (*RB* 15). Thereby he succeeds to heal the bitter wounds in the souls of the fellow-Indians gathered into the courtroom to observe the trial.

When telling the reversed historical narratives, he speaks as a pony and as Chief Qualchan, depicting two different battles against Colonel George Wright in 1858, and one account as a young warrior Wild Coyote fighting against Colonel Steptoe in the same year (*Tonto* 96, 98, 100). On the prison bus, the fellow convicts recognize him:

“I know who you are,” the Chicano said to Thomas. “You’re that Indian guy did all the talking.”

“Yeah,” one of the African men said. “You’re that storyteller. Tell us some stories, chief, give us the scoop.” (*Tonto* 103)

Thomas comes from a long line of storytellers, so he is not only conveyor of the oral culture on the tribal level, but also continuing his family traditions: “They all had the gift of storytelling, could pick up the pieces of a story from the street and change the world for a few moments.” (*Tonto* 132). His own commentary on his role as a storyteller reveals certain sadness and loneliness that the stories aid to comfort: “I have only my stories which came to me before I even had the words to speak. I learned a thousand stories before I took

my first thousands steps. They are all I have. It's all I can do." (*Tonto* 73)

Storytelling keeps him away from alcohol as well, as already his grandfather understood that drinking and storytelling couldn't coexist:

Samuel [Builds the Fire] had always thought alcohol would corrupt his stories, render them useless, flat. He knew his stories had the power to teach, to show how this life should be lived. He would tell his children and their friends, and then his grandchildren and their friends, those stories which could make their worlds into something better. At the very least, he could tell funny stories that would make each day less painful. (*Tonto* 134)

Paula Gunn Allen in her *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook* characterizes traditional Indian stories as follows:

Many times the stories weave back and forth between the everyday and the supernatural without explanation, confusing the logical mind and compelling linear thought processes to chase their own tails, which is a major spiritual purpose behind the tradition's narrative form. (Allen 1991:5)

Such pattern bears an evident connection to the Native American perception of stories as having a transformative power. Stories lie in the center of the Native American culture as the way of retaining or acquiring identity. Together with belonging to a certain place, they set the cornerstone for both individual and tribal identity. In oral cultures, such as Native American, the myths and legends are passed on from one generation to another, establishing a steady connection across the centuries. Stories tell you who you are, where you come from, who your people are and what your place is; they direct and guide, condole and give inspiration. In stories, everything is embodied and enacted. Paula Gunn Allen in her essay collection *The Sacred Hoop* comments on the stories as a tool "to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, /.../and to actualize, in language, those truths that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity", and sums up their traditional importance: "[Through stories,] one learns how to view oneself and one's tradition so as to approach it rightly." (Allen 1986:55-56). In other words, stories are a tool for survival. In addition, Duane Niatum in the *Harper's Anthology* emphasizes the importance of stories as being

also a “shield /.../against the social and spiritual plague of twentieth century consumer culture” (*Harper’s* 1988:XXIX).

This brings us to the final aspect of stories deriving from the Amerindian perspective, namely, their immediate connection to the question of identity. The Native people cherish the belief in the power of stories as providing a tribe with a collective identity, and, on the other hand, the individuals with an individual identity. Duane Niatum in the Preface to *Harper’s Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* states: “Every tribe or clan has at least one storyteller who chants the stories of the people for everyone in the community to hear” (*Harper’s* 1988:XI). Therefore, all things taken together, Alexie’s writing is aimed at fostering individual as well as collective identity. And the same function for the characters is enacted by Thomas Builds-the-Fire throughout the *Tonto* collection and the novel *Reservation Blues*.

THE POLITICAL BUM

The common marker for the third set of characters could be deliberate self-destruction through alcoholic beverages. This intentional tendency became especially notable with increasing number of people moving from reservations to larger cities and finding themselves not welcomed by employers. As concerns the historical background of the given stereotype, its development dates back to the 1940s already, continued to grow in the 1950s, but became publicly recognized only in the 1960s along with the general concern with the minority issues. The peak for the Political Bum image was the period from 1970s to early 1990s, but it is not quite extinct even today.

Vine Deloria, Jr in *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, in “Chapter 1: The Indian Movement” (1994:4-24) estimates that the worsening of social situation of the Native Americans began during the Second World War when war industries on the west coast of the U.S. attracted large numbers of Indian workers; once the war ended, they became unemployed (Deloria 1994:6-7). But many of the problems that darkened the second half of the 20th century rooted even more in the 1950s, when two harmful legal acts came into force in 1953, leading to a new Indian crisis. One of them, the Termination Act became rejected soon, but the other one, the Relocation Act gave rise to a wave of impoverished urban Indians (Stingl 1981:344-5). Deloria mentions the urban areas of California, primarily Los Angeles, San Francisco-Oakland, and San Jose as the most eminent destinations for the relocated (Deloria 1994:6-7). Namely, the Relocation Act encouraged Native Americans to move to cities and leave their reservations. The idea behind the act was to cut back the expenses, since as soon as a reservation resident re-settled to city, he/she lost the right to apply for government aid meant exclusively for reservation dwellers only. The first notable social stratification dates back to this time as

well.

In the 1960s, the intellectual climate changed for the Americans and the white majority acknowledged the situation and the presence of the Indians in the United States. It was the period during which the Native Americans received a voice, both politically and literally. The cultural-historical context of the sixties as the decade of Native American revolts and the time witnessing the first publications of American Indian poetry (until then the sparse publications of Native authors were a matter of minor periodicals, and rare even under such conditions) gave rise to a certain ethnic esteem and hope. It was also the time when more radical groupings emerged, such as American Indian Movement, and ventured different activities to attract the attention nationally and internationally to the existing “Indian problem” in North America, including poverty and various minority issues. However, the problems remain and, for example, the situation of the urban Indians (which accounts for more than half of the American Indian population) in the second half of the 1980s according to the Introduction of *Harper’s Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* was a ‘plight’ and the reservations were described as being “in terrible shape, with conditions bad and worsening with no immediate help in sight.” (*Harper’s* 1988: XIV)

The Political Bum stereotype is a summary and mixture of the elements of those historical currents. The blending of economic problems giving rise to social problems, the feeling of protest gaining momentum from the AIM activism and other radical groupings, and the Native American Renaissance euphoria adding certain romantic colors found internalization and idealization among the troubled and angry people, for whom the easiest way to make a statement against Anglo-American world seemed to refuse to live up to the generally appraised social American standards. These a(anti)social types that contribute to the Political Bum stereotype exhibited their opinions through (to a certain extent)

intentionally self-imposed unemployment, often spending their days drinking and hating the “white America”. With something that could be worded as “I am drinking because I’m Indian, and I am Indian because I drink” for the motto, their acts of manifestation have given rise to a derogated image of Native Americans among the non-Indian society, and dangerously shaken the ethics of their own people.

Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop* chapter “A Stranger in My Own Life: Alienation in American Indian Poetry and Prose (1986:127-146) alleges that the issue of the Political Bums in different variants is a common concern for the Native American writers, since they frequently incorporate characters that are “fraught with pain, rage, and angst, beset by powerlessness, denial, loss of self, normlessness, and anomie, and often characterized by political and personal violence” (Allen 1986:128). Alexie provides a shockingly abundant gallery of that sort of characters, young and old, male and female, all hopeless and wrathful (e.g., central characters Victor and Junior, although their classification under this particular category becomes sometimes questionable and changes from one Alexie’s work to another; a more clear-cut example would be most of the aunts, uncles, parents, and other background characters). To quote the author, his books are about “funny, angry Indians” (Campell and Dailey 1998). There has been a shift in his works from the effects of drinking to its causes, but he has retained the interest in “exploring the emotional, sociological, and psychological reasons for any kind of addiction or dysfunctions within the community” (West and West 1998).

To claim some peoples are more inclined to become addicted to alcoholism would be a racial and politically incorrect suggestion. Furthermore, the alcohol goes hand in hand with socially dysfunctional societies regardless of nation, country, or continent, and it would be a dubious affair to determine whether the lack of money and social status is a cause or an effect of drinking. Yet a hypothetical question can be posed, whether there

exists more likelihood for addiction in societies whose traditional worldviews have been less self-centered or even self-effacing. One way or another, alcoholism and self-destructive behavior is the brand name for Political Bums. Allen in *The Sacred Hoop* connects it to the feelings of alienation and resignation:

Some, many of us, just give up. Many are alcoholics, many are addicts. Many abandon the children, the old ones. Many commit suicide. Many become violent, go insane. Many go “white” and are never seen or heard from again. But enough hold on to their traditions and their ways. (Allen 1986:190-191)

Paula Gunn Allen (1986:134-135) distinguishes between three different groups in the reactions to alienation, and regards the tendency to approach life in terms of black and white oppositions as the root of the conflicts, “good is set against bad, Indian against white, and tradition against cultural borrowing; personal significance becomes lost in a confusion of dualities.” The first group consists of the so-called ‘apples’ who convert from Indian into white culture and, consequently, are likely to suffer “suicidal depression, alcoholism, abandonment on Indian ways, “disappearance” into urban complexes, and verbalized distrust of and contempt for longhairs” (*ibid*). The second group acknowledges the impossibility to reject one’s own background, and usually work out their struggle through rage directed against whites and ‘apples’. Their violence tends to be other-directed, including domestic violence. The third category is what most accurately seems to portray the Political Bum:

[These are] people caught between two cultures. These are the most likely to be suicidal, inarticulate, almost paralyzed in their inability to direct their energies toward resolving what seems to them an insoluble conflict. Their lives are, as they see it, completely beyond their control and any hope of reconciling the oppositions within and outside themselves beyond their reach. (Allen 1986:134-135)

Appearance

There is nothing specific to be mentioned about the Political Bum’s appearance that would be remarkably distinctive as Native American in this particular stereotype. Although

Alexie has provided the reader with the descriptions of the characters of the kind, for the most part, the external image coincides with any low-life, alcoholic, and unfortunate individual.

The dress code is illustrated in a short story where a boy takes a short visit to a city nearby, notices a former reservation dweller and gives a picture of his looks as follows: “He wasn’t quite drunk, a few sips from it, actually. He had on a little red coat that couldn’t have been warm enough for a Spokane winter. But he had some good boots. Probably got them from Goodwill or Salvation Army.” (*Tonto* 216).

In “Every Little Hurricane” in *Tonto*, while describing his uncle Adolph, the seven-year old Victor adds some supplementary elements that serve to summarize the general impression the Political Bum tends to leave: “Hello, uncle,” Victor said and gave Adolph a hug, gagged at his smell. Alcohol and sweat. Cigarettes and failure.” (*Tonto* 9).

In *RB*, Checkers Warm Water characterizes the Political Bum, his appearance, with a striking symbolic comparison, naming them brown zombies:

Checkers was always afraid of those Indian men who wandered the streets. She always thought they looked like brown-skinned zombies./.../Those drunk zombies always followed the family from store to store. Still, Checkers remembered how quiet and polite some of those zombies were./.../In Missoula they stood on street corners, wrapped in old quilts, and held their hands out without saying a word. Just stood there and waited. (*RB* 99)

Character

The shadows of the Warrior image penetrate to some extent the Political Bum imagology. The self-image of oneself as a Political Bum can be viewed as a negative alteration of the Warrior stereotype when to opt for the latter is impossible. The most obvious difference lies in the non-existence of the dignity and stoicism attributed to the Warrior representation. For example, the teenager Julius Windmaker in “The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore” (*Tonto* 43) turns from a promising basketball player, the modern alternative for being a Warrior, into drunkard and gives up

sports. A short passage in *RB* insinuates the idea of warrior toughness which has remained as ideal for many, but due to their incapability to live up to the ideal, the weaknesses undermining the toughness can be excused by being drunk, using alcohol as a camouflage: “A drunk Indian can cry and sing into his beer all night long, and the rest of the drunk Indians will sing backup.” (*RB* 17).

Paula Gunn Allen has referred to the self-destructive image as a contemporary version of the hostile savages conveying the characteristics of “worthless, alcoholic, and lazy, unwilling to join in the general progressiveness and prosperity that is the final index of the righteousness of the American dream” (Allen 1986:4-5). The qualities that Allen mentions focus mainly on how a Political Bum would be viewed by outsiders. From the perspective of internal characteristics, i.e., among the traits that are more likely to be spotted by an insider, must be pointed out such aspects as alienation, isolation, lowered self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and self-estrangement, accompanied by anxiety, hopelessness, and (self-)victimization.

To some degree, there are also traces of Anglophobia in the Political Bum archetype. Allen defines Anglophobia as including a strong sense of bitterness toward white population and a consequent unwillingness to examine the dynamics of white socialization (Allen 1986:224). In short, an Anglophobic Native American views white society with fear and hostility.

The desperation and hopelessness lie in the heart of the Political Bum stereotype, conditioned by the general attitude towards Indians as antisocial element. For example, in “Eugene Boyd Don’t Drink Here Anymore” (*BFD* 75), a stranger in a bar is told the news that Eugene Boyd was shot some time ago: “Who the hell did it, the stranger asks me, and I tell him that everyone knows but the police ain’t going to do anything about it because when one Indian kills another Indian, that’s considered natural selection” (*BFD* 75). The

quote illustrates the roots of low self-esteem, an attitude that one's life is discounted. Another citation that concentrates more on the hopelessness resulting from the lack of any control about one's present and future, derives from "Reservation Blues", the song lyrics that open the novel of the same name: "*And if you ain't got choices/ Ain't got much to lose*" (*RB 1*).

Since the Political Bum stereotype typically includes the unemployment and poverty, a strong sense of an uncertain future causes a lot of insecurity. Junior Polatkin provides the reader with ominous statistics of his friends' perspectives upon leaving high school in the short story "Indian Education": "Back home on the reservation, my former classmates graduate: a few can't read, one or two are just given attendance diplomas, most look forward to the parties. The bright students are shaken, frightened, because they don't know what comes next." (*Tonto 180*). The Political Bum image glooming as the most likely future for them generates fear and engenders pessimism regarding the chances for better choices, and produces self-destructive urges because of despair.

The disbelief in one's prospective paves way to seeking makeshift comforts, to building false hopes that the help should come from outside. Many of the characters in Alexie's stories impute alcohol to be able to save their personal world from cataclysms, like Victor in "All I Wanted to Do Was Dance": "It happened that way. He 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. One more beer and he would love her forever." (*Tonto 88*).

A Political Bum seems to believe in the slogan "Nothing more hopeless than a sober Indian" (*Tonto 87*). The escapism, and especially an escape by means of a drink, is a very characteristic feature of the Political Bum ideology. Most of the alcoholics in Alexie's stories seem to compare drinking with the Noah's Ark: "Maybe they're all hiding on a ship

in a bottle,” (*Tonto* 124) assumes Victor in “Jesus Christ’s Half-Brother Is Alive And Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation”. Victor himself is the most thoroughly portrayed representative of the Political Bum stereotype in Alexie’s works in terms of his belief in alcohol as anesthetic for reality and in self-destructive habits: “He drank so much but he would never pass out. He cried./.../He punched the walls but never hard enough to hurt himself. “Nothing works. Nothing works”” (*Tonto* 88-89).

As mentioned above, the feeling of alienation from the traditional values and from contemporary ones as well, is one of those elements that make the Political Bum a Native American stereotype, since most of the other issues, despair, poverty, alcoholism, etc., are global phenomena. The attitude of Political Bum toward one’s Indianness consists of controversies. On the one hand, he emphasizes himself being an Indian. Yet on the other, he feels uncomfortable about his ethnicity, and blames it for being the cause of a tough life, considering it simultaneously a self-denial and an excuse. Again, it all results in uncertainty that drinking is trusted to alleviate.

For instance, there rings a need for tradition in Victor’s line, when he asks Junior to join him for a car trip to the lake, and almost a persuasion of Junior by means of a promise of an ‘Indian’ event: “We’re going out to Benjamin Lake to do this new drug I got. It’ll be very fucking Indian. Spiritual shit, you know?” (*Tonto* 14). But the choice of tone and vocabulary disguises the desire carefully. The issue of lost connections with traditional heritage and language has been described in “Distances”: “I do not speak my native tongue. Except that is, for the dirty words. I can tell you what I think of you in two languages.” (*BFD* 18). Similarly to the previous example, a certain up-on-arms feeling can be sensed.

Behavior

In *Tonto* story “Every Little Hurricane”, Victor’s father, whom the boy perceives as a warrior, transforms into a Political Bum. The political statement, its causes and effects, are well presented in the following excerpt:

In other nightmares, in his everyday reality, Victor watched his father take a drink of vodka on a completely empty stomach. Victor could hear that near-poison fall, then hit, flesh and blood, nerve and vein. Maybe it was like lightning tearing an old tree into halves. Maybe it was like a wall of water, a reservation tsunami, crashing onto a small beach. Maybe it was like Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Maybe it was like all that. Maybe. But after he drank, Victor’s father would breathe in deep and close his eyes, stretch, and straighten his neck and back. During those long drinks, Victor’s father wasn’t shaped like a question mark. He looked more like an exclamation point. (*Tonto* 6).

The Political Bum -kind of thinking defines drinking as a manifestation and, secondly, as an opportunity to close the eyes to the negative facts. At the same time the quote reveals the Political Bum as typically a stereotype that was applied by fathers of the characters, echoing the development of the stereotype in the 1940s and the 1950s as brought out at the beginning of this chapter, and confirming Alexie’s interest in the male situation under the circumstances of a conflict between two different cultures and traditions.

A similar absent fathers theme, including pain and circumventing judgments, resonates in an exchange of experiences between Chess Warm Water and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Thomas’s relationship with, or rather his responsibility for his father, who serves as another example of the Political Bum, speaks primarily of the son’s role as taking care of the father: “Once a month, he bailed his father out of jail for drunk and disorderly behavior. That had become his father’s Indian name: Drunk and Disorderly” (*RB* 95). Chess, defining the phenomenon as the “warrior desperation” and “the need to be superhuman in the poverty of reservation” (*RB* 114) in her turn, concentrates more on finding excuses for her father’s behavior:

After his basketball games were over, he didn’t have much else. If he could’ve held a basketball in his hands, when he cut down trees for the BIA, maybe my father would’ve

kept that job. If he could have drunk his own sweat after a basketball game and got drunk off the effort, maybe he would've stayed away from the real booze. (*RB* 98).

As already said, there are many controversies in the Political Bum's agenda. On the one hand, he creates an image of being himself an embodiment of political statement. On that ground, the drinking, excused by the very agenda, is not the aim, but the means. On the other hand, it often remains the only active action taken to bring about any changes, and a passive who-cares-attitude emerges as the norm:

"They're going to kill each other," somebody yelled from an upstairs window. Nobody disagreed and nobody moved to change the situation. Witnesses. They were all witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of epic scale. Victor's uncles were in the midst of a misdemeanor that would remain one even if somebody was to die. One Indian killing another did not create a special kind of storm. The little kind of hurricane was generic. It didn't even deserve a name. (*Tonto* 3).

The reasons of passivity seem to stem from a feeling of resignation, although in the short story "Witnesses, Secret and Not" explains it rather as a silent manifestation: "That's how it is. One Indian doesn't tell another what to do. We just watch things happen and then make comments. It's all about reaction as opposed to action." (*Tonto* 216).

Alexie's criticism of self-destructive behavior through alcohol addiction becomes evident on several occasions. Proportionally speaking, alcohol is present in the *Tonto* collection in almost all stories - only one story does not involve any mentioning of drinking. Therefore the criticism is not an overt preaching of healthy habits; in fact, many of the comments seem to follow the above-mentioned Noah's Ark's approach. But the ones that express the disapproval of such genocide from within reek of distress. For example, in "Every Little Hurricane" in *Tonto* :

Victor dreamed of whiskey, vodka, tequila, those fluids swallowing him just as easily as he swallowed them. When he was five years old, an old Indian man drowned in a mud puddle at the powwow. Just passed out and fell facedown into the water collected in a tire track. Even at five, Victor understood what it meant, how it defined nearly everything. Fronts. Highs and lows. Thermals and undercurrents. Tragedy. (*Tonto* 7).

On those occasions, the self-destruction by means of alcoholism emerges as a form of a slow suicide. In a conversation between two characters, one is worried about the large-

scaled number of addicts (“Drinking/.../will kill them.”), the other responds and asserts: “I think that’s the idea.” (*RB* 100). Also Victor decides for a slow suicide after his friend Junior shot himself, he turns down a job opportunity and devotes himself to drinking: “That little explosion of the beer can opening sounded exactly like a smaller, slower version of the explosion that Junior’s rifle made.” (*RB* 293).

The suicidal tendencies in the direct meaning of the word are palpable in Junior’s behavior, who kills himself in *RB*. In his post-mortal chat with Victor, Junior Polatkin sheds some light on the factors that drove him to committing suicide. He explains his suicide was a decision in order to get rid of his hard life, and due to his inability to get a vision, see dreams or hearing stories, plus, as the last drop, he did not want to continue drinking (*RB* 290). Thus, his motives combine the social element with the ethnic impotence, but also refer to alcohol as a tool to survive, when the other sides of life turn bare. It is significant that Junior does not have a ‘real’ name. His namelessness (and the frequent reference to Junior as a regular name on the reservation) allows enhancing his lack of identity and underlining his self-estrangement.

The tendency to fight the alcohol addiction fits also well under the category of Political Bum. For example, the following lines describe the extent of drinking problem on reservations: “Yesterday I got this postcard from Pine Ridge and my cousin says all the Indians there are gone and do I know where they went? I write back and tell him to look in the A.A. meeting.” (*Tonto* 124). However, often the Anonymous Alcoholics meetings alternate with drinking periods:

There ain’t many who do stay sober. Most spend time in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and everybody gets to know the routines and use them on all occasions, not just at A.A. meetings.

“Hi, my name is Junior,” I usually say when I walk into a bar or party where Indians have congregated.

“”Hi, Junior,” all the others shout in an ironic unison.

A few of the really smart-asses about the whole A.A. thing carry around little medals indicating how long they’ve been continuously drunk. (*Tonto* 204)

On the whole it can be said that a contemporary process seems to be the trend of Political Bum turning into White-Collar Redskin (both on the levels of stereotypes and individual choices) and the White Collar Redskins making efforts to get rid of the existing negative stereotype. In the short story "Class" from *TIW* collection, a lawyer declares:

I don't drink alcohol, never have, mostly because I don't want to maintain and confirm any of my ethnic stereotypes, let alone the most prevalent one, but also because my long-lost father, a half-breed, is still missing somewhere in the bottom of a tequila bottle. I had always wondered if he was a drunk because he was an Indian or because he was white or because he was both. (*TIW* 47)

WHITE COLLAR REDSKIN

The recently emerged generation of young, well-educated success stories of lawyers, businessmen, teachers, artists, and other professionals of Native American origin form the fourth group. As a new phenomenon, arisen most outstandingly during the 1990s and onwards, these contribute especially to the characters in Alexie's latest collection of short stories, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, in which Alexie examines the possibility for remaining Indian while accomplishing a certain level of wealth and social status, and in his center of interest are the urban Indians.

In an interview, Alexie has emphasized the difference of *TIW* from his previous writing due to the subject matter. He describes the characters of the collection as "professional, urban Indians – poets and teachers and lawyers, so really successful Indians. Like John Updike's characters, except they have braids"²⁹. By incorporating this group of Native Americans, he updates the general image of the American Indians, but is also filling a gap in contemporary Native American literature that is predominantly dealing with reservation Indians: "Most of the people we call Native American writers grew up urban, which makes it doubly ironic that there's very little urban Indian literature. I think it's because urban Indians see the rez as some sort of paradise, so/.../it's an Eden effect."³⁰

The author depicts the *status quo* of the US entertainment industries, where Native Americans are taking over the gambling halls, turning from the devoted Bingo-players into casino owners, gaining fame as writers, and so on. Many of them are channeling the profits for the benefit of their tribe, whether to ease the situation on their home reservation or invest into cultural continuity (publishing houses, university scholarships, etc.). At the

²⁹ Online interview with Sherman Alexie. Available at <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/com.../transcript.asp?userid=2UK192519J&eventId=218>, accessed January 12, 2001.

³⁰ *ibid.*

same time, they are also frequently criticized for having abandoned their own people, moving away from reservation, and assimilated into the dominant culture by having created a career and sound financial standing for themselves.

Therefore, the most notable feature in the White Collar Redskin stereotype is an effect of a twofold split. On the one hand, the Native Americans that have entered into the convenient American life are often accepted neither among the other success-stories, nor on the reservations. In the first case they are newcomers who have to prove themselves constantly and fight the prejudice because of their reservation background, in the second case the other reservation residents consider them traitors because they choose to leave.

Among the stereotypical images, the White Collar Redskin represents the clearest contradiction with the previous stereotype, the sharply contrastive image of the Political Bum. White Collar Redskin is troubled due to the multiplicity of choices, whereas the Political Bum suffered from lack of any choices. Because of the former stereotype and the general attitude toward the reservation Indians, to establish a successful career as a professional in a city means simultaneously a success in combating the prejudiced attitudes due to one's reservation background. What must also be emphasized is the fact that White Collar Redskin is the first stereotype that is not connected with either reservation or wilderness.

In one of the *Tonto* stories, there emerges a telling similarity between the backgrounds of a reservation Indian going to city and a (white) person who has spent some time in jail and is trying to start a new life. Junior recollects a basketball player of another team: "This guy was about twenty-eight and had a tough life. Grew up in inner-city Los Angeles and finally made it out, made it to college and was playing [basketball] and studying hard. If you think about it, he and I had a whole lot in common." (*Tonto* 208).

Another example derives from "Class" in *TIW*. Edgar Eagle Runner, a well-doing

layer marries a white woman. At the wedding, “our vows were witnessed by three dozen of Susan’s best friends, along with most of her coworkers at the architecture firm, but Susan’s handsome brother and parents stayed away as a protest against my pigmentation.” (*TIW* 39). The prejudice can be found even among the married couples. In “Assimilation”, Mary Lynn, who majored in Blake and Milton during her studies at university, who works at Microsoft and is well off and constantly works overtime, is married to a white man. Even after years of marriage and three children, her husband keeps wondering, “how an Indian from reservation could be so smart” (*TIW* 10).

In addition, the White Collar Redskin will experience another kind of prejudice among his/her own people. The former dichotomy of ‘the apples’ or the urban Indians and ‘the skins’ or the reservation Indians, has not disappeared and still prevails. The blind hatred of the city Indians among the reservation Indians has been represented in the form of an allegory in the story “Distances” in *Tonto*. The story is a fantasy, or rather a nightmare, of an apocalyptic change - all that has anything to do with whites is being destroyed (including watches, electronic equipment, Christian icons, etc). The urban Indians, called the Urbans, are labelled pariahs, no intermarriages with the Skins, the reservation Indians, are allowed, and the Skins themselves are forced to remain on reservation in order to save their race. On the background there are haunting the ghosts of the ancient Indians, the Others, who in their turn torment the Skins and regard them an anomaly and ‘non-Indian’.

The theme of a confrontation between the reservation Indians versus the urban Indians transpires throughout the *TIW*. An illustrative case emerges in a bar fight between the professional street fighter Junior, markedly a reservation Indian, and the lawyer Edgar Eagle Runner in short story “Class”. Junior attacks Edgar, the I-narrator, verbally because he looks successful:

He took a few steps back, pointed at me.

"I'm sick of little shits like you," he said. "Fucking urban Indians in your fancy fucking clothes. Fuck you. Fuck you."

I looked down and saw my denim jacket and polo shirt, the khakis and brown leather loafers. I looked like a Gap ad. /.../

"Jesus," he said. "I don't know why I'm even talking to you./.../You fucking whimp. You're not worth my time. /.../ Why don't you just get in your BMW, that's what you drive, enit?/.../"

I didn't drive a BMW, I drove a Saab.

"/.../Just drive back to your fucking mansion on Mercer Island or Edmonds or whatever white fucking neighborhood you live in. drive back to your white wife." (*TIW* 50).

Junior's envy of Edgar's successful social climbing turns into rage. Ultimately, the incident escalates to a fistfight between them, yet this is a deliberate decision of Edgar, not of Junior. The bartender Sissy explains the reasons of Junior's anger to Edgar after their fight is ended:

"I wanted to be with my people," I said.

"Your people?" asked Sissy. "Your people? We're not your people."

"We're Indians."

"Yeah, we're Indians./.../ But we live in this world and you live in your world. /.../ Do you know how much I want to live in your world?" (*TIW* 55)

On the basis of the characters in *Tonto*, *TIW*, and *RB* can be generalized that the stereotypical White Collar Redskin is less likely to be negatively prejudiced of the reservation Indians than the latter are opinionated and stereotyping the White Collars. A joke in *Tonto* defines the White Collar less Indian, stating "the real Indian got blisters on his feet. The fake Indian got blisters on his ass." (*Tonto* 91). Even a temporary absence of permanent reservation residents may lead to disapproval, such as is the case in *RB*. The rock group *Coyote Springs* turns from a reservation star into an object of insults after they travel to New York to give audition at a records company:

"But everybody liked us before."

"Before you left the reservation, before you left." (*RB* 179)

There are a number of characters that wish to leave reservation, but choose otherwise or return to their home reservation. Still the desire to leave seems to be common, often enhancing the envy-factor in creating the White Collar Redskin myth. The *TIW*

introduces three different paths taken on the example of the basketball player Roman Gabriel Fury, the carpenter Wonder Horse, and the first-person narrator of “One Good Man”.

In “Saint Junior”, Roman Gabriel Fury had always been determined to leave the reservation, follow his dreams and become a first-class basketball player. His career fails to proceed according to his high expectations, although he travels across the world as an athlete. Yet his ambition of becoming an NBA player is not fulfilled, and the man returns to his home reservation, where he lives happily ever after:

He’d always known that his true and real mission lay somewhere outside the boundaries of reservation. There were Indians who belonged in the city, and then there were those rare few who could live successfully in either place. But Roman had always felt like he didn’t belong anywhere, like he couldn’t belong to any one place, or any series of places. (*TIW* 159.)

The carpenter named Wonder Horse in “One Good Man” wants to leave as well, but never made any attempt to make it happen. He stays on the reservation, because it is the only place he is familiar with:

With dark hair, eyes and skin, he was fifty or eighty, take your pick. A small man with large hands, he had to resist the daily urge to get in his pickup and drive away from the reservation, never to return./.../He/.../believed the whole of the reservation – the streams, rivers, pine trees, topsoil, and stalks of white wheat – needed him, even loved him. And he remained because he was loyal and vain. (*TIW* 210)

The first-person narrator of the short story “One Good Man” reveals simultaneously both the motivation for those who remain home, as well as for those who leave for cities. His internal monologue is not judgmental, as he acknowledges the diversity in people’s choices and the likelihood that opinions change during one’s life:

I’d left the reservation when I was eighteen years old, leaving with the full intention of coming back after I’d finished college. I had never wanted to contribute to the brain drain, to be yet another of the best and brightest Indians to abandon his or her tribe to the Indian leaders who couldn’t spell the word *sovereignty*. Yet no matter my idealistic notions, I have never again lived with my tribe. I left the reservation for the same reason a white kid leaves the cornfields of Iowa, or the coal mines of Pennsylvania, or the oil derricks of Texas: ambition. And I stayed away for the same reasons the white kids stay away: more ambition./.../I loved the reservation when I was a child and I suppose I love it now as an adult (I live only sixty-five miles away), but it’s certainly a different kind of love. As an adult, I am fully conscious of the reservation’s weaknesses, its inherent limitations

(geographic, social, economic, and spiritual), but as a child I'd believed the reservation to be an endless, magical place. (*TIW* 220-221)

It is noteworthy that the narrator belongs to the younger age group than the carpenter or the basketball player, therefore there seems to be a reference to the younger generation as more tolerant than the older people. Or maybe they are simply more calculating in terms of building up a career. On the grounds of the first assumption, the *TIW* is calling for more tolerance. It can be pointed out that mostly it is a criticism toward the reservation Indians who are prejudiced against the urban Indians. The Native Americans residing in cities have been portrayed as having an accepting attitude toward those who live on reservation, sometimes their attitude even verges idolization.

Alexie is critical of another feature of intolerance, the hatred of half-breeds on the reservations. Again, here resonates the issue of the questionable extent of 'Indianness' attributed to the object of disapproval as well as a belief that the half-breeds, because they are closer to the dominant culture, may threaten the perspectives of the 'real Indians' on job market. In a scene in *RB*, Chess Warm Water warns a white woman not to conceive a child with an Indian man:

Your son will be beaten because he's a half-breed. /.../ No matter what he does, he'll never be Indian enough. Other Indians won't accept him. Indians are like that./.../ Those quarter-blood and eight-blood grandchildren will find out they're Indian and torment the rest of us real Indians. They'll come out to the reservation, come to our powwows, in their nice clothes and nice cars, and remind the real Indians how much we don't have. Those quarter-bloods and eight-bloods will get all the Indian jobs, all the Indian chances, because they look white. Because they're safer. (*RB* 283)

Paula Gunn Allen defines a breed as "an Indian who is not an Indian" (Allen 1986: 129) and draws a parallel between the breeds due to parentage and the breeds due to their acculturation to non-Indian society. In her opinion the existence of such equivalence is one of the main sources for the emergence of a sense of alienation (Allen 1986:129-130):

Breeds are a bit of both worlds, and the consciousness of this makes them seem alien to

traditional Indians while making them feel alien among whites. Breeds commonly feel alien to themselves above all. The Indian world informally classifies individuals according to their “Indianness.” No one is exactly sure what the qualifying characteristics are /.../. One can meet formal standards and still find oneself excluded from the community on social levels. Or one might change communities and find oneself forced to reestablish one’s Indian identity, often with respect to unfamiliar standards and norms. This is particularly true for these who come into a strange urban environment, though it is not as fraught for rural people, who conform to physical standards of appearance, speak an Indian language or use English in the way that bilingual Indians of whatever tribal antecedents do. (*ibid.*)

Appearance

The appearance of White Collar Redskin stereotype has mainly three tendencies, ranging from consciously non-’Indian’ looks to a markedly conscious statement of one’s background via the appearance.

The first case can be depicted on the example of Low Man Smith in the short story “Indian Country”, a half-breed born in Seattle. He is a mystery writer and carries a suitcase and computer bag. He has entirely average contemporary looks, where nothing indicates to his ethnic background, and although he considers himself a Coeur d’Alene, he does not speak his tribal language and has visited the home reservation only six times.

The intentional image building of oneself as a Native American can be seen in the case of Sara Polatkin of the same short story. She is a Spokane, who left the reservation for her studies at law school. She makes efforts to retain her appearance as recognizably Indian: “Her voice inflected with a heavy sing-song reservation accent. She probably had to work hard to keep that accent. Her black hair hung down past her waist.” (*TIW* 138).

In “Class”, the lawyer Edgar Eagle Runner (on his driver’s license, Edgar Joseph), exemplifies a combination of the two above-mentioned appearances. He has retained only one element that is recognizably ‘Indian’: “black braids that hung down past my chest. I’d been growing the braids since I’d graduated from law school. My hair impressed jurors but irritated judges. Perfect.” (*TIW* 38)

Character

The White Collar Redskin tends to live simultaneously in two worlds. The Alexie's characters belonging to this stereotype differ in their ability to combine the two worlds, some have assimilated more, some less, and most of them seem to have developed a sense of alienation. Another option is to take (or at least try) another identity: "I'm Eddie Tap Water. Used to be Spring Water. But I am Urban Indian now." (RB 150).

The best example of the two worlds incorporated is Mary Lynn, the wife of a white man, in "Assimilation". She likes to listen to "the Big Mom Singer's powwow CDs (*I'm not afraid of death, hey ya, hey, death is my cousin, hey, ya, ha, ha*) and read from Emily Dickinson's poetry (*Because I could not stop for Death - / He kindly stopped for me ---*)" (TIW 2-3). On the surface, she has been successful in combining the two cultures, but as the story unfolds, her internal confusion becomes revealed.

The theme of assimilation emerges in the short story "Saint Junior" as well. Here the emphasis is on the differentiation in the heart of assimilation and the issue is not as much an assimilation into white culture, but into another tribe: "She'd always understood that an Indian could be assimilated and disappear into white culture, but she'd discovered, too, that an Indian of one tribe could be swallowed whole by another tribe." (TIW 161)

The Urban Indians trying to demonstrate their Indianness or at least proving it for themselves can be seen, for example, in "The Toughest Indian in the World". The reporter, the I-narrator, talks to the fighter he picked up and is careful to use a word that demonstrates his reservation background: "I threw in the "enit", a reservation colloquialism, because I wanted the fighter to know that I had grown up on the rez, in the woods, with every Indian in the world." (TIW 26). Thereby he reveals that in some ways, in terms of his background, he feels inferior to the hitchhiker, he feels less "Indian".

In “Class”, the reservation-born lawyer Edgar goes to an Indian bar for the first time in his life and observes a reservation Indian: “One large and muscular Indian guy played pool by himself. In his white T-shirt, blue-jean jacket, tight jeans, and cowboy boots, he looked like Chief Broom from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. I decided he could have killed me with a flick of one finger.” (TIW 49). Also Edgar confesses that the pool-player somehow rises above him.

It is typical of the White Collar Redskin to have American values, including individualism (vs. collective as in traditional Native culture) and a conformity with general standards. In “The Toughest Indian in the World” the reporter drives a brand-new Toyota Camry, “the best-selling automobile in the United States”, because he believes in white standards: “*Consumer Reports* has named it the most reliable family sedan for sixteen years, and I believe it” (TIW 24). After he picked up “the toughest Indian in the world”, a well-off boxer of a hitchhiker who is on its way back home on reservation, he changes manifestly traditional and starts to go by foot to visit his family and own home reservation, where he hasn’t been for twelve years: “I started walking. In bare feet, I traveled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die. At that moment, if you had broken open my heart, you could have looked inside and seen the thin white skeletons of one thousand salmon” (TIW 34). He decides to fight the feeling of alienation by retuning to traditionalism.

An opposite recognition takes place in the mind of the lawyer Edgar Eagle Runner in “Class”. Although the man temporarily yearns contacts with other Indians, he realizes that his place is not in that world anymore. Also Low Man Smith in “Indian Country” understands that he is comfortable in the role he is in and has no yearnings for building ties with other Indians, considering Indianness as a potential cause for being a social outcast: “Jesus, he’d always wanted to be the kind of Indian who *didn’t* get kicked out of public

places.” (*TIW* 126). He plays golf, carries several credit cards, and belongs to seven frequent-flier clubs. And he brags about his wealth, trying to cover his cynicism and loneliness:

“I make so much money that white people think I’m white.”

Nobody laughed.

“You’re one of the funny Indians, enit?” Sid asked Low Man. “Always making the jokes, never taking it seriously.” /.../

Low knew for a fact that everything was funny. Homophobia? Funny! Genocide? Hilarious! Political assassination? Side-splitting! Love? Ha, Ha, Ha! (*TIW* 144)

It is fascinating to note that, for instance, Sollor argues that urban, industrial environment serves to foster the ethnic identity and turns it into a ‘sacred asset’ (Hutcheon 71). A similar argument has been proposed by P.G. Allen: “In large measure, the urbanization of large numbers of American Indians has resulted in their reclaiming their traditions “ (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*. 31). Hence, Sollor’s and Allen’s suggestions would serve as an intriguing point for the current debate about the possibility for remaining ‘Indian’ while leading a ‘normal American life’, pursuing a yuppie career and residing in some major city. This question often posed by an opposition between the reservation Indians and the urban(ized) Indians is one of the main issues in the recent works by Sherman Alexie, but also many other Native authors in the US and Canada today.

Behavior

Since the White Collar Redskin is driven by ambitions and a desire to succeed in his/her professional career, it is typical of this stereotype to value education highly. A point to be taken into account is that White Collar Redskin, like many characters in the collection *TIW*, such as Roman Gabriel Fury of “Saint Junior”, “was the first member of his extended family who’d ever wanted to pursue higher education.” (*TIW* 165).

The White Collar Redskins in Alexie’s *TIW* collections are all sober, although a few have been mentioned to be recovering alcoholics. One of their obvious goals is to fight

the previous stereotype, the Political Bum, and therefore seem to be careful to not to enact any of the characteristics of that negative image.

Alexie's White Collar Redskin characters who are living in cities tend to be married to whites, for example Mary Lynn in "Assimilation" and Edgar in "Class". Mixed marriages as a form of assimilation and simultaneously as a source of problems and confusion runs through both short stories, but is especially focused on in "Assimilation", where is emphasized the negative attitude toward mixed marriages on reservation. Mary Lynn is a wife of a white man and a mother for three children. Her two sons have Indian looks and are thereby accepted by the grandparents on the reservation, whereas her blond blue-eyed daughter is not: "When Mary Lynn's parents called from the reservation they always asked after the boys, always invited the boys out for the weekend, the holidays, and the summer, and always sent more elaborate gifts than they sent to the girls" (*TIW* 12). She appears as not fully at peace with her choice to marry a white man and wants a sexual intercourse with another Indian; she regards it as a "carnal form of affirmative action", "a political act", "rebellion, resistance, revolution" (*TIW* 4).

The sexuality as a topic is present in many short stories in the collection *Toughest Indian In the World*. It is not only an issue of interracial contacts, but even more notably about sexual minorities. There are a number of references to homosexual relationships, such as in the stories "Assimilation", "The Toughest Indian in the World", "Indian Country" and "Saint Junior". As Alexie reveals in an interview, he is making a "personal and political statement" by incorporating the sexual minorities in his stories and hoping to break the intolerance thereby:

As my life has become more urban and diverse, so have my friends become more urban and diverse. I think the hatred I am most upset with in the world is homophobia. It's the only hatred that has absolutely no basis in reality. Every other group of people has oppressed every other group of people – except the gays and lesbians. Find me a country of gay men that's invaded another country. Find me a lumberjack who's been straight-bashed by a group of raving lesbians. You get rid of all the gay art in the world, and you'll have

two car-repair manuals and three albums of John Tesh, and do you really want to live in that world?³¹

Furthermore, Sherman Alexie draws a parallel with the homosexuals and Indians in American society, because both groups have been treated with equal prejudice. It becomes obvious in a phone conversation between the half-Indian Low Man Smith and white lesbian Tracy Johnson in “Indian Country”:

“Low, it’s been forever. Are you still an Indian?”

“Yes I am. Are you still a lesbian?”

They both remembered their secret language, their shared ceremonies. (*TIW* 134).

Allen in the *Sacred Hoop* seems to support Alexie’s metaphor for prejudice, although she concentrates more on the aspect of denial in the attitude toward Native Americans and sexual minorities: “The lesbian is to the American Indian what the Indian is to the American - invisible.” (Allen 1986:245).

What seems to concern Alexie most in this matter is the hatred or disapproval of such minorities especially among the reservation Indians. Once more, Alexie portrays the reservation Indians as less tolerant than the urbanized White Collar Redskins: “Years ago, homosexuals were given special status within the tribe. They had powerful medicine. I think it’s even more true today, even though our tribe has assimilated into homophobia.” (*Tonto* 203)

The phobic approach among reservation Indians’ is similar in the case of sexual minorities and white people alike. Tracy, a white woman living for a long time on the Flathead Reservation in “Indian Country”, tells her old friend Low Man about her new partner Sara Polatkin, a Spokane girl. Sara’s parents on the reservation disapprove of their daughter’s choice, because it is twice difficult for them to bear, sexual orientation-wise and racially:

³¹ Online interview with Sherman Alexie. Available at <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/com.../transcript.asp?userid=2UK192519J&eventId=218>, accessed January 12, 2001.

“I’m freaking out her parents. Completely. Not only am I lesbian, but I’m also white.”
“The double whammy.” (*TIW* 137)

One of the main messages Alexie has imbedded in the stories of *TIW* is to draw attention to diversity. The author emphasizes it throughout the collection, when he brings in characters with similar background, but who have made different choices in their life. Some choose to remain on reservation, others leave for city, some become urban Indians who highly value their ethnic background, others try to merge into the ‘Americanness’. Some are happy with their choices, others are not.

A quote from the *TIW* collection, where the first-person narrator of “One Good Man” talks about himself and his siblings and the choices they have made, seems to be the best conclusion for the chapter on White Collar Redskin:

We’d all pursued our very different versions of the American Dream (the Native American Dream!) and had all been successful to one degree or another. We were teacher, truck driver, logger, accountant, preacher, and guitar player. Our biggest success: we were alive. Our biggest claim to fame: we were all sober. (*TIW* 219)

CONCLUSION

The research carried out aimed at a deeper look into the Native American images and a comparison of the findings by means of character analysis. Therefore it primarily consisted of a close reading of Alexie's prose relevant to the given research on Native American identity and the existing stereotypes, complemented by collecting the background materials, selecting Internet sources for additional information (interviews and media performances of Alexie, commentaries to his books, biographical data, and the like).

The necessary discussion of the theoretical aspects, i.e. the part of the research belonging to the realm of cultural studies, included an analysis of stereotypes as a social phenomenon (the patterns of their origins, impact on society, etc.), relying mainly on the following materials: Linda Hutcheon's *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Chris Baker's *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, and Judy Giles and Tim Middleton's *Studying Culture*, and especially the works by the Native American authors such as Paula Gunn Allen and Vine Deloria Jr. It became clear that Native American literary and cultural studies are still wanting an acknowledged, reliable and working methodology. However, the majority of Native scholars seem to agree on one aspect: that the Anglo-American, not to mention European approaches should be rejected as inappropriate while discussing Native literatures.

An intriguing aspect exposed in the research material is the fact that the stereotypes in discussion were created by the non-Indians and in the due course of time have become internalized and (re)lived by the Native Americans, resulting in a conflict between the general stereotypical idea of Indianness and the actual reality of the individual lives.

The main objective of the thesis was to draw attention to and emphasize the impossibility and fallacy of the tendency to make generalizations when dealing with Native

American issues. The diversity and multitude of the former Native cultures in North America alone is remarkable. The differences in the overall characteristics, social order, or ways of life should not be disregarded; when disregarded, it is another reinforcing factor for emblematic imagology and stereotypical representations. In the light of the diversity mentioned above, the given thesis could serve as a part for a more extensive further study of the stereotyped images by cultural regions in order to look into ways whether and how the traditions have influenced the stereotypes and the attitude toward stereotypes, for example, whether there would be more female stereotypes in the Native Southwest due to its considerably notable matriarchal background.

Generally speaking, it can be suggested that Alexie problematizes the existing mass culture, especially the totalizing, generalizing institution of a Pan-Indian stereotype that disregards the difference and diversity of Native American cultures, traditions, and social structures both in the traditional and contemporary sense, which makes him akin to the postmodernists challenging the totalizing institutions, media among others. Alexie does indeed raise questions regarding the commonly produced and accepted (?) image of Native 'reality' and draws attention to the shortcomings in the representations of Indians in mass media that typically lack the accuracy and relevance in terms of the real situation in reservations or urban societies. While doing so, however, Alexie leaves the task of drawing conclusions, of making judgments or discoveries of the hidden messages primarily to his reader. Furthermore, he has used the means of mass communication (imitations of newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, advertisement texts, etc) in his fiction and has also turned two of his works into a feature film as to make the issues presented more accessible to the audience. Paradoxically, Alexie relies on the Indian stereotypes, but uses them with a certain twist. By no means can Alexie be accused of fostering the existing Native American stereotypes; on the contrary, his main mission is to break free from these. He is

including the recognizably stereotypical elements to undermine them with psychological depth and human(e) dimensions that his characters convey.

The stereotypes analyzed in the thesis proved to reflect and exemplify the developments in the mentality of the dominant culture. Consequently, one of the main regularities discovered in the thesis regarding the phenomenon of stereotyping is the correlation of an existing stereotype and the values enhanced at a certain point of time in the society. An excellent example of this tendency is the emergence of the Mentor stereotype within the context of New Age movement with the spiritual guidance as one of its central concepts, or the Political Bum and the general moods of protest in American society during the late 1960s.

Each group of stereotypes found in Alexie's works can be viewed as a counter-reaction to the previous stereotype. There emerges a clear pattern of opposition between the passive Flat Indian *vs.* the heroic and idolized Warrior, between the aggressive Warrior of physical stamina *vs.* the intellectual/spiritual know-it-all Mentor, between the respected Mentor as a spiritual leader *vs.* the self-effacing and self-destructive Political Bum, and between the lowlife Political Bum without any control over his future *vs.* the well-off success story of the White Collar Redskin with plentiful of choices.

Such pattern that each successive stereotype opposes to the formerly existed stereotypical image is one of the most important findings of the thesis. The regularity discovered unveils the probable reason why the Native Americans themselves have been so easily subjected to the stereotypical images: to internalize another, contrastive image and pattern of behavior may seem as an effective measure to fight the formerly existed stereotypical constraints and allows an illusion that a one-dimensional stereotype has been overcome.

On the grounds of the analysis in the chapters focused on one particular Native

American stereotype it becomes evident that each of the stereotypes discussed has certain distinctive features distinguishing it from other stereotypes. The Flat Indian includes elements of all the subsequent stereotypes and, therefore, can be regarded as the archetype of all Native American representations. Consequently, in comparison with the other stereotype groups presented in this thesis, the Flat Indian is characterized by a considerably wider time-span in terms of its existence than the rest of the (more specific) representations. There can be suggested that Flat Indian category is the most exclusively appearance-bound image as compared to the other stereotypes, because its character and attitudes seem of marginal importance as the constituent part of the image.

Although the Warrior has an equally pictorial appeal as the Flat Indian and has proven to be the most promoted image by film industry, it equally comprises a certain behavioral stereotype in addition to the stereotypical façade. Alexie's works indicate that it is namely the Warrior ideal that plays the most prevalent part in the self-image of young Indian men.

The Mentor reveals most clearly the impact of contemporary values and popular trends on formation of the stereotype. It is the only image that is entirely connected with the spiritual and mental capacities, whereas the White Collar Redskin together with the Political Bum can be regarded as being social stereotypes above anything else. In addition, the Political Bum stands out among the other four images due to the fact that in many ways this stereotype can be considered a negative alteration of another stereotype – that of the Warrior.

And finally it needs to be brought out with a special emphasis that the White Collar Redskin forms a phenomenon on its own. It is not merely the only stereotype that is associated with urban environment rather than wilderness or reservation, but it is the only stereotype created by the Native Americans themselves, in this case, by the reservation

Indians applying it to the city Indians.

In other words, the differences among the images allow to assert that stereotyping is not entirely subordinated to some universal construction or a fixed pattern of stereotype formation that coincides in all aspects and is applicable to all the stereotypes. As brought out above, the main variable tends to be the emphasis that can be set predominantly either on the external qualities (Flat Indian, Warrior) or on the internal characteristics and behavior (Mentor, Political Bum).

To conclude on a positive note, the Native American stereotypes are hard to break, but as it has become a common concern for many researchers, writers, film producers and also general public, their sovereignty can be expected to diminish. There is an active movement, initiated by the Native Americans, to fight the racist coloring in the sports symbols and team mascots, such as “Chiefs”, ”Indians”, “Warriors”, “Redskins” and the like. There are many writers and film directors, such as Sherman Alexie, who are making major contribution to the emergence of a just representation of Indians by creating literary or film characters to enrich the representations of American Indians on the cultural scene and provide a gallery of recognizable, i.e., contemporary and psychologically complex human beings, in order to break free from the constraints of stereotype-based imagology.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
INGLISE FILOLOOGIA ÕPPETOOL

Helena Tabur-Jõgi

Indiaanlaste stereotüüpsed minakuvandid Sherman Alexie romaanis *Reservation Blues* ning lühijutukogumikes *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* ja *The Toughest Indian in the World*.

Stereotypical Self-Images of Native Americans in the Novel *Reservation Blues*, and Short Story Collections *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and *The Toughest Indian in the World* by Sherman Alexie

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Annotatsioon:

Magistritöö kitsam eesmärk oli uurida Ameerika indiaani kirjanduse noorema põlvkonna ühe tuntuma ja tunnustatuma autori Sherman Alexie romaanis *Reservation Blues*, kahes lühijutukogumikus *The Toughest Indian in the World* ja *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* ning luule- ja lühiproosa raamatus *The Business of Fancydancing* esinevate tegelaskujude haakuvust indiaani stereotüüpidega. Laiem eesmärk oli läheneda indiaanlaste identiteedi komplitseeritud temaatikale veidi ebatavapärasemast aspektist, läbi käsitletavate stereotüüpide analüüsi.

Metoodika aluseks oli enimlevinud indiaani stereotüüpide klassifitseerimine vastavalt stereotüübi olemusele (sh loomuomadused, käitumismaneer, välimus). Töö sisaldab ka ülevaadet oletatavatest eeldustest konkreetse stereotüübi kujunemiseks, võimalikku mõju selle kandja identiteedile, põhjusi, miks väljapoolt kuvandikandjate ringi pealesurutud kuvand on leidnud indiaanlaste seas omaksvõttu ja järgimist, hõlmates seetõttu olulisel määral kultuuriuuringute ja postmodernistliku metodoloogilise aspekti rakendust antud töö eesmärgi saavutamiseks. Igale stereotüübi rühmale on töö koostaja poolt antud tinglik illustreeriv nimetus: Ilmetu Indiaanlane, Sõdalane, Mentor, Poliitiline Heidik ning Punanahk-Valgekrae.

Magistritöö tulemusena moodustuvad Alexie tegelaskujudele põhinevad kuvandirühmad, mille kronoloogilise järgnevuse pinnalt ilmneb antud rühmade vahel toimiv vastureaktsiooniefekt - iga uus stereotüüpiseeriv (mina-)kuvand tühistab oma olemusega eelnenud stereotüüpipõlvkonna ning ühtlasi viitab püüdele stereotüüpiseeritusest välja murda. Antud töös kirjeldatud gruppide jadas Ilmetu Indiaanlane – Sõdalane – Mentor – Poliitiline Heidik – Punanahk-Valgekrae nähtub see eelkõige iseloomutuse/meelekindluse, füüsilise/vaimse, austatavuse/negatiivse maine, vaesuse/ jõukuse jne vastandustest.

Märksõnad:

amerikanistika, indiaani kultuuri ja kirjanduse uuringud, ameerika kirjandus