

## Self- and Counter-Representations of Native Americans: Stereotypical Images of and New Images by Native Americans in Popular Media

Kedong LIU & Hui ZHANG  
Harbin Institute of Technology, China

### Abstract

Historically speaking, American mainstream media have distorted Native American images, which has misled the formation of young Native Americans' identity. The emerging Native American writer and film maker Sherman Alexie has countered the distortion by uttering his own voice and presenting his own image of the new American Indians. Alexie has replaced the reticent, subservient, disappearing "Noble Savage" with the expressive, free, and surviving new Indians. Alexie depicts successful and resilient American Indian characters and plots in films, novels (sometimes with cartoon illustrations). He has also disintegrated the stereotypical mascot and ushered in a new Indian image. Racial genocide, assimilation, and oppression are substituted by syncretism.

**Keywords:** Native American, film, TV, radio, novel, cartoon

### Introduction

American mainstream media have always tended to distort Native American images. The film, *Dances with Wolves*; the radio and TV Western, *The Lone Ranger*; and the novel, by Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, to name just a few, present negative or romanticized images of American Indians, either nasty or cruel, or subservient and laconic, but all disappearing.<sup>1</sup> These distortions have severely misled the formation of young Native Americans' identity. As a counter strategy, native writers and film workers began to counteract by putting whites in their lenses and representing their own lives and images. This study<sup>2</sup> takes examples from several media: film, TV, radio, books, cartoons, etc., and focuses on the works of the emerging Native American Artist Sherman Alexie.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more examples on the distorted images of American Indians, please refer to Zou, Huiling. (2006) and Zou & Zheng (2009).

<sup>2</sup> This research was supported in part by the Heilongjiang Provincial Social Science Grant (Project: Syncretic Strategies of Contemporary American Indian Writers; code: 10D041; Project: Post-Classic Narrative Theories Based on Contemporary American Literature; code: 10B033), the Heilongjiang Provincial Department of Education Higher Institution Humanities and Social Sciences Grant (Project: Contemporary American Drama Studies, After 1950; code: 11554098), and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (Grant No. HIT.Hss.2009008, HIT.Hss.2009015, HIT.Hss.2009039)

## Literature Review

Alexie is a versatile and controversial writer and film maker. Most critiques emphasize Alexie's ingenuity and uniqueness. Unlike most Native American writers (such as Native American literary masters Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich), who usually write about "mixed-blood existence in a landscape torn apart by war, the Dawes Act, and other colonizing forces" (James, 2000, p. 48), Alexie often focuses on "full-bloods as his attempt to restore the power to the land" (James, 2000, p. 4) and "to keep tribal images intact" (James, 2000, p. 48). He often criticizes stereotypes of Indians in popular culture, especially Hollywood movies, and replaces them with images and stories from the Indians themselves. James calls this "symbolic guerilla warfare" (James, 2000, p. 48). Alexie has "no tolerance for the racist ideologies present in the history of the entertainment industry as far as Indians are concerned" (James, 2000, p. 4). Alexie switched the Spokane reservation with the Coeur D'Alene reservation when he adapted his book of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* into an all-Indian film *Smoke Signals* to satirize the fact that "Hollywood films often replace one tribe with another in order to appeal to a larger audience" (James, 2000, p. 5). In other words, Hollywood frequently distorts facts. Alexie also "tears down as many pop icons as he can such as John Wayne" (James, 2000, p. 5). Alexie utilizes other art forms, such as film, music, cartoons, and the print media, to bombard mainstream distortion of Indian culture and to redefine Indianness. Alexie uses various media (e. g. music and film) and has collaborated with many artists. He collaborated with the Native American musician Jim Boyd in producing a soundtrack album of the blues music described in his first novel, *Reservation Blues*. After the success of his first film, *Smoke Signals*, he worked on *The Business of Fancydancing*, which debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2002. In his latest novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Alexie cooperated with artist Ellen Forney and added 60 cartoons in it, which are very effective. It is also true that Alexie insists that Indian tradition be kept intact, safe from white appropriation. Alexie writes books and makes movies for "a generation heavily influenced by popular culture" (James, 2000, p. 154), so his use and criticism of popular culture images and his representation of Indian images through various media are very effective.

## Key Concepts and Theoretical Lenses

Alexie has used counter-representation to deconstruct the "Potent White" stereotype and decenter whites' dominant positions; self-representation to deconstruct the "disappearing Noble Savage" stereotype and relocate Native Americans from the margin to the center; and humor to attract readers from both races and make them understand the American Indian culture better, with the final goal of syncretism.

Whites are represented in all the mainstream media as potent masters. They scorn the "dirty", "nasty" Indians and otherize them as aliens and inferior beasts. Some Indians also admire whiteness, taking it as holy. Yet, Alexie presents white characters in such a way that the reader sees them as vulnerable, womanish, or impotent. In a way, Alexie otherizes the white, or simply, he puts whites in an American Indian lens, to help white characters rethink their role and take Indians as equals.

A similar effort is made to deconstruct the silent, subservient, and disappearing stereotype of American Indians. Alexie's Indian characters are talented, eloquent, and expressive, loving stories and endlessly telling stories. In contrast, he sometimes silences or verbally disables white characters. Linguistic activeness helps Indian characters reclaim the center and push whites to the margin.

Humor is a device that relaxes white readers, attracts them, and then surprises them when they are off guard. Many white readers read Alexie's works and viewers view his films simply because he is funny. He is funny on the surface but serious in the core. When readers/viewers try to pry open the core, they will sometimes be stunned and experience instructive epiphanies concerning white identity, Indian identity and their relationship with each other after being indignified by the surprise mock.

Syncretism is originally a religious term. Here, it is adopted to mean cultural and racial blending (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989). Alexie achieves syncretism through a circular way. His characters first express interest in going into the mainstream society, are commercially oppressed, turn to cultural confrontation because of anger, relent after meditating all the cruelties caused by confrontation, and finally tread into the mainstream society again and are accepted.

This paper aims to examine the American Indian culture and its interaction with white culture through Alexie's works in different media, and since Alexie is a pure-blood Indian, criticizes both races, and advocates a syncretic attitude, his works sufficiently represent an American Indian perspective.

Alexie's works, mainly his films, cartoons, poems, short stories, and novels, counter the images misrepresented by the white popular culture and re-present images from the American Indian perspective, which rectifies the Indian images and educates the white audience, in preparation for their mutual understanding before becoming one syncretic entity.

### **Deconstructing the “Disappearing Noble Savage” and the “Potent White” Stereotype**

Alexie criticizes popular media such as film and TV as distorting American Indians and exhorting white images and proceeds to deconstruct these misrepresented images. His witty remark through Thomas Builds-the-Fire (with irony) in *Smoke Signals* that “The only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV” (as cited in Cox, 1999, p. 220) tells the viewers that all the Indians on TV are distorted, simulated, and romanticized while the Indian viewers take them as true representations.

### **Misrepresentations of American Indians by White Media**

As a complement to the military genocide and the Christian effort of assimilation, the American popular media produce the absence of Native Americans.<sup>3</sup> The film version of

---

3 For detailed discussion, please refer to Zou (2008).

Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (directed by Michael Mann), portrays the disappearing "Noble Savage" Chingachgook and focuses on the white hero, Natty Bumppo, or Hawkeye. Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1991), though showing sympathy to the Sioux, implies their extinction as a culture in the postscript: "Thirteen years later, their homes destroyed, their buffalo gone, the last band of free Sioux submitted to white authority at fort Robinson, Nebraska. The great horse culture of the plains was gone and the American frontier was soon to pass into history." Also, the film features a white hero, Lieutenant Dunbar, who eventually returns to the mainstream culture with a white woman, Stands-with-a-Fist, rescued (a captive de facto) by the Sioux. Both movies teem with stereotypical Indians and suggest the tragic ending of the Indians as a race. Similar cases occur on TV. Said (1993) argued:

Without significant exception the universalizing discourses of modern Europe and the United States assume the silence, willing or otherwise, of the non-European worlds. There is incorporation; there is inclusion; there is direct rule; there is coercion. But there is only infrequently an acknowledgement that the colonized people should be heard from, their ideas known. (as cited in Cox, 1999, p. 223)

As a result, the TV sets blast away on reservations, whose indolent residents try to but cannot get consolation, entertainment, or solutions to present problems from TV programs. They are tricked into believing that the simulated Indians on TV are authentic. TV, as "the oppressive technological [form of] narratives that define both Native Americans as a conquered people, as decontextualized, romanticized, subservient, and usually absent Tontos, and Native America as a conquered landscape" (Cox, 1999, p. 237), "confuse[s], distract[s], and literally colonize[s]" (Cox, 1999, p. 241) the Indians on the reservation and keeps them away from tradition. This severance isolates the Indians and drowns them with abundant white cultural concoction. Consequently, they do not see a future, or if they do, a predestined one. This is why Alexie compares this medium, and all the white popular culture, for that matter, to the white noise that deafens the viewers after a station plays "The Star-Spangled Banner" and ends its broadcasting day, so that everything colored is whited out,<sup>4</sup> and the Indian viewers cannot hear themselves think. To change this predicament, and to "avoid technology's destructive influence" (Cox, 1999, p. 238), Alexie makes his characters turn off the television's sound, which Cox terms "muting the white noise". Alexie writes in his essay "White Men Can't Drum", "What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be Indian? What does it mean to be an Indian Man? I press the mute button on the remote control so that everyone can hear the answer" (as cited in Cox, 1999, p. 244).

### **Deconstructing Taciturn "Disappearing Noble Savages" and "Potent White" Images: Self- and Counter-Representation**

---

<sup>4</sup> "The white noise is, literally, the oppressive noise of white mass-produced culture, the loud demand to abandon all that is Indian and conform to the dictates of the invader's cultural belief system or to be destroyed" (Cox, 1999, pp. 237-238).

As a more powerful effort than turning off the television's sound, Alexie wrote and co-produced a film entitled *Smoke Signals* (1998) to "intervene... in and rewrite... the narratives of conquest by inserting Native American voices into the storytelling" (Cox, 1999, p. 225). In the film, the main characters, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, take a trip from the Spokane Reservation to Phoenix, Arizona to recover the ashes of Victor's father, who has died in an accidental fire. They fulfill the mission successfully and, during the process, mix with white people. In the film, Alexie makes Native American viewers think. They contemplate upon their identities and relationships, and Alexie criticizes the negative influence of popular culture, especially Hollywood films. Victor asks Thomas, "You're always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you seen *Dances with Wolves*? A hundred, maybe two hundred times? ... Do you think that shit is for real? God. Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?" (as cited in Cox, 1999, p. 232). It seems that Victor knows what a real Indian should be like. Ironically, when Victor tells Thomas to look like a "mean, stoic warrior... 'to look like you just got back from killing buffalo'" (Cox, 1999, p. 232), Thomas protests, "But our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fishermen" (Cox, 1999, p. 32). Cox notes, "Alexie mocks romanticized images of Native Americans as both stoic and savage warrior, while also noting how these images influence the self-representation and identity construction of individual Native Americans" (Cox, 1999, p. 233).

The simulated Indian images on TV and in the Hollywood films influence the identity construction of individual Native Americans. Indeed, Hollywood and TV have created simulated Indians and have played and replayed these images so many times that the Indian viewers take them as real. These romantic and stoic characters hardly speak in the films; nor do they get heard. In Hollywood films and TV plays, Indians are paid to die, to fall off the horse, to confirm the "Vanishing Noble Savage" stereotype, so endings are important. That is why Alexie counters this phenomenon with *Smoke Signals*, an all-Indian production, in which the main characters are Indians instead of whites, in which the Indian characters are talkative, and in which the Indian characters end up being successful.

Alexie subverts stereotypical images of whites while he deconstructs stereotypes of Indians. In "Dear John Wayne", he crushes the "Potent White" image. When a white anthropologist named Spencer Cox interviews Etta James, an elderly powwow dancer, for an academic paper on the effect of European ballroom dancing on the Indian powwow, Etta refuses to answer the questions according to the script, but leads the discussion to John Wayne and then blurts out that she had an affair with Wayne while shooting the film *The Searchers*. In her story, John Wayne is not tough, but very effeminate. He cries when he ejaculates. "[H]e is sensitive and silly" (Bolt, 2003, p. 140). Bolt (2003) argues:

Through Etta's tale, Alexie has taken on the myth of the testosterone-infused cowboy in a surprisingly subversive way. Rather than critiquing the Indian-killing cowboy, she transforms and even erases him – replacing him by a liberal equalitarian who assures his children, 'I may act like a cowboy, I may pretend to be cowboy, but I am not a cowboy in real life, do you understand?'" (p. 141)

Alexie has deconstructed the popular mythical macho John Wayne and re-established him as a woman-like person, maybe more real-person-like.

Indian youths like Victor are convinced that TV or film versions of Noble Savages should be what they emulate, yet they do not know that those images are merely stereotypes and simulations. When they emulate these images, as Denzin put it, they “have become reflections of the reflections that have been brought to them by the media-oriented, postmodern cinematic society” (as cited in Smith, 2001, p. 116). These youth fight their own kind when there is no other target. They chase or attract white women as proof of their machismo. “[T]hey long for white women as trophies or as a form of revenge against white men” (Grassian, 2005, p. 102). Alexie’s works may help Indian youth to see things more clearly and stop blindly emulating stereotypes.

### **Decentering Whites and Relocating Indians**

Alexie uses the following means to decenter whites and white culture and to make readers think: physically and verbally, through emphasizing orality over text and muting white characters, through exoticizing the dominant culture and people, and through privileging the woman-dominant native culture versus the Jesus-centered Christian white culture.

### **Loquacious Indians, Voiceless Whites**

Alexie decenters mainstream culture by privileging the spoken word over the written. Alexie does not directly reveal private tribal rituals, yet he is aware of the importance of tradition, including the oral tradition. Many of his characters are good story tellers, the best example of which would be Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who appears in many of his works. In almost all of Alexie’s works, he uses orality as a tool to critique dominant discourse, which heavily relies on the written word.

Alexie’s Indian characters might be quite loquacious and amusing, creating fictional realities against the written white history, yet his white characters are often muted or rendered voiceless. In Owens’s opinion, language is “the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (as cited in Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 100). Language failures on the part of the white characters “signal that Alexie is seizing control of the hierarchical structure of power. The conceptions of truth and reality are [now] established by Alexie... the Anglocentric reader ‘suddenly [feels] very white’ (Alexie, 1996, p. 108) and very uncomfortable” (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 100). In *Reservation Blues*, while Chess and Thomas are having a conversation, Betty (a white woman) breaks in with a whisper. After Chess (notoriously well known for her preferences of pure Indians over whites and half-breeds) shows her annoyance, Betty says “I’m sorry I said anything” and keeps quiet (Alexie, 1995, p. 168). Similarly, in *Indian Killer*, when Marie challenges the white professor, Dr. Mather, he is unable to respond, and has to close the door on her to “resort to physical boundaries” for he loses “the power of words to establish his dominance” (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 99). In the same book, the white writer Wilson fumbles for words while he is discomposed about Reggie’s satirizing of his bluff of being an ex-cop: “Well, uh,

I, ah” (Alexie, 1996, p. 369). When he backs out of the bar, he hears the whole bar burst into laughter. Wilson’s loss of speech and people’s derision indicate his marginalization. White readers are often rendered speechless by Alexie’s work, too. Alexie has achieved his goal in that “[H]e has pushed the dominant culture to the margins; he has successfully created the Anglo Other” (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 99).

Alexie’s technique to lure the white reader to have a closer examination of both Indian and white characters and to decenter Anglo-centrism by muting white characters is quite effective, as it matters as to who gets to voice his ideas in a piece of writing. It used to be all white voices, but now Alexie mutes the white and voices the Indian.

### **Otherizing Mainstream Culture**

Another of Alexie’s techniques to Otherize mainstream culture is to exoticize the country (USA) and demonize its inhabitants. In *Smoke Signals*, before Thomas and Victor board the bus, Velma asks, “Do you guys [have] your passports?” When Thomas asks why, she says, “[You]’re leaving the rez and you’re going into a whole different country, Cousin.” When Thomas says, “But it’s the United States”, Lucy breaks in, “Damn right it is. That’s as foreign as it gets.” After Thomas and Victor board the bus, they are indeed transported into a completely different world, which is the first scene in the whole film with non-Indian characters. They feel that they have entered an exotic or foreign world.

Alexie now takes the Indian characters as the center and scrutinizes the surroundings through their gaze. The strangeness they observe exposes white crankiness and projects it as Other and exotic.

In Alexie’s works, the white characters are often evil. They are heartless, abandoning and abusing their children, as is evidenced by the white father of Reggie Polatkin in *Indian Killer*; they are rapists (exemplified by Sheridan in *Reservation Blues*, who claims that he is “everything”, which claim is dismissed by the Indian girl Checkers); they are serial killers, as is reminded by Jack Wilson’s agent in *Indian Killer*; and they are liars, as Marie testifies: “Every one so far [is a liar]” (Alexie, 1996, p. 417). In *Indian Killer*, John Smith “convinces his family that Shakespeare was an Indian woman” (Alexie, 1996, p. 48). “In so doing, John topples the Anglocentric canon; he undermines many of the assumptions on which Western intellectual thought is based” (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 95). John’s refusing to “believe that a famous and powerful white man is ‘everything’” (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 95), as does Checkers in *Reservation Blues*, pushes the dominant culture aside.

### **Privileging the Woman-Dominant Native Culture versus the Jesus-Centered Christian White Culture**

Alexie also marginalizes dominant white culture by preferring womanism to white concepts of masculinity and Christianity (Courtney-Leyba, 2001). As Indian tribes are predominantly matriarchal, and the white Judeo-Christian society is mainly patriarchal, Alexie often prioritizes or foregrounds the powerful, magic female characters. He uses this strategy to dismantle the predominantly masculine world of the Judeo-Christian tradition:



Womanist consciousness is not only a reflection of Alexie's culture but it is also a tool to dismantle the dominant religious discourse of the United States. Through Big Mom as the creator, Nezzy as the savior, and 'girl on top of the world' (Alexie, 1993, pp. 197-198) as the spirit of forgiveness, Alexie offers a womanist alternative to Christianity's father, son, and holy ghost. (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 93)

According to Courtney-Leyba, Alexie has dexterously replaced the mainstream patriarchy and Christianity with the womanist elements of his own culture, yet she is only partly right when she says that the Indian matriarchy provides an alternative to the Judeo-Christian patriarchy.

Actually, Alexie does not mean to substitute the dominant mainstream patriarchy with the Indian matriarchy, but, instead, he suggests a complementarity pattern of coexistence, as is evident in *Reservation Blues*, when Big Mom suggests to Father Arnold a complementarity pattern between the Indian ritual and the Catholic ritual. In other words, one is not to replace the other, but they are meant to coexist as equal and complementary entities.

### **Humorous Education for Both Races**

Alexie not only writes for Indian readers, but also white audiences, who think reading Indian literature is fashionable and who have preconceptions about Indians (James, 2000, pp.154-155). Alexie uses much humor to intrigue the readers. Alexie sometimes uses biting humor and at other times silliness and absurdity. He is very critical of both cultures, but his humor and satire make the readers laugh and urge them to read on, wherefrom they gain a better or truer picture of real Indian life.

### **Humor as Bait**

Alexie uses humor to lure the reader. As Alexie put it in an interview with Ase Nygren, humor "breaks down barriers between people" (Nygren, 2005, p. 160), "enables me to talk about anything, [and] makes dialogue possible" (Nygren, 2005, p. 161). His humorous style, according to Blewster, "has always been the weapon of choice" (as cited in Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 85). He has used humor, in Bakhtin's words, to "break open [canonically liberal academia's] external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it" (as cited in Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 85). As a result, readers would have a chance to examine the matter that they are reading more carefully. The white readers will often find that they are laughing at themselves. That laughter is part of the desired outcome of Alexie's artistic strategy, for humor and laughter can relax readers and lure them to be off guard. Alexie observes, "People like to laugh, and when you make them laugh they listen to you. That's how I get people to listen to me now" (as cited in Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 86). Humor makes readers accept the work readily, and the uncomfortable message would be only an after taste. It is only too late when white readers "realize that they are being laughed at by those they would call 'Others'" (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 86). The readers' reaction might be either of the following: rejecting the book by throwing it across the room, or revising their preconceptions about Indians. "Once Anglo readers recognize that they are the object of fun or anger," Courtney-Leyba contends:



They may be tempted to reject Alexie's writing because his texts [in Iser's opinion] "may conceivably contradict [their] own preconceptions [of Anglocentrism or white privilege] to such a degree that it calls for drastic reactions, such as throwing a book away or, at the other extreme, being compelled to revise those preconceptions". (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 100)

### **Making the Reader Think**

Alexie's infuriating the reader is to set him thinking. "[T]here is likely no contemporary fiction more uncomfortable for Anglo readers than the works of Sherman Alexie" (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 66), for Alexie has greater affection for "real Indians" and "presents a more complex indictment of 'mixedbloods' and 'wannabes'" (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 179) than the attitude shown in writers like Thomas King. Alexie's early "anger-driven prose" was to "deliberately discomfort readers" (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 179), especially white readers. Alexie, Gomez-Pena contends, "assume[s] a fictional center, push[es] the dominant culture to the margins, and treat[s] it as exotic, foreign, and unfamiliar" (as cited in Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 67). His "negative portrait of Anglo Others" (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 67) invariably exasperates the white readers, so that they "may 'get it' and then promptly throw [his] books across the room" (Courtney-Leyba, 2001, p. 66). Yet, often readers would throw the book, but start thinking.

### **More Sober Whites and Indians because of Humor**

In terms of readership targeting, it is true that Alexie writes for both Indians and whites, but as Alexie himself points out, he mainly targets at white audiences, since they are much more populous. As for the Indians, however, Alexie offers some "trap-door" jokes, designating the jokes that only Indians understand but that whites do not understand.

Alexie keeps us "involved, interested, and motivated to see these stories to the end ... Somehow we come away from these works both more sober and more hopeful" (Ferguson, 2002, p. 124). Alexie's humor allows characters and readers alike to "access difficult emotions and safely bring them to consciousness where solutions can be developed", which process "effectively joined characters and reader, and [readers] were better able to understand the characters' experience" (Ferguson, 2002, p. 124). Humor and laughter "bring others over to our side" (Ferguson, 2002, p. 125), and the "process of understanding and being understood brings relief, joins individuals, ... and reinforces a sense of mastery over the current stressor that improves self-esteem and feelings of efficacy" (Ferguson, 2002, pp. 124-125).

### **Humor as Healing Power and Epitome of the Indian Resiliency**

Alexie's humor functions also as a factor to show Native Americans' resiliency, survival, and growth. The humorous character is usually a Trickster figure, like Thomas Builds-the-Fire in many of Alexie's stories. Through such characters' humorous language and behavior, the reader sees flexibility, resiliency, and hope for survival and growth for contemporary Native Americans.

As mentioned above, one of the functions of humor is to engage the reader and make him/her think better about the issue(s) at hand. Another function of humor is to show Indians' flexibility, resiliency, and hope. Yet another function of humor, which Ferguson does not bring up, is that humor has healing power. It is "an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds" (Alexie 1993, p. 164) and "a ceremony [which is] used to drive away personal and collective demons" (Alexie, 1996, p. 21).

### **A Path toward Syncretism**

While Alexie appropriates and subverts stereotypes from popular culture and reconstructs positive Indian images in his books and films, he advocates syncretism in racial relations in his four novels: *Reservation Blues* (1995), *Indian Killer* (1996), *Flight* (2007), and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), defying the accusation by some critics that he delineates simulated Indians and over-exaggerates despair on reservations and that he perpetuates the "Vanishing Noble" stereotype. Taken as a whole, Alexie's four novels, as discussed below, form a cyclical pattern, going through oppression, confrontation, and passive merging, and point toward syncretism.

### **Racial Oppression and Coalition**

*Reservation Blues* deals with pan-Indianism, interracial coalition, and racial oppression. Alexie appropriates the "Ghost Dance", pertaining to the Lakota Sioux, to create pan-Indianism. He insists that the 1890 event, in which more than 200 Lakota Sioux were killed by the US military at Wounded Knee Creek, involves every Indian tribe. Thereby, Alexie generalizes the history of one specific Indian tribe and achieves pan-Indianism. In the novel *Reservation Blues* (1995), members of the Spokane, Flathead, and Lakota form the pan-Indian coalition. Alexie also forms the interracial coalition between African Americans and Native Americans by magically bringing the famous African American Blues musician Robert Johnson, who died in 1938, to the Spokane Indian Reservation. As for the Indian-white relationship, Alexie suggests the racial complementarity pattern, in which the two races coexist as equal entities that complement each other. After the band's unsuccessful trip to New York and before Thomas and the Warm Water sisters leave for Spokane, at the seeing off ceremony, Big Mom says to the Catholic priest Father Arnold, "You cover all the Christian stuff; I'll do the traditional Indian stuff. We'll make a great team" (P. 280). This is similar to the gender complementarity that Patrice Eunice Marie Hollrah (2001) observes between Indian men and women, where men and women play different but equally important roles in the Indian society. Alexie, through Big Mom, suggests that this paradigm be applied to the Indian-white relationship. However, this ideal pattern meets with severe challenge from harsh reality. Whites now oppress and exploit Indians in new ways. In *Reservation Blues*, the oppression and exploitation are manifest when the white music agency Cavalry Records denies "Coyote Springs", a band formed by the Indian youth, the opportunity for progress by refusing to sign a contract with them and by hiring and profiting from the white groupies who form a simulated Indian band.

## Racial Confrontation

In the confrontation between Indians and whites in *Indian Killer*, racial hatred is infused by the white radio host (who says that the Indians are spoiled, that they are nasty, and that they killed a white boy), the usurpation of Indian cultural heritage by white academia, the distortion of Indians and Indian culture by white writers, which infuriates the Indian youth, who are trying hard to find their cultural roots and to form their ethnic identities. In *Indian Killer*, the confrontation falls into three categories: violence, verbal challenge, and organized demonstration. The Indian youth are obviously influenced by Indian nationalism (or separatism/indigenism). It seems that the two sides are equal in power, but actually the whites have got the upper hand, for they have control over the electronic and print media and the academia. Whites are more powerful, for they are in possession of the means of information dissemination, the media: radio, classroom, and publishers. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) argues, "Radio provides a speed-up of information" (p. 267), contracts the world into a village, and "creates insatiable village tastes for gossip, rumor, and personal malice" (p. 267). The white radio host Shultz's program does spread wrong ideas about Indians. Since radio is also a "mighty awakener of archaic animosities" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 267), Shultz's talk on the radio helps revive whites' long-standing hatred of Indians. As Truck Shultz's large audience enable him to "start a fire", the white professor Mather can disseminate false knowledge in the classroom, and the white Wannabe writer Wilson poisons the readers through print. The Indians do not have any advantage like that, so they are still the weak, the underdog. The efforts of the Indian youth have not caused drastic change. Alexie then seeks to cause the whites to disappear through the "Ghost Dance". It can be seen that though confrontation does not resolve racial problems, it voices protest of, and shows some power from, the weak.

## Passive Merging

In *Flight*, an Indian adolescent merges into the mainstream society after a body-shifting travel in time. The protagonist realizes that violence, war, hatred, and anger cannot solve racial problems and that people on both sides need to forsake hatred and cherish forgiveness. Only in this way can the Indians and whites stop antagonism and achieve merging. The protagonist "Zits" experiences the whole initiation process: experiencing (time traveling and body shifting), introspecting, experiencing epiphanies, and finally coming to terms with mainstream society, with some lucky benevolence from the whites. *Flight* presents a circular initiation pattern of the protagonist. The successful initiation of a minority protagonist requires two conditions: a friendly mainstream society and the healthy ethnic identity of the initiate.

## Active Merging

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* presents the active merging of an Indian adolescent into the mainstream society. The protagonist actively crosses the racial and political border, and negotiates with both the white community and the Indian reservation. It is clear that diligence, intelligence, and perseverance help an Indian gain foothold in the mainstream society.

Indians should know their traditions well (they should also know that traditions should evolve as times change instead of remaining the same all the time) and should have the capability to survive in the mainstream society. Adventurous spirit, ambitions, and perseverance, together with the traditional belief that the whole tribe is a family who should care about one another, produce the image of the new Indian, who can nullify the stereotypes that whites have of American Indians. The new Indian is one who can freely cross the political border between the Indian and the white worlds. Alexie deconstructs the stereotypes of Indians, represented by the white school mascot of an Indian (which is bright red, with feathers, scars, broken teeth, and an aquiline nose), and reconstructs the image of a new Indian, who is intelligent, diligent, enduring, and excellent in sports. The sport of basketball, in particular, plays an important role in this process. It is an important device to empower the protagonist, helping him gain recognition from the white society and form a healthy ethnic identity, solidifying tribal connections, and hence presenting a new Indian image.

Alexie also utilizes cartoons (with help from artist Ellen Forney) to illuminate his theme of complex identity in the process toward syncretism. In the whole book, sixty cartoons are presented, which greatly enhance the effect of the story. Just to take one example, when the protagonist Arnold plays on the white basket ball team against the reservation team, the spectators cheer for him, he performs well, but he asks himself who he is, whereas on the reservation, he is treated as a traitor. The halo and the dragon image contrast well and the balloon saying "Who am I?" depicts a highly hybridized subject suffering from individuation (Alexie, 2007b, p. 182).

In short, Alexie's themes evolve from oppression (frustration on the Indians' part) to confrontation, to passive merging, to active merging, thus forming a complete circle, and accomplishing the goal of syncretism.

### **Conclusion**

By adding cartoons to his books, starring Indian actors and actresses in his films, and contemplating stereotypical images in popular media, Alexie deconstructs the simplistic stereotypes of Indians and reasserts expressive, initiative, positive, and complexly hybridized new Indian images. His ultimate goal, though, is to achieve syncretism.

### **Major Contentions**

Alexie basically presents realistic pictures of contemporary Native American life. For that reason, he has received criticism. Scholars argue that as a pure blood Indian, he insists on keeping the American Indian tradition intact and seems to have a dislike toward mixed-bloods, that he is too angry, and hence not tolerant enough of whites, and that his writings are not romantic and pictures too stark.

Alexie appropriates existent images of whites and Indians from white media and reverses them, rendering Indians protagonists to survive the stories/films and making whites assume supporting roles and foils. He has turned Indians into active individuals instead of passive receptacles. He arranges for the Indian youth to tear apart long-standing cultural myths by

asking questions concerning particularities of Native American cultures. His stories of success on the American Indian part and counter representation of the whites from potent, powerful, and invincible into impotent, weak, and vulnerable offer Indians confidence and hope and shuck the whites of the halo.

Alexie's rendering of the loquacious Indians and voiceless whites; otherizing of the white world, taking the US as a foreign country from the Indian perspective, and making characters evil; and prioritizing the womanist Native American belief over the masculine Judeo-Christian belief effectively decenter whites and relocate American Indians from the margin to the center.

Alexie utilizes humor as bait to lure the reader, makes him think, be he a white or Indian, to reassess the cultural issue at hand and have a better understanding of it. Besides the entertaining, luring, and stimulating functions, humor reveals the resiliency of Indians. Humor also has healing power, comforting all the cultural wounds that have been inflicted upon the Indians.

Alexie does not intend to despise one culture and exalt the other. His ultimate goal is to advocate and prove the necessity of syncretism. His scheme and depiction assumes a cyclical or circular pattern, from oppression, to confrontation, to passive merging, and finally to active merging. It seems that sometimes it needs numerous cycles to realize syncretism.

### Limitations and Future Research

Alexie is sometimes criticized by other Indian scholars and people from the reservation, saying that he is being too stark and sometimes using and distorting reservation life. The authors of this article agree with Alexie's syncretic strategy, believing in the ultimate merging of Indians and whites. However, there might be details or factors that are not salient to the authors of this article that might hinder his judgment of the soundness of his argument, since they have not even been to a reservation. This is a limitation the authors recognize.

Alexie's works are often about one or two or three Indian youths and about the bilateral relationship between the Indians and the whites, only occasionally touching upon other races, like African Americans or Chinese. Therefore, further investigation is needed into his treatment of older age and multi-racial conditions.

Alexie has also used other techniques such as magical realism, temporal-spatial travel, and cultural gaze, and touched upon issues like homosexuality, growth of Native poets, and war. In his other film, *The Business of Fancydancing*, and in his new books, *Face* and *War Dances*, self- and counter- representations also abound, but due to the limited space, these should be addressed in future research.

### References

- Alexie, Sherman. (1993). *The Lone Ranger and Tonto fistfight in heaven*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Alexie, Sherman. (1995). *Reservation blues*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Alexie, Sherman. (1996). *Indian killer*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.

- Alexie, Sherman. (2007a). *Flight*. New York, NY: Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
- Alexie, Sherman. (2007b). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. (E. Forney, Illus.). New York, NY: Little Brown.
- Ashcroft, Bill; Griffiths, Gareth & Tiffin, Helen. (1989). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Bhabha, Homi. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bolt, Julie. (2003). *Border pedagogy for democratic practice*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.
- Courtney-Leyba, Karen E. (2001). *Uncomfortable fictions: Cross-cultural creation and reception of contemporary literature*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL.
- Cox, James Howard. (1999). *Muting white noise: Revisionary native American novelists*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.
- Denzin, Norman K. (1991). *Images of postmodern society*. London: Sage Publications.
- Erdrich, Louise. (1993). *Love medicine*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Ferguson, Laurie L. (2002). *Trickster shows the way: Humor, resiliency, and growth in modern native American literature*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from UMI. (UMI microform 3069384)
- Grassian, Daniel. (2005). *Understanding Sherman Alexie*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Hollrah, Patrice Eunice Marie. (2001). *Political ramifications of gender complementarity for women in native American literature*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
- James, Meredith K. (2000). *"Reservation of the mind": The literary native spaces in the fiction of Sherman Alexie*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.
- McLuhan, Marshall. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York, NY: The New American Library, Inc.
- Nygren, Ase. (2005). A world of story-smoke: A conversation with Sherman Alexie. *MELUS*, 30 (4), 149-169.
- Owens, Louis. (1994). *Bone game: A novel*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Owens, Louis. (1998). *Mixedblood messages: Literature, film, family, place*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Said, Edward. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Smith, Michael W. (2001). *Reading simulacra: Fatal theories for postmodernity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Zou, Huiling. (2006). On the Indian images in the white canons of 19th century America. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 5, 45-51.
- Zou, Huiling. (2008). *A postcolonial study of American Indian literature written in English*. Changchun: Jilin University Press.
- Zou, Huiling & Zheng, Jia. (2009). On the inscription of mainstream white ideology in early classic westerns. *Journal of Xuzhou Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 35(4), 139-143.