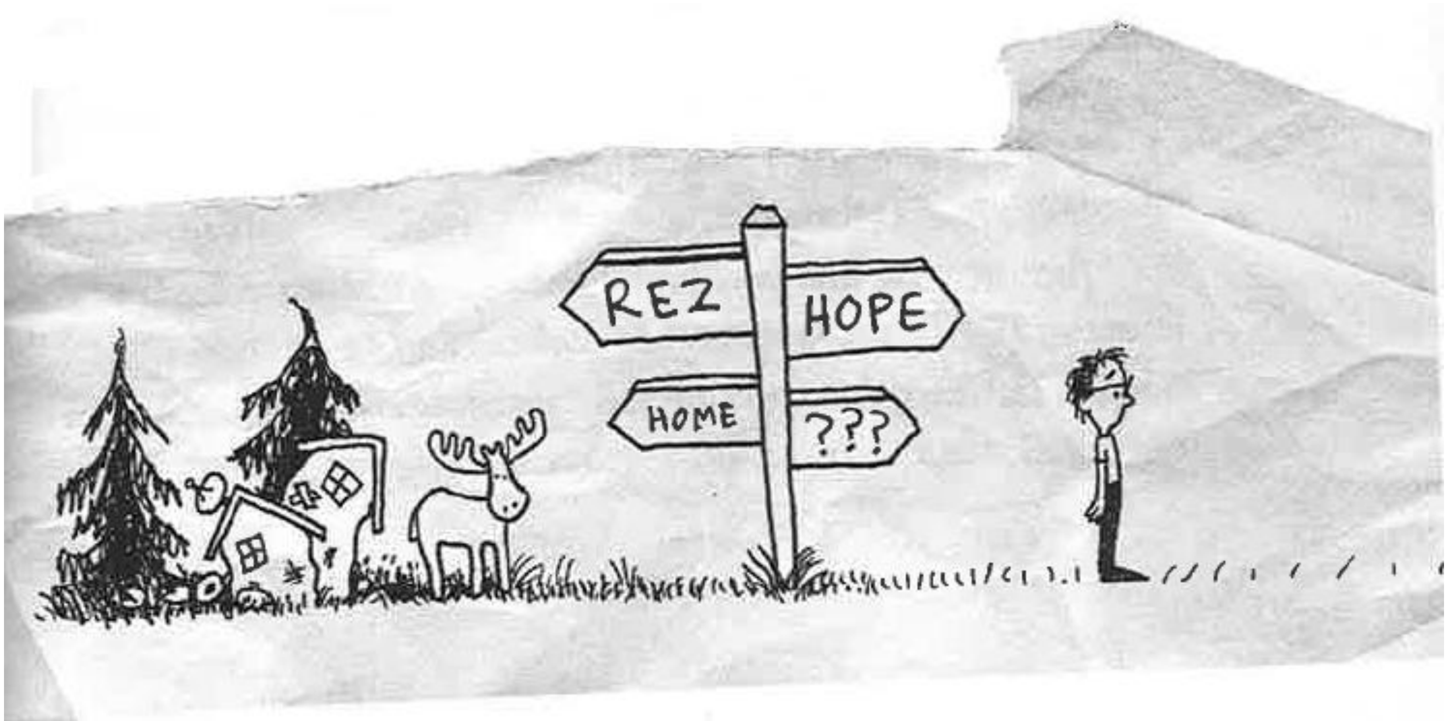
The Rez and the Rest

American Indian Identity and the Negotiation of Space in Selected Works by Sherman Alexie



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10 June 2011

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Introduction

When it comes to American Indian[1] literature, there is still much work to be done. As Arnold Krupat states: “Although there exists at present a solid body of criticism demonstrating the importance of Native American literature in its own right and in relation to ethnic, minority, or difference literature of a variety of kinds, Native materials still continue to be badly neglected” (Krupat vii). He traces this to media inattention to Indians, and a general lack of Indians in academia, or of academics of other ethnicities who are interested in Indians. There is a lack of awareness of American Indian issues, which not only hurts Indian people, but, as Krupat explains, “also hurts Americans in general. This is because it is simply not possible to achieve any remotely adequate understanding of the ‘ethical and intellectual heritage of the West as a whole’, or, locally, that enormous powerful offshoot of ‘the West’ known as the United States of America, without engaging ethically and intellectually the treatment here of blacks and Indians” (Krupat ix). Like the black people living in the United States, American Indian people will not disappear or go away and their specific position within the United States, and their own perspectives on this position as reflected in, for example, literature, ought to be discussed. In the following pages some works by Spokane Indian author Sherman Alexie will be discussed. Despite the fact that he is one of the younger Native voices on the literary stage, Alexie has on many an occasion been counted with the most important (or perhaps rather, most well-known) American Indian literary authors like N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich and Leslie Silko. He is known for his sometimes controversial statements and writings and also for what Nancy J. Peterson described nicely as “a strong commitment to communicating Native realities, often bleak ones, to a wide audience” (Peterson ix). Part and parcel of this Native reality is the important question related to the position of Indians in the United States: how to be Indian? What does it *mean* to be Indian, also in relation the space of the United States as it is today? How do Indians themselves deal with definition from without, with images like the noble savage who lives in perfect communion with the land, but also with the image of the Indian drunk? These are all relevant questions and they are all

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[1] With regard to the terms ‘Native American’ and ‘Indian’; I have chosen to largely use the term ‘Indian’, in accordance with what seems to be Sherman Alexie’s preference. He has called the term ‘Native American’ a “guilty white liberal term” and prefers the term ‘Indian’ “because that is what we are” (Alexie in Krupat 138). The political and historical implications of the variety of terms have been discussed by, for example, Vine Deloria (1974), Suzan Harjo (1993) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (2000). An entire paper could be written on the implications of these terms, but for now I shall leave it at this.

connected to the matter of Indian identity and Alexie handles these topics in many remarkable ways. As a topic of discussion, however, 'Indian identity' is of course way too broad for a thesis of this size. That is why the current discussion will focus on the interrelation between space and Indian identity, in selected works by Sherman Alexie. This will entail both the implications of the negotiation of space by Alexie's literary characters and the representation of the various locations in his work.

Space in Native American Literature

Why choose 'space' as a topic in relation to Indian identity? In the words of Eric Cheyfitz: "The "central theme of identity […] needs to be understood in relation to the agenda of *sovereignty / land* which is the strong theme of Native American writing from the beginning to the present moment" (Cheyfitz 109). This makes clear straight away that a connection to the land has not only a spiritual importance to American Indians (though this is certainly also highly important), but it is also part of their specific political agenda. All the various tribes of the United States, united under the common denominator of 'Indians', share a history of colonial subjugation which started when the Europeans first set foot on the shores of America. But they never left, and their offspring never will. Colonialism will never end for the Indians, which might be part of why some still cling to the last vestiges of their respective ancestral lands, usually in the form of their reservations (more on which will be said in chapter 1). What Indian activists largely fight for these days, is the right of self-governance (usually called 'sovereignty') with minimum interference from outside the boundaries of the Indian lands. What they call the 'Indian Nation' is still a troublesome concept – how to be a 'nation within a nation', not only legally and politically, but also with regard to one's very identity? As Meredith James says, "Land, or lack thereof, is central to Indian identity" (James 2).

These issues are, naturally, also central to many Native authors writing today. The literary characters who struggle with their identity usually find that they must try to articulate this identity in relation to the land. James quotes Nelson on this: "In recent Native American literature, as in many of the cultural traditions to which this body of literature refers and defers, identity, like life itself, derives from the land. Whoever wishes either to recover or to sustain a healthy state of existence, then, must enter into some working identity not only with a cultural tradition, but also with a particular landscape" (Nelson qtd. in James 6-7). Nelson obviously sees this wide-ranging connection to a landscape as key to Indian identity formation. A similar stance is expressed by Krupat, who elaborates Nelson's view on the matter with a note on the importance that such an attachment to space has to the Indian

political agenda of sovereignty, which has been mentioned above: "Native communities 'negotiate with narrative' to 'establish […] cultural identity', an identity that undergirds a particular sense of distinctiveness connected to a particular geoscape, *and implies autonomy and a full capacity for self-governance*" (Krupat 8, my emphasis). The importance of space in relation to Indian identity reflects a view on space and its implications which has been provided by Edward W. Soja: "Space in itself may be primordially given, but the organization and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience" (Soja 79). Space and its specific organization is very political and as such, its treatment in literature (and any other writing for that matter) can be read as a political statement on its own accord.

Sherman Alexie's Novels

Even though he has only been actively publishing since 1991, Sherman Alexie is certainly a prolific writer. He has already published sixteen collections of poetry and short stories (sometimes only poetry, sometimes only short stories, sometimes combined), and four novels. My discussion of space and Indian identity in Alexie's work will mainly focus on his novels. The reason for this is both practical and born out of my own personal interest. First of all, the sheer amount of Alexie's poems and short stories made the idea of taking a wider approach, which would necessarily also entail poetic analysis, rather daunting. Four novels seems a nice, workable amount for a research topic of this scope. Also, I have personally always felt that Alexie's novels are quite clear in their respective political standpoints. Alexie himself has said on occasion that writing novels comes harder to him than writing poetry, which might be part of why his novels seem more easily accessible to a literary analysis of the kind I provide in these pages. However, that they seem more accessible does certainly not mean they are less interesting, or any less political.

The four novels Alexie has written thus far are *Reservation Blues* (1995), *Indian Killer* (1996), *Flight* (2007) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* (2007)[2] (for those who are not familiar with these novels, I have provided brief summaries in an appendix at the end, on page 62 and 63). There is a rather large gap between the first two novels and the last

[2] Since especially the title of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is too long to provide fully every time I refer to it, I will just refer to it as 'the *Diary*'. The other titles are short enough to use in the course of the text, yet I have still chosen to largely abbreviate them in the parenthetical references. *Reservation Blues* will be called *RB* in these references, *Indian Killer* will be referred to as *IK* and *Flight* simply as *Flight*. The *Diary* will be called *ATD* (short for *Absolutely True Diary*, obviously).

two, which means that when analyzed together they can provide a view on how Alexie's views on the matter at hand changed over time (and I will suggest that they have). The first three novels are all adult novels (though some have argued *Flight* seems aimed at young adults, Alexie himself has said that its overt violence makes it an adult book – though this does not mean that it is entirely unsuited for young adult readers), while *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is a young adult novel. It is interesting to note that this young adult novel has been placed on a list of 'challenged' books published annually by the American Library Association. This list is published in order to inform people of which books have been criticized most that year, and for what reasons. The main goal of the ALA is to criticize the specific kind of censorship that comes with banning books. Alexie's youth novel made the second place on this list for 2010, only after a children's book called *And Tango Makes Three*, which tells the story of two male penguins who hatch a donated egg and raise the baby penguin together. *And Tango Makes Three* has made top of the list for four times in five years, due to its apparent display of homosexuality. Alexie's youth novel has been placed on the list due to its content of "language, racism and sexual content" (*Seattle Times*, par. 4). If anything, I think it speaks in favor of Alexie that he does not shield young adults from important issues such as poverty, alcoholism and racism (which have been discussed in all his novels to some extent), and yes, sexuality as well (even if this particular novel actually only features jokey remarks on masturbation).

Chapters and Themes

The first three chapters of this thesis each focus on a specific kind of location. I have chosen to not discuss every novel separately, since I believe analyzing them side by side would make the differences and similarities more apparent. I have chosen three kinds of locations: the space of the reservation, boundary spaces, and spaces away from the reservation (mainly towns and cityscapes). I have chosen to add a chapter which does not focus on a locality, but rather on a specific attitude towards being in the world which I found particularly useful with regard to especially Alexie's latest two novels: the concept of the cosmopolitan patriot, as developed by Kwame Anthony Appiah. The themes discussed are not the same for every chapter. Still, I have discovered that such themes as authenticity divisions versus connections and how the self is constructed in relation to another have been recurrent.

What I will argue in the following pages is that the interrelation between identity and space we see in Alexie's works functions in a different way than it does in the works of his Native literary predecessors and colleagues, mainly with regard to the space of the reservation

and its supposed positive influence on Indian identity formation. I will also argue that there is a big difference with regard to attitude towards identity and space between his earlier two novels and the newest two. While Alexie's earlier two works seem to imply irrevocable differences between the Indian and the whites, and as such often between the reservation and the city, the later novels are more hopeful with regard to the possibility of cooperation and forgiveness, which makes the city less of a contested space for the Indians and frees them of the largely mental constraints of the reservation.

Chapter 1: Within the Boundaries of the Reservation

Sweetheart, I know these car wrecks are nearly genetic
Sweetheart, I know these hands have been shaking for generations
And they shake and shake and shake and shake
Sweetheart, I know these suicides are always genetic
Sweetheart, I know we have to travel to the reservation
For the wake and wake and wake and wake
And sweetheart, all these wakes for the dead
Are putting the living to sleep
(*Wake,* RB 275)

One of the more forceful statements Sherman Alexie has made about what he deems the nature of the reservations is the following, said in an interview with Dave Weich: "One of the things we forget as natives and non-natives is that reservations were created as concentration camps. They were created so Indians would be shipped there and die. I really think that's still their purpose: to kill" (Alexie in Peterson 171). This is not the only time Alexie has drawn the parallel between the holocaust and the genocide of the American Indians. What is striking is that indeed, what once was primarily a way of keeping relatively firm boundaries between the white people and the Indians, has over time become more firmly regarded as 'Indian Country', key to the maintaining of tribal heritage and Indian identity, an Indian home-space of sorts (more on this below). Over time, the boundaries setting apart 'Indian Country' from the rest of America, have become less and less physical boundaries and more boundaries of the mind, boundaries construed by both history and social dispositions. The main goal of this chapter is assessing the role of the reservation space in Alexie's novels. Seeing as the reservation plays the most prominent parts in *Reservation Blues* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, those are the novels which will feature most prominently in this chapter. It will prove fruitful to first go back to the origin of how the reservations were initially conceived.

On the Birth of the Reservation

In her work *Literary and Cinematic Reservation in Selected Works of Native American Author Sherman Alexie*, Meredith James provides her readers with a very concise and useful description of the origins of the reservation system. She relays how "much of early Indian policy was developed for monetary gains" (James 13), and that the landscape in many ways appeared to foreshadow the bright future of the United States, in all its versatility and plenty. Also, "The vast American landscape provided many places into which Indians could be

pushed, away from encroaching white settlements"(James 13). At first, the forced movement of Indians was mainly by relocation, i.e. by removing tribes from their homelands for the sake of profit, and forcing them into designated 'Indian Territory'. In practice, the first plans for the reservations were made public in 1848 by William Medill, the commissioner of Indian affairs. His plan entailed that "Native peoples would be put on small parcels of land which cut down the number of Indian agents and allowed more missionaries to become involved with civilizing the Indians" (James 16). The idea of the reservation as a space used to curb Indian resistance (by, for example, cutting down the number of Indian agents), connects with Giorgio Agamben's idea of the camp as a modernist construction in which "the juridical basis for internment was not common law but *Schutzhaft* (literally, protective custody) to avoid danger to the security of the state" (Agamben 167). The camps are born from a 'state of exception' which supposedly poses a danger, but eventually "The state of exception [...] ceases to be referred to as an external and provisional state of factual danger and comes to be confused with juridical rule itself" (Agamben 168), i.e.: "The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception becomes the rule" (Agamben 168-169). This seems to hold well for the reservation space, which has achieved a high degree of normalcy and even changed some of its political implications so that it may function within a world which technically condemns spaces which are construed to "attempt to overcome the division dividing the people, to eliminate radically the people that is excluded" (Agamben 179), and in which "whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the police [or social workers, missionaries, etcetera] who temporarily act as sovereign" (Agamben 174). The presence of civilizing missionaries also illustrates how the concept of the reservation combined relocation with forced civilization programs: "Reservations were not only an attempt to separate Indians from the white settlements of the early United States, but also to impose European philosophies and worldviews" (James 8). The concept was all about power and control: "The reservation system was and is in theory a modern concept that seeks to contain and designate ethnicity and culture" (James 1). Such practices were legitimated by science, which proclaimed Indians inferior; a classic colonialist practice. The Indians would be saved by the enlightened white man, who would bring them the Word of God while committing cultural genocide.

As Frank W. Porter III says, "In every generation, white society asked itself what to do with the American Indians. Their answers have resulted in the twists and turns of federal Indian policy" (Porter in Fixico 9). He continues to describe the two most common approaches: the civilizing approach described above, or "ignoring the Indians until they

disappeared under pressure from the ever-expanding white society" (Porter in Fixico 9). The latter approach ties in with the 1950s federal Indian policy to "transfer federal responsibility and jurisdiction to state governments, encourage the physical relocation of Indian peoples from reservations to urban areas, and hasten the termination, or extinction, of tribes", all in the name of "integration into American society" (Porter in Fixico 11). In the 1970s this policy was replaced with what is generally known as 'self-determination', which tries to balance (and often sees a clash between) a degree of sovereignty for the Indians with the reality of the Indians as citizens of specific American States, having to function in that massive world-nation that is the United States.

James describes the issues the American Office of Indian Affairs faced when setting up the reservations from 1860 onwards, as they tried to force people from different tribes in the same reservation spaces, thinking they would succumb to Euro-American civilization. Since the Indians refused to stay within the set boundaries, the Office used military force to keep the Indians in place. The Indians' surroundings had larger impact on their psychological and physical well-being than the Office had foreseen, which made it all the more difficult to keep them from escaping the reservation lands. Seeing as at first the Indians (naturally) did not want to remain within the set boundaries of the reservation, it is all the more interesting to see the change in perception on the reservations on the part of the Indians. While at first the reservations were strictly regulated from without and seen as undesirable spaces in which to reside, nowadays for many Indians the reservations have come to represent the last vestiges of Indian land and the last space in America where tribal culture can be, to some degree, preserved, if only the Indians can regain a measure of sovereignty. As Cecil King says, native people should "be consulted and respected as not only human beings, at the very least, but as independent nations with the right to determine what transpires *within our boundaries*" (King in Krupat 6, my emphasis). The boundaries set by the Euro-American settlers have become the boundaries of the Indian nation.

As Michel Foucault said, "Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (Foucault in Soja 19). For few spaces is this clearer than for that of the American Indian reservation, which has come to mean cultural preservation because of its facilitating of tribal life within the largely urbanized United States on the one hand and on the other it is a physical reminder of the complex power relations that exist between American Indians and the Euro-American settlers. Edward W. Soja says the following, which ties in nicely with Foucault's statement: "Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies" (Soja 80). And naturally, one space can

incorporate multiple ideologies. This idea of space as a political and ideological product will be significant to keep in mind when analyzing Alexie's novels.

The Literary Reservation in Alexie's Novels

The reservation which most commonly features in Alexie's work is the Spokane Indian Reservation (located approximately 50 miles northwest of Spokane, Washington) where he grew up. It is probably safe to state that his representation of Indian reservations is to a large extent based on his own observations and experiences. Here is how he described growing up in the Spokane reservation in an interview with Charlene Teters, in 1997:

> The Spokane Rez, in my experience, is one of the most beautiful in the country: pine trees, streams, lakes, the Columbia and Spokane Rivers, Tshimakin Creek, deer walking through the middle of town, bear falling asleep on the church roof. Physically, it is the most beautiful place in the world. And then it has all the social problems that a reservation has: the alcohol and drug problems, family dysfunction, domestic violence. And so I grew up in that. It's isolated, and unlike a lot of reservations, it's mostly Indian, and most everybody is Spokane Indian. It's really more of a mono-culture. So that's what I dealt with for the first eighteen years of my life, and that was good. It was like a little island" (Alexie in Peterson 54).

This combination of joy and sorrow is pretty much how we see the reservation represented in Alexie's work. Actually, one of the descriptions of the Spokane reservation Alexie gives us in *Reservation Blues* has some striking similarities to the quote above:

> Pine trees blanketed the mountain and the rest of the reservation. The town of Wellpinit sat in a little clearing below the mountain. Cougars strolled through the middle of town; a bear once staggered out of hibernation too early, climbed onto the roof of the Catholic Church, and fell back asleep. [...] 'This is a beautiful place', Johnson said. (*RB*, 7)

Down to the bear on the church, it is similar. And as in Alexie's description of the reservation of his youth, the beauty is immediately contrasted with the dark sides of life on the rez, as the Spokane Indian Thomas Builds-the-Fire answers Johnson:

> 'But you haven't seen everything', Thomas said.
> 'What else is there?'
> Thomas thought about all the dreams that were murdered here, and the bones buried quickly just inches below the surface, all waiting to break through the foundations of those government houses built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. (*RB* 7)

Alexie's reservations are swarming with drunks, violent jerks, commodity food and general misery. But there is also warmth and laughter, and it is precisely this ambiguity which seems to be the core to Alexie's literary representation of the Spokane reservation. As Meredith James says, "Alexie's works show a harsh, sometimes unforgiving, reservation, yet at the same time this fictional reservation serves as a source for celebrating traditional values of family and community" (James 87). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* shows the same sort of ambiguity as *Reservation Blues* does, as it shows both the bitterness of the many deaths caused by alcohol (killing even those who do not drink, like Arnold's grandmother) and the poverty and hopelessness which has haunted families for generations, but also the love Arnold has for his family and his best friend and the closeness of the tribe as a whole: "On the rez, you know every kid's father, mother, grandparents, dog, cat, and shoe-size" (*ATD* 153). That what some have dubbed 'realism' has also been interpreted as an exaggeration potentially harmful to the Indian agenda to fashion a more positive self-image, is shown most prominently in Gloria Bird's well-known essay "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*". Bird first criticizes Alexie for the 'emotionless' way in which he represents the reservation town of Wellpinit : "The community of Wellpinit and its surroundings are intimate props, familiar scenery that is vacant of any emotional investment. There is none of the sweeping, lyrical prose of Momaday's *The House Made of Dawn* whose lines like, 'The canyon is a ladder to the plain', stay in the mind for years" (Bird par. 19). While the presence or absence of 'sweeping, lyrical prose' in Alexie's work can be debated, Bird's true argument is precisely about that which has earned Alexie so much praise: his supposed realistic representation of reservation life. Bird sees Alexie's way of portraying reservation life as counterproductive: "The reduction of Indian existence to defeat reads as internalized oppression, of buying into a vision of ourselves as dying/vanishing and simply returns the representation of Indians as they are produced in American literature and in the media back to itself" (Bird par. 26), and she continues with her title-statement: "it is the exaggeration of despair without context that doesn't offer enough substance to be anything

more than a 'spoof' of contemporary reservation life" (Bird par. 27). Personally I think that Gloria Bird overlooks the emotional ambiguity of Alexie's reservation spaces and that it is precisely this ambiguity which creates the richness of his text, on the levels of aesthetics, emotion and social validity.

Purity/Authenticity and Notions of Home

Despite its origin as a place of cultural genocide, something which the reservation also represents is the myth of purity, of authenticity, and inherently, of home. As Meredith James says, "For Native peoples, [reservations] are the sites of retention and struggle and more importantly the sites of home. Only 20% of Native peoples in the United States live on reservation, but reservations always remain constant particularly in the field of Native American literature" (James 25). Alexie himself has stated he thinks that this is the main reason why the reservation is still such a prominent presence in Native literature: "very few of the top thirty or forty Native writers publishing now grew up on the reservation, and yet most Native literature is about the reservation. So there is a nostalgia for purity: a time when we were all together and when our identity was sure, and when our lives were better" (Alexie in Peterson 145). Meredith James notes pretty much the same thing: "Native authors re-imagine these reservation spaces, often trying to show them as positive for their characters' journeys of reclaiming their identities"(James 11). However, Alexie has also claimed that he thinks that "Nostalgia is always doomed and dooming" (Alexie in Peterson 123), and also that "In my dictionary, 'Indian' and 'nostalgic' are synonyms" (Alexie in Peterson 137). As such, according to Alexie, the way in which some Indians are nowadays connected to the reservation lands could be seen as self-defeating. In *Reservation Blues*, Junior and especially Victor are perfect examples of macho Indian males, who measure themselves by their 'toughness' and their ability to conquer (white) women. Yet, for them as for many other Indians, the reservation is their home, their world. Whatever lies beyond the boundaries of the reservation is Unknown, and hence frightening: "Though they always pretended to be the toughest Indian men in the world, they suffered terrible bouts of homesickness as soon as they crossed the Spokane Indian Reservation border" (*RB* 61). Many others feel the same way, it seems. The *Reservation Blues* character called 'the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota' spends his time proclaiming that "The end of the world is near!" While this would seem the talk of a madman to most of us, "None of the Spokanes paid him much mind because they already knew the end was just around the corner, a few miles west, down by Turtle Lake" (*RB* 11). For these Indians, there is no world beyond the borders of the reservation, even though Alexie

often shows us that the outside world keeps intervening by ways of technology and capitalist produce – the Indians are avid TV-fans (we see *Diary*'s Arnold Spirit watch "The Prize is Right" on page 88), when they speak the characters often use references to pop culture ("What do you think this is? An American Werewolf in London?" (*RB* 288), and the supplier of commodity food provides both cheap beer and large quantities of diet Pepsi (especially present in *Reservation Blues*). Especially the example of the commodity food shows that no matter how much it may seem that the Indians' entire world fits within the boundaries of the reservation, the existing power structures have construed a measure of dependence on part of the Indians that is hard to subvert. The concept of commodity food is a physical product of those power relations that relocated Indians to the reservations to begin with, impoverished them and as such kept them largely dependent on the cheap food provided for them by the state. The fact that the narratives keep providing examples of pop culture and the intruding power structures from without could be seen as a statement – awareness of the world beyond the reservation, a global awareness if you will, will also perhaps increase awareness and general knowledge of the very power structures that can be seen at work within the boundaries of the reservation. What is generally thought of as an Indian Space, a last vestige of tribal culture, is actually very much infused with elements from the outside world. To take matters into their own hands, then, the Indians would have to engage with the United States and the world at large.

Why then this tendency to try to see the reservation as the last vestige of purity, a space for all intents and purposes cut off from the rest of the world, while this is obviously not the reality? Alexie himself has his own view on this matter: "I think a lot of Indians view their separation and their refusal to belong as an open act of defiance" (Alexie in Peterson 123). The yearning for lost purity then signifies a sort of 'us versus them' dichotomy, the rez versus the rest. The notion of sovereignty, the idea that Native peoples want to have the freedom to govern themselves, is also a big part of this. As Krupat says, "The sense of the 'land' at issue here is, to be sure, spiritual, [...], but it is also legal and political, involving 'land ownership' and control – sovereignty" (Krupat 8). The boundaries of the reservation then demarcate not only the historical boundaries laid by the oppressors, but also the boundaries surrounding Indian Land, which, due to feelings of militancy and nostalgia, has to serve the Natives as their homeland, no matter how bad the living conditions in this Indian Land might be. Daniel Grassian has also provided a reading of *Reservation Blues* in which he sees this same idea of closing one's community off from the rest of the world to such a degree as is possible as

ultimately defeating: “The monotonous, virtually self-enclosed hermetic environment [of Wellpinit] has become, in a way, a casualty of its own homogeneity” (Grassian 79).

What then would having a reservation as a home-space mean for those trying to maintain an Indian identity? One can assume that for those militant few who are passionate about the Indian political agenda it might represent the notion that there is something to fight for – a sovereign Indian Nation. Such a sentiment can be seen in *Indian Killer,* not in any of the main protagonists but in some of the young Indians the Indian student Marie, who lives outside the reservation, remembers from her reservation: “They could speak Spokane as fluently as many elders, but they could barely read English. They were intelligent and humorous, and never wanted to leave the reservation” (*IK* 33). For these young Indians, their Indian identity seems to be enough, and hence the reservation space is enough. Still, these lines emit a certain kind of futility, a sense of talent gone to waste. Interestingly though, in Alexie’s novels the most passionate, militant Indians can be found off the reservations. Those who have stayed within the reservation seem largely stumped by the negativity of the place in which they reside – devoid of hope, of passions, they take to the bottle, to reclusiveness or to random violence. Those who still have hope are often the ‘misfit’ protagonists, like the story-teller Thomas Builds-the-Fire from *Reservation Blues* and the somewhat dorky Arnold Spirit from the *Diary*. One of Arnold’s cartoons, titled “Why I Did Actually Miss a Lot of School”, shows a clear example of the general hopelessness that can be found on the reservation. The final panel has as a headline: “Mom + I had to go search for my father so we could bring him home + keep him safe”. It shows Arnold and his sad looking mother next to his dad who is sitting next to an empty beer can with his head on the table. Arnold says: “Come home, Dad”, to which his father replies: “I am home. Misery is my home” (*ATD* 174, see the image on page 14). As depressingly funny as this line seems (as much of Alexie’s humor it sits on the brink between funniness and sadness, as a type of coping-mechanism), it can also be interpreted as, in a sense, accepting the intolerable. By saying ‘Misery is my home’, Arnold’s father, drunk as he is, seems to accept that there will be no happiness for him and that he is done trying to look for it. Misery is his home, and his home is the reservation. Ergo, the reservation is misery, so for him, as an Indian within that space to which he belongs (which the word ‘home’ implies), there is no way out of his misery.

Illustration by Ellen Forney (*ATD* 174).

It is the ultimate passivity, but a passivity we see in more of Alexie's characters who have lost hope. Arnold's sister, Mary Runs Away, had spent years hiding away in a basement until she found hope and got married and moved away (to a different reservation, where she is killed in a fire). As Arnold sees it, "This reservation tried to suffocate her, had kept her trapped in a basement" (*ATD* 91). He ascribes a kind of agency to the reservation as a space which can be seen in Alexie's work more often and on which more shall be said below. The descriptions of the reservation spaces as places largely denoted by feelings of hopelessness and misery shows the vicious circle that is at work here. As Henri Lefebvre said, "Space and the political

organization of space express social relationships but also react back upon them" (Lefebvre in Soja 81). The long history of poverty and misery the reservation represents influence (if not to a large extent create) the social reality of the people residing within its boundaries, while at the same time this social reality fashions the reality of the current reservation and its political implications. Misery has become the main identity of the Indians, as is reflected by the territory they inhabit.

Another effect of the presupposed authenticity that can be found on the reservations is that it attracts outsiders (in Alexie's novels mostly white New Agers) in search of what they perceive Indian authenticity should be like. As Loretta Todd said: "In the modernist period, it was the lands and resources they sought; in the postmodern it is the experiences, the sensation they want. Nothing is authentic or autonomous, therefore everything is fair game" (Todd in Krupat 5). Explained this way, the quest for Indian wisdom could be seen as a form of new colonialism, projecting Western desires on the Natives who either try to show them reality or play into the white people's desires by performing an 'Indian' identity to earn money or a sort of respect due to perceived exoticism. In his *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan provides his readers with an elaborate account of exoticism in practice. He defines exoticism as follows: "exoticism describes […] a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (Huggan 13). Explained like this, exoticism can of course never be free of political implications. Huggan goes on to explain how exoticism can function as a "highly effective instrument of imperial power" (14), as it implies an imperial gaze on an exoticized subject who is not expected to look back. In Alexie's novel, the exoticized subject does look back, since the reader often sees those who perceive exoticness in the American Indian characters through the eyes of the Indians themselves, or at least see how Alexie shows the strong contrast between the exoticized image and reality. In the *Diary* we see Arnold's perception of such reservation-pilgrims: "Yet another guy who showed up on the rez because he loved Indian people SOOOOOO much" (*ATD* 163). *Reservation Blues* focuses on this issue some more, mostly in the form of the two white women, Betty and Veronica, who come to the reservation when they heard of the Indian rock band Coyote Springs. They wear more turquoise jewellery than any Indian on the reservation and they have sex with Victor and Junior even though the two do not even treat them with any semblance of respect. The women keep elaborating upon the wisdom of the Native Americans: "You live at peace with the earth. You are so wise" (*RB* 168). Precisely this idea of Indians who live their lives as perfect environmentalists and have

ages-old wisdom, is an image of authenticity created by the desires of others, which has not much (if anything at all) to do with reality. As Alexie himself has stated on occasion: "Environmentalism is a luxury" (Alexie in Peterson 85). If you live in poverty, communion with the earth and recycling are not on top of your list – survival is, making sure your family has something to eat. And yes, sometimes this means you have to cash in on other people's expectations, like Arnold's grandmother does by selling beaded keychains on eBay and calling them "Highly Sacred Aboriginal Transportation Charms" (*ATD* 69). The outside world wants their Indian spirituality ready-to-be-consumed, but also as 'real' as possible – an Indian from the reservation is more 'pure', more 'real' than an Indian living on the streets of Seattle, asking for change. As Chess exclaims in exasperation to Betty and Veronica: "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). The reservations are misread from without, as all have come to represent an image of Pan-Indian tribal wisdom.

So it seems Alexie's novels represent the reservation as a space which functions in problematic, intricate ways when it comes to the idea of the preservation of a 'pure', homogeneous Indian identity (for as far as such a thing would even be possible to achieve). As Meredith James says on the construction of Wellpinit in *Reservation Blues*: "Separation from culture, family, and land doesn't necessarily occur from being off the reservation or from a lack of knowledge about tribal heritage, it can also happen within the boundaries of the reservation" (James 33). Fathers desert families either physically or mentally, macho culture reigns and the one reservation story teller is the outcast of the tribe, instead of being one of its leaders. It is almost ancient tribal culture gone topsy turvey, as Grassian suggests (Grassian 79). But is there a way to go back to 'the way things were' at all, even for those who still profess a hope for better things? A few lines of Arnold Spirit come to mind, who, as he finds it difficult to adjust to school life outside of the reservation, muses: "Maybe I could just drop out of school completely. I could go live in the woods like a hermit. Like a real Indian. Of course, since I was allergic to pretty much every plant that grew on earth, I would have been a real Indian with a head full of snot" (*ATD* 58). This could be read as a metaphor for the way in which contemporary Indians are no longer suited to go back to the way things were – even if it would seem like an attractive way to live. As it stands, there will be no refuge in 'the woods', so they will have to try their luck in the modern world, and most probably not just the modern reservation. It seems that a space such as the reservation, as represented in Alexie's

novels, has too much going on to be fruitful as a space which would aid the construction of Indian identity. The very idea rests on feelings of nostalgia, the desire for home or the desire of others for an authenticity that does not exist. When dealing with purity/authenticity and home spaces with regard to the space of the reservation, Soja's statement concerning space as an ideological, political product is all too valid. The reservations as portrayed by Alexie are more likely to block any kind of revolutionary identity formation rather than aid it.

The Non-Existence of the Reservation

It is interesting to note that in many ways, the reservation space as shown in Alexie's novels is teetering on the edge of (inter)national oblivion. One of the first lines of *Reservation Blues* is the following: "Wellpinit, the only town on the reservation, did not exist on any maps" (*RB* 3). No one ends up there by accident, so for anyone who does not have business there, it simply does not exist. Two lines of a song by Coyote Springs also shows the invisibility of the reservation: "It's the reservation / The news don't give it a mention" (*RB* 248). The *Diary*'s Arnold muses on the following: "If the government wants to hide somebody, there is probably no place more isolated than my reservation, which is located approximately one million miles north of Important and two billion miles west of Happy" (*ATD* 30). The reservation has no definite, documented location on the maps and what happens there is easily ignored. The space of the reservation is in a sort of existential limbo, except for those who reside there.

What would this mean? It could be read in connection to the construction of the United States as a unified nation. The reality of what the reservations have always meant (the oppression and physical and cultural genocide of the native peoples of the United States) makes the reservation a difficult memorial space as well. Cultural memory has always been vital for the process of constituting a nation – Ernest Renan has elaborated upon this in his famous work "Qu'est-ce qu'un nation?" (1882). Cultural memory is supposed to highlight common suffering and common victories – but this is not what the reservation represents. If anything, it represents unresolved conflict and a history of warfare and cruelty which still has the capacity to shake the very foundations of the United States of America. If remembered. More recently, Paul Ricoeur, among others, has elaborated the way in which forgetting can be used as a force for unification, even as it problematizes forgiveness by its denial of memory (Ricoeur 451). There is the power of representation and the power to choose *not* to represent. The reservations are something of a blemish on the image of a successful nation the United States want to present, tiny spots on the ideal of the American Dream. The imposed invisibility of the reservations is also very much in line with some early reservation policies

which were all about the virtual disappearance of the Indians as a people and make them an integrated part of the United States, where they would blend in until oblivion. Marc Augé said: “Certainly the European, Western ‘here’ assumes its full meaning in relation to the distant elsewhere – formerly ‘colonial’, now ‘under-developed’- favored in the past by British and French anthropology” (Augé 10). Interestingly, the way the Indian lands are ‘nations within a nation’ seems to create a different sort of dichotomy, where the reservation cannot fully take on the meaning of the ‘under-developed elsewhere’, but is all too tightly ensconced within the very boundaries of the United States, a reminder of its blemished past. Therefore, the reservation spaces must be either erased from the map, so to speak, or its very reality must be altered to such a degree as would mean the truth would be practically written over (and as such erased). *Reservation Blues* provides an example of the latter method: “[Father] Arnold came to the reservation in his yellow VW van, expecting tipis and buffalo, since he had never been told otherwise” (*RB* 36). Those who produce knowledge do not reside within the reservation. The image of the reservation Father Arnold has in mind is a historical image, so much entrenched in the past that it seems this image has no place in our present modern times. As Sherman Alexie himself has said: “In most people’s minds, American Indians only exist in the nineteenth century” (Alexie qtd. in Guilbert 155). Father Arnold’s idea of the reservation does not exist.

The erasure of the reservation is also closely tied up with the idea of literacy, of education. As stated above, those who *know* the true reservations are usually not those who broadcast the news, those who write the books. This is changing, yes, but still it seems not enough knowledge is being produced to contradict the lingering imagery of the Noble Savage or the Hopeless Drunk. The *Diary* shows how even intelligent young Indians receive bad education, which instigates Arnold to leave to go to school outside the reservation – but he is the only one. Arnold’s father has a friend, Eugene, who was a great basketball player: “Eugene was a legend. People say he could have played in college, but people also say Eugene couldn’t read. You can’t read, you can’t ball” (*ATD* 145). Eugene is held back by his lack of education. Even Victor from *Reservation Blues*, a loser most of his life, at the end of the novel tries to better his life by applying for a job. He hands his resume over and gets nothing but ridicule in return - his resume is riddled with spelling mistakes and clearly shows that he has no idea how to compose a resume. Progress is halted at the reservation, and as such, so is knowledge production on the reality of the reservation spaces and its very existence in the minds of others. Yet, even if the reservation is dead in the minds of others, Alexie shows that the reservation is very much alive. The reservation is so much alive in fact,

that on occasion it is shown to act on its own accord, demonstrating a specific kind of agency which allows it a measure of subjecthood. Arnold tells us how the reservation had “tried to suffocate” his sister Mary, kept her trapped (*ATD* 91), and *Reservation Blues* takes it even further, with descriptions such as: “Music rose above the reservation, made its way into the clouds, and rained down. The reservation arched its back, opened its mouth and drank deep because the music tasted so familiar” (*RB* 24), or “She heard the Spokane Reservation breathe” (*RB* 86). It is as if the very agency of the reservation, the way in which it is shown to be *alive* shows the lie of the non-existence of the place. The reservation exists, and it demands that people deal with its existence.

A Reservation of the Mind

Sherman Alexie himself has often told his interviewers that one of the poems which inspired him to become a writer was a poem by Adrian Louis, which said: “Oh Uncle Adrian, I’m in the reservation of my mind”. Meredith James has a very interesting take on this concept which she simply calls ‘the reservation of the mind’: “The concept of the ‘reservation of the mind’ can be used to describe a worldview imposed upon Indians by the United States government” (James 8). This can mean a wide range of things, amongst them a worldview in which Indians are worthless, less-than-whites, in any way culturally, intellectually, etcetera, inferior. These sentiments can be noted especially in the following train of thought of Arnold Spirit:

> But we reservation Indians don’t get to realize our dreams. We don’t get those chances. Or choices. We’re just poor. That’s all we are. It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor. You start believing that you’re poor because you’re stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you’re stupid and ugly because you’re Indian. And because you’re Indian you start believing you’re destined to be poor. It’s an ugly circle and *there’s nothing you can do about it*. (*ATD* 13)

Even after he has decided to attend Reardan High School he finds it hard to rid himself of these imposed sentiments: “Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. It was the opposite of me. I didn’t deserve to be there. I knew it; all those kids knew it. Indians don’t deserve shit” (*ATD* 56). Interestingly, these sentiments are not specifically bound to the reservation space – it is an ages old influence which extends beyond the

boundaries of the reservation. But more shall be said on this in chapter 2. For now, it is enough to realize that the notion of the reservation of the mind exists and that it is more likely to inspire passivity than action. Yet still there are dreamers.

What Dreams Are Made of, Where They Live and Die

To go back to the idea of the American Dream mentioned above, it is interesting to note that some of Alexie's characters do venture out of the reservations in search of their very own American Dreams – the band Coyote Springs tries to obtain a record contract, the intelligent Arnold Spirit pursues a proper education, as did Marie Polatkin in *Indian Killer*, all with differing degrees of success. Arnold Spirit is even very explicit about how his journey to the school of nearby Reardan can be read as him following his own American Dream: "There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream" (*ATD* 217), he says. What is clear in any case, is that it is pretty useless to try to live your American Dream within the boundaries of the reservation. *Reservation Blues* provides some pretty powerful illustrations of this, as it tells its readers how the bones of dreams are buried beneath the surface of the reservation, and how the turtles that live in the great caverns beneath the reservation are said to "feed on failed dreams" (*RB* 27). Even Arnold's sister Mary, who left the Spokane reservation to get married and live on a different reservation in Montana, finds her death because of a drunken party which ends in a fire. The happiness on the reservation is brief, and it will not suffice for those who dare to dream big.

While for some the constant awareness of a world beyond in which foods of every variety are readily available, as are hopes and dreams, might provoke nothing but a quiet despair and hopelessness, for others this is precisely what triggers them to take matters into their own hands. As Appadurai notes on the force of the imagination: "It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape" (Appadurai 7). It is Arnold's ability to dream big, his knowledge of the existence of a better education, which makes him throw his ages-old geometry book into his teacher's face, his imagination is what makes him able to draw cartoons to create "other worlds to live in" (*ATD* 23). Arnold's sister Mary wanted to live the romance novels she used to read and which she dreamed of writing herself. Coyote Springs hoped their music would bring them a degree of wealth. There are dreams on the reservation, to be true. But it is also true that those who dream big enough to be triggered into action will have to leave the reservation, and "go somewhere where other people have hope"

(*ATD* 43). In *War Dances*, Alexie wrote that “Pain is never added to pain. It multiplies” (*WD* 58). Arnold Spirit has to try and have his hope multiplied, away from the reservation.

Sherman Alexie’s literary reservation is a space in which joy and sorrow always come combined. It is a place which breathes nostalgia, is misrepresented from without which adds to its supposed authentic image, and its alleged purity is belied by the ever interfering power constructions and pop culture which we see present in Alexie’s novels. The reservation as a home brings nothing but negativity – there is no hope there, only an ever present history of misery. The literary reservation is a space which indeed shows the kind of internalized oppression Gloria Bird criticized Alexie for, but I argue that this is part of the novels’ political agenda, especially so in the *Diary*. This internalized oppression, the ‘reservation of the mind’, if you will, is what a character like Arnold has to let go of when he tries to pursue his dream away from the reservation. The Indian identity construed in relation to the reservation space is either passive in its despair or triggered into action by the obvious discrepancy between that which the reservation has to offer and that which features in their dreams.

Chapter 2: Boundary-Spaces

but I have salmon blood
from my mother and father
and always ignore barriers
and bridges, only follow
this simple and genetic map
that you have drawn
in my interior, this map
that always leads back
to that exact place
where you are
("Exact Drums", Water Flowing Home*)*

When discussing space in connection to identity formation, boundary spaces are impossible to ignore. In the case of American Indians, boundaries have specific connotations, as pointed out by Robin Riley Fast in the following lines:

> American history, past and present, conspires to make the whole continent a contested space for Native Americans and to make virtually inevitable, for contemporary Indians, *an acute awareness of boundaries and divisions* – between Native and Non-Native, the reservation or ancestral lands and the city, and also, for example, within tribal communities, between traditional and modern ways, full-blood and mixed blood, Native languages and others, Native spirituality and Christianity. (Riley Fast 4-5, emphasis mine)

An important thing to note about boundaries as they will be discussed in this chapter, is that they are by nature more complex than a dividing line between two opposites, despite the primary definition provided by the Oxford Dictionaries: "a line which marks the limits of an area; a dividing line" (Oxford Dictionaries). My definition of boundaries will be based upon Inge Boer's work *Uncertain Territories: Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*, in which she states that boundaries are "uncertain; not lines, but spaces, not rigid but open to negotiation" (Boer 13). This notion of boundaries as *spaces* is central, since this means that the boundary is in itself a location in which events may take place, which is essential to its inherent negotiability: "boundaries […] are negotiated in a process that does not end with the provisional designation of a boundary. The boundary is arbitrary in character, temporary and changeable" (Boer 10). As such, boundaries function as "terrains of encounter rather than division" (Boer 43). This involves geographical boundaries, naturally, but also boundaries

between sexes, ethnicities and religions, which implies a widening of the very concept of the boundary and its being tied up with issues of power and politics. As Boer says:

> Needless to say that the mapping of 'real' boundaries onto different religions, ethnicities, cultures and sexes, leads to the search for justifiable and visible referents as well. It leads to divisions - and then, easily exclusions – according to colour or dress and the naturalization of norms of the dominant discourse and culture. (Boer 11)

This makes the nature of the boundary a lot more fluid and more widely applicable. It is important to note that when it comes to encounters, "Ultimately, the movement is *in* the boundaries, not just in the spaces it separates or in a borderless harmony" (Boer 34). Such encounters not across but negotiating boundaries can create a specific kind of newness which Homi Bhabha sees as important to culture in general: "the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present" (Bhabha qtd. in Boer 43). Boer herself elaborates on this when she states that "Where contestation is possible, newness may occur" (Boer 52). This possibility for contestation is put forward as the main reason why viewing boundaries as space instead of dividing lines is more fruitful:

> Establishing a dividing line between the two domains, no space is left for contestation. Boundaries in the present study, by contrast, are to be imagined as spaces, not lines. Spaces that, in the sense of Derrida's parergon, can belong to either of the two domains they are supposed to separate, but in which encounters between the two are possible as well. (Boer 52)

Both the very idea of boundaries as spaces of negotiation and the notion of the newness which such negotiation might inspire will be central points for the discussion of the kinds of boundaries represented in Alexie's novels. Even though the ways in which some of the characters negotiate cityscapes can be read within the context of boundaries, those instances will be largely discussed in the third chapter.

Boundary Negotiation / Mobility

All of the four novels feature specific kinds of boundary negotiation with different kinds of mobility. That such movements can take many different forms may be clear by the introduction on boundary spaces provided above. Especially the boundary negotiations which

feature in the *Diary* and *Reservation Blues* focus around the notion of leaving the reservation, be it for short periods of time or longer. The implications of leaving the reservation are enormous. Alexie himself has stated that: "As an Indian the idea of the reservation is always there. You grow up firmly within borders" (Alexie in Peterson 155). That these borders are largely part of the reservation of the mind discussed in the previous chapter may be clear. It is difficult to leave the reservation when no one appears to do so, but also when others will not take it kindly when you do, when your very own kin will call you a traitor. Such sentiments can be found in *Reservation Blues,* when the band Coyote Springs leaves for a short while to play some gigs and to try to obtain a record contract with the ominously named Cavalry Records based in New York. When they return home, the fellow members of their tribe largely turn their backs to them. Thomas then has the following conversation with one of the older women of the tribe:

> 'But everyone liked us before'.
> 'Before you left the reservation, before you left'.
> 'But we still live here'.
> 'But you left. Once is enough.' (*RB* 179-180)

This behavior instills a kind of fear in the hearts of the members of Coyote Springs: "What if we screw up in New York and every Indian everywhere hates us? What if they won't let us on any reservation in the country?" (*RB* 214). They fear exile, an exile from both their home-community and the Indian community at large. Why this rejection of those who leave? Arnold from the *Diary* has some thoughts on this: "some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think that you *become* white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful" (*ATD* 131). Leaving the reservation, crossing the boundary, implies a forsaking of one's Indian-ness, a taint to the purity some think the reservation implies. Negotiating boundaries might inspire newness, perhaps metamorphosis. Usually some manner of change is necessary in order to function in spaces that carry different political implications. Arnold himself faces the same kind of rejection as Coyote Springs does, though he is less fearful of the exile from his home community this might entail. When Arnold decides to go to school at Reardan High, he already knows that this is a betrayal of some kind: "You can't just betray your tribe and then change your mind ten minutes later. I was on a one-way bridge. There was no way to turn around, even if I wanted to" (*ATD* 55). He does not appear to want to turn back – he has made up his mind, and chose to go where there would be hope and a

future. But he is right: his tribe does not take it kindly. There has been a long history of hostility between Reardan and the Spokane reservation, a history which naturally began with the power implications that exist between the Indian world and the white world, and has continued with smaller skirmishes which served to perpetuate hostility. Reardan High beat the Spokane reservation school at all kinds of matches, and Arnold knows well that when his father negotiates the road to Reardan, there is hostility lurking outside the borders of the reservation: "During one week when I was little, Dad got stopped three times for DWI: Driving While Indian" (*ATD* 46). Leaving the Spokane reservation school for Reardan, to some of Arnold's fellow tribal members means fraternizing with the enemy, with the white community which has caused the Spokanes nothing but trouble. Arnold's friend Rowdy goes as far as to call him a 'white lover', and spurns their friendship for a long time afterwards.

It is not just the hostility of the home community which makes it difficult to move beyond the borders of the reservation. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, boundaries are spaces which can be negotiated. Moving away from the reservation thus implies more than just a crossing of a specific border placed by the state – moving away is not one step across a threshold, it is a process, and a difficult one at that. When Coyote Springs goes to Seattle, their van does not want to go faster than forty miles an hour. Junior remarks: "This van don't want to go to Seattle, enit?" (*RB* 133). This is an ominous sign for Coyote Springs; even more so since they do not have a clue what the world outside the reservation has to offer them. They are traversing White Country, as opposed to Indian Country. Their fear is made concrete when they meet a white man on their way to Seattle, a white man whom Victor and Junior treat rudely almost straight away, despite the fact that the man treated the Indians politely enough: "On a reservation, this white man would have been all alone. In America, this white man was legion" (*RB* 128).

Arnold is also fully aware of the difficulties he will have to face if he decides to go to Reardan: " 'I want to go to Reardan', I said again. I couldn't believe I was saying it. For me, it seemed as real as saying, 'I want to fly to the moon' " (*ATD* 46). Here we are talking of simple mobility, of being able to move from A (the reservation) to B (Reardan High). As Arnold's father notes: " 'It's going to be hard to get you to Reardan. […] We can't afford to move there. And there ain't no school bus going to come out here' " (*ATD* 47). This shows that even though any student might be *allowed* to go to a better school, which is what Reardan is, simple infrastructure provides an obstacle which proves to be a challenge in itself. There is no school bus which comes to pick Arnold up, so he has to rely on his parents to bring him, or, if they are out of gas or when their car has broken down again, he has to hitchhike. This

means that on some days, he does not even manage to reach Reardan and has to go back home. His parents' lack of gas or a fully operational car (or his father's drinking habits), show that the political implications of the reservation (which are largely the cause of its poverty) extend beyond the physical 'borders' of the reservation and show the boundary as space at work. It is also the reservation of the mind which is alive in the boundary space, which makes Arnold doubt the very possibility of his moving to Reardan. He sees the students at Reardan as being "filled with hope. I don't know if hope is white. But I do know that hope for me is like some kind of mythical creature" (*ATD* 51). A journey to Reardan, to attend school there, is to travel into the Great Unknown.

While in *Reservation Blues* the story of Coyote Springs' border crossings are largely narratives of failure, Arnold makes it work, despite adversity. Perhaps it is because he was made for it – even before he planned to cross the border of the reservation physically, he was negotiating boundaries of the mind by means of his cartoons. "I draw because I want to talk to the world" (*ATD* 6), he says, as he explains how drawings, unlike language-based narrative, have the ability to transcend cultures. He does not only want to talk to the world, he also wants to create worlds for his friend Rowdy: "So I draw cartoons to make him happy, to give him other worlds to live in" (*ATD* 23). He is already thinking beyond the reservation, locating happiness *outside* it, be it in a physical or a mental sense. Eventually, even Rowdy sees that what Arnold is doing is opening new futures for him and that he does not necessarily need to become white in order to make it work. At the end of the book Rowdy tells Arnold that he was reading a book about old-time Indians, "about how we used to be nomadic" (*ATD* 229). He looked up 'nomadic' in the dictionary and this was the meaning he found: "people who move around, who keep moving, in search of food and water and grazing lands" (*ATD* 229). He tells Arnold he does not think the Indians on their reservation are nomadic anymore these days, except for Arnold. "You're an old-time nomad. […] You're going to keep moving all over the world in search of food and water and grazing land. That's pretty cool" (*ATD* 230). Rowdy has come to realize that movement does not have to imply a rejection of Indian identity – that in fact, it can be a very Indian thing to do. It is all about resources and quality of life – the reservation school lacked resources, so Arnold moved away to where he figured those learning resources could be found. Movement can indeed be fruitful, something which Alexie himself has commented upon as well: "As an Indian living in the US, I'm used to crossing real and imaginary boundaries, and have, in fact, enjoyed a richer and crazier and more magical life precisely because I have fearlessly and fearfully crossed all sorts of those barriers" (Alexie in Peterson 135).

When it comes to movement within boundary spaces, there is another important point to discuss: the presence of airplanes in the novels. Both *Reservation Blues* and *Flight* feature some dramatic instances in which their characters find themselves suspended in air. When Coyote Springs travels to New York by plane, especially Victor is very scared and his fear only increases when the plane "hit some nasty turbulence" (*RB* 219). This part can be read in the same way as the part where the van 'does not want to go to Seattle' – Coyote Springs is travelling into the unknown, and the turbulence functions as an indication that boundaries cannot be negotiated without any trouble. "Coyote Springs was flying to a place they had never been. They didn't know what would happen or how they would come back" (*RB* 219). Especially this last bit, 'how they would come back', implies a fear of change, of newness, which can happen during the negotiation of boundaries. Think of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, in which flight by and the fall from a plane instigates far-reaching metamorphosis. Coyote Springs cling to the eagle feathers Thomas brought them for the journey. They cling to their origin, their Indian-ness, whatever that may truly be. Still, flight is also represented as an idealized location. When Coyote Springs leaves after failing to obtain their record contract in New York, Chess muses: "[She] almost wanted to stay there in the airport forever. She had almost wanted to stay suspended between here and there, between location and destination" (*RB* 257). There is something definitely alluring to being neither here nor there, this nor that. After making a horrible decision, the decision to shoot innocent people in a bank, *Flight*'s protagonist Zits finds himself in the strange position of being placed inside other people's bodies, sharing their awareness and sometimes being able to handle on their behalves. During his third 'incarnation', he finds himself inside the body of a pilot, and feeling the exhilarating sensation of flight: "And my heaven is a small airplane that will forever fly. It will never land" (*Flight* 108). What does this mean? The state of flight implies a being nowhere, with *terra firma* as both memory and prospect. It is both the ultimate boundary space and something else entirely. One is temporarily free of the political implications place (as such, boundary spaces as well) necessarily brings with it, besides perhaps the implications of business class versus economy class. Space is ideologies (see Soja) and history, space requires us to be active participants of society and community. Coyote Springs is both afraid to face exile from the reservation and has been disappointed by the world outside the reservation. Zits' entire world has consisted of rejection, pain and disappointment. This influences the characters' attitude towards boundaries and the possibility of crossing it. However, the location of the airplane seems to provide an altogether different alternative. Suspended in air, passivity reigns. Someone else (the pilot Zits temporarily

inhabits knows how to operate the plane) is in control. This says something interesting about the very state of being ‘in transit’, on the move: both starting point and destination carry frightening implications of possible change, while the airplane seems to imply an existential limbo which both frightens and allures.

Analysing the Other Across Boundaries

In chapter 1 the implications of thinking of the reservation as a space of purity / authenticity have been discussed. The us versus them dichotomy this instigates also perpetuates an image of boundaries as divisive lines with a definite inside versus outside. As Andreas Huyssen has noted, “The more diaspora and nation share the perception of loss [loss can be seen as the state of being of Indians], the more they will both insist on safeguarding identity and fortifying their borders, thus ossifying the past and closing themselves off to alternative futures” (Huyssen in Baronian et al 86) – these alternative futures can be interpreted as Bhabha’s idea of ‘newness’. This is a perception which truly treats borders as lines, the ultimate physical representation of dichotomy, rigid rather than fluid or functioning as a space of negotiation. Even if this ‘closing off’ is to a large degree artificial (due to power implications from without, etcetera), it perpetuates an image of those residing outside as Other, outside and potentially hostile. In the case of the Indians this has of course to do with the notions of sovereignty which have also been previously discussed, so that the very idea of borders of the Indian territories must, politically speaking, be firm in order for it to be undeniably clear where the white American territory ends and the Indian territory begins, with all its political implications, specific laws and treaties.

Even so, if we decide to look at boundaries as spaces, fruitful encounters might occur, which can then lead to an analysis of the other across any divide, be it culturally, geographically, ethnically, religiously, or economically. Especially Zits is interesting in this respect, seeing as he has the unique opportunity to inhabit different bodies and as such, the opportunity to move beyond the ethnical/cultural boundary which his own body usually posits (more on which below). Zits, himself the son of an Indian father and Irish-American mother, can (despite his appearance which would have him designated as Indian) negotiate the boundary between White American and American Indian by ‘inhabiting’ the different body-spaces. He is a federal agent repressing early Indian activism, a young boy in an Indian camp which is about to be attacked by the cavalry, an Indian tracker working for the US Army, a pilot who taught a friendly terrorist how to fly, and finally his own drunk, homeless father. In the process, he both gains a perspective of the futility of the cycle of violence the individual

groups appear to be caught in (this new perspective can be seen as the particular newness which can be gained when negotiating boundaries). Each group commits violent acts in the name of justice, and wants him to join their righteous battles. Zits realizes that justice, or rather, revenge, is futile in the long run. Boer says the following: "cross-cultural representations are part of an interactive process that problematizes deeply entrenched ideas about one's own identity with respect to that of others" (Boer 19). When Zits was about to shoot the people in the bank, he felt righteous – he was dealing out justice, it was him against the world, a world which has wronged him and people like him time and again. His cross-cultural journey opens his eyes to the fact that in the end, retribution does not solve anything but only opens the way for counter-actions from the other camp, and this changes his perspective on both himself and the world around him. Such perspectives on cycles of violence and the futility of violent retribution are, naturally, still extremely valid in our time and age, when the white world views its own celebrating of the death of Osama Bin Laden as justified, whilst it criticizes the Arab world for being barbaric when it shows similar sentiments. It is all about perspective and what side you are on. Arnold from the *Diary* notes a similar thing after he had some profound experiences at Reardan. At first he thinks the white kids at Reardan are "beautiful and smart and epic" (*ATD* 50). But most important of all, "They were filled with hope" (*ATD* 50). He analyses them across a boundary, and thinks he can never belong because he is Indian. But this world image is changed when the kids and teachers at Reardan largely come to accept him, and he tells one of his teachers who bullies him: " 'I used to think the world was broken down by tribes', I said. 'By black and white. By Indian and white. But I know that isn't true. The world is only broken into two tribes: The people who are assholes and the people who are not" (*ATD* 176). That is clarity for you.

Cultural Cross-Dressing / The Body as Boundary

Fascination with the cultural other might inspire one to want to be like the other. When this mostly takes the form of taking on the physical appearance of a cultural other by ways of dress or make-up, one may speak of cultural cross-dressing. Cultural cross-dressing, according to Boer, "elicits fantasy" (Boer 143) and "conveys a sense of freedom from boundaries" (Boer 143). It is important to note that this notion of freedom from boundaries, though perhaps wished for, can never be absolute. The very nature of cultural cross-dressing implies the impossibility of 'passing' and, as Boer says, "In truly post-modern fashion, the fiction is overt while the desired fictionality is offered as available. Rather than the wholesale endorsement of the other identity, it is the *desirability* to 'be' this other […] that is absolutely

necessary" (Boer 154). Desire is central, as are the power-implications the cultural cross-dressing implies. "Cultural cross-dressing is deeply implicated in unequal relations of power, where the cultural 'other' does not call the shots and has little or no recourse to influencing the process of being represented. Cultural cross-dressing […] is not reversible" (Boer 162). This can be related to Huggan's ideas of the postcolonial exotic, since he shows that the inequality in power relations that exoticism implies is masked by "exoticist rhetoric of fetishised otherness and sympathetic identification" (Huggan 14).

Alexie's novels feature different white characters who have an obvious wish to be Indian. It is important to note that indeed, this could never work the other way around. Some Indians might wish to be white(r) (the young John Smith from *Indian Killer* tries to rub the darkness from his skin), but this will never be accepted, not even as a kind of 'charming' exoticism. Indians (and people from other ethnic groups) dress like white folks all the time, but this is not deemed exotic or charming, it is rather a form of necessary conformity to function within a white, globalized world, where globalization and western capitalism are the norm. Betty and Veronica from *Reservation Blues* wear more turquoise jewellery than any Native and are obviously enchanted with the exoticness of being Indian. When Coyote Springs fails at their audition for Cavalry Records, Betty and Veronica obtain a contract, singing Indian songs and being presented as (rather pale) Indians. Their whiteness makes them accessible and less frightening, while their supposed Indian aspects make them exotic and intriguing. This idea of white cultural cross-dressers taking the place where an Indian perhaps ought to be is also very much present in *Indian Killer*. The obviously white writer Jack Wilson states that he is a Shilshomish Indian and even believes it himself, even though there is hardly any evidence for his claim. It is actually rather unlikely, and probably based on his desire to belong to an ethnic group which he admires. Still, his books feature on the reading list of a university course on Native American Literature, while there are no books by 'real' Indians on it, a fact which angers the Indian student Marie Polatkin. Wilson dances around his house in a Powwow outfit and visits a local bar which is mostly frequented by Indians, though he does not appear to realize that the Indians do not take it kindly when others pretend to be Indian (they call him 'Casper the friendly ghost' and make fun of him). Also, the professor teaching the Native American Literature class, Dr Clarence Mather, is a white man wearing a bolo-tie and sporting a pony-tail, who prides himself about being 'adopted' into an Indian tribe. Marie detests him and the fact that he thinks he is an authority on Native Literature – she thinks Native literature ought to be taught by an Indian, just like women's literature ought to be taught by a woman and black literature by a black person. Of course this

can be seen as a form of exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, a very essentialist stance which has its own problematic political issues. Still, the very act of cultural cross-dressing can never be seen as separate from the power structures which enable such cross-dressing, and the importance of such an act to those represented. Frantz Fanon has described the importance of knowing what cultural identity others would ascribe to you. Such behavior is never innocent.

What makes one Indian? This is a crucial yet seemingly unanswerable question, and one especially *Indian Killer* definitely raises. While Marie is angered by the likes of Wilson and Mather who perform their own kinds of Indian-ness in a way that is almost oblivious of the political implications of such behavior, she finds a certain kind of attachment to the character of John Smith. John looks every bit the classical Indian, the warrior-hero, tall, dark and handsome with long hair and a serious expression. But he has been raised by white people. While his blood might be as Indian as Marie's, he does not have the experience of living on a reservation (which Mathers claims he has) or a record tracing his Indian heritage to a specific tribe or tribes (which Wilson professes to have, flimsy as it may be). He is immensely troubled, which probably stems from his lack of knowledge of his heritage and his place in the world. He is ashamed of this when he meets other Indians, and simply tells them he is Lakota. He is not found out when someone asks him if he can speak his language, because it is rather normal that many Indians these days do not. While John's statement that he is Lakota can be seen as untruthful, he also partially barred from being a son to his white parents because of his overly Indian appearance. The novel relays the specific moment when John realizes he is not the same color as his parents, even though he wants to be. He tries to rub off the brown of his skin, every shade of it. His body makes him Indian, while he lacks the knowledge and experience needed to make that identity his. Still, John's case will not be seen as cultural cross-dressing, simply because he can lay claim to a sort of Indian identity – an identity based on loss and the history of babies stolen from Indian parents. His cultural schizophrenia is very much a result from his inherent Indian-ness, even though it is difficult (if not impossible) for him to lay claim to this stolen identity.

The body itself may also be seen as a space, something on which Jean Luc Nancy, among others, has written:

> Bodies aren't some kind of fullness or filled space (space is filled everywhere): they are *open* space, implying, in some sense, a space more properly *spacious* than spatial, what could also be called a *place*. Bodies are places of existence, and nothing exists without a place, a *there*, a 'here', a 'here is', for a *this*. (Nancy 15).

From this idea of bodies as space it is a tiny step to bodies as boundary space, a space which in a sense might change by its movement. This can be seen in the case of Arnold, who moves to Reardan and notices how he himself changes along the way: “Zitty and lonely, I woke up on the reservation as an Indian, and somewhere on the road to Reardan, I became something less than Indian. And once I arrived at Reardan, I became something less than less than less than Indian” (*ATD* 83). It is interesting that he says ‘less than Indian’, and not more white. He obviously finds it difficult to be Indian in the space of Reardan, though his very body, despite its movement, makes sure that he cannot be anything else. He looks Indian, he sounds Indian, he *is* Indian, no matter if he would like to change this. All he can do is keep a low profile about his Indian identity, and become something ‘less than Indian’. This leads to a specific kind of feeling of schizophrenia: “I felt like two different people inside of one body. No, I felt like a magician slicing myself in half, with Junior living on the north side of the Spokane River and Arnold living on the south” (*ATD* 61). On the reservation he is known as Junior, like so many other Indian kids. In Reardan, he is Arnold, the only Indian besides the school mascot. The same sentiment can be seen in the name of one of the homeless Indians Coyote Springs meet in the city: “I’m Eddie Tap Water. Used to be Spring Water. But I’m Urban Indian now” (*RB* 150). Again the character’s name is used as an illustration of his cultural schizophrenia. In any case, Arnold’s body, like the body of anybody else, can be read as a moving boundary, a racial boundary, which carries with it the implications of history and the reservation space, which can be traced by the pimples on his skin (Zits from *Flight* notes how only poor kids have to be zitty these days), the cheap clothes he wears, his very complexion and ethnical physical traits.

The Beauty and Ugliness of Boundary Negotiation

Reservation Blues’ Coyote Springs does not gain anything from moving away from the reservation, except perhaps being exiled from their communities as traitors and failures. The record company, Cavalry Records, shows them once again that for Indians there is not much hope outside the reservation.

In *Indian Killer*, the killer figure moves across invisible boundaries to kidnap and sometimes murder whites. Who this killer is and what his motives are remains unclear until the end of the novel, though it is implied that this killer is the embodiment of the Ghost Dance, the Dance which would make sure the whites would all die and leave the land to the Indians. *Indian Killer* is a book which drips anger and desperation. The killer’s activities inspire anger in the community, which causes violent skirmishes between Indians and whites.

Three young white men move around town wearing masks and using baseball bats on random Indians (a young student, a homeless couple), while three young Indians move in a parallel sense, attacking random white people. The anger and fear is palpable throughout the book, and there is no room for a solution. All there is in the way of newness is a higher degree of hate and mistrust across the ethnic boundaries.

After this novel, Alexie seems to have regained a measure of hope and his boundary negotiations become more fruitful. In *Flight*, Zits' negotiation of bodyscapes brings him new perspectives and shows him the futility of the kind of violent retribution which was also expressed in *Indian Killer*. The *Diary*'s Arnold has trouble adapting to his new situation at first, but eventually learns that it is not so much the division between 'tribes', or ethnic groups that matters, but how we deal with these divisions and the negotiation of the boundaries which appear to divide us but which are also contact spaces. It is not either/or, but and. Alexie himself has noted:

> You can still maintain your tribal ties and your culture while also having a much broader worldview [...] I have these two amazing cultures to choose from – this sort of world culture / American culture and then my own tribal background. They're both filled with magic, and I'm angry at the people who taught me I had to choose between them. (Alexie in Peterson 165)

The world is not made up of lines or dichotomies, but of spaces we can choose to negotiate, opening up the possibility for fruitful encounters and newness, new perspectives. As Arnold muses: "If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing" (*ATD* 129).

When establishing the negotiability of boundaries as spaces, it is a small step to seeing the futility and unproductiveness of seeing boundaries as firm lines, dividing two camps. The us versus them dichotomy such a view of borders implies inspires fear and a kind of hatred. Of course, such fear and hatred is not based on nothing, but especially *Flight* and the *Diary* show that when you take the trouble to try to negotiate boundaries, it can pay off. Nevertheless, this should not go without an awareness of the political issues which firmed the boundaries one decides to cross, as in the case of cultural cross-dressing.

Chapter 3: Away from the Reservation; Towns and Cityscapes

I've been relocated and given a room
In a downtown hotel called The Tomb
And they gave me a job and cut my hair
I trip on rats when I climb the stairs
I get letters from my cousins on the rez
They wonder when they'll see me next
But I've got a job and a landlady
She calls me chief, she calls me crazy
("Urban Indian Blues", RB *220)*

I think how when I left the reservation
my entire world, which had been brown, became white
but this is New York City and everybody is brown
but this is America, too, and everybody is still
white, but then again, I know America is not white
exactly, but it is white inexactly, without
color, needing this or that blood to stain its hands.
("Lover of Maps", Summer of Black Widows)

Even if the reservation space is still very much a central place in Native American literature, these days only a rather small percentage of Indians still live on reservations. As Alexie said in an interview with Dave Weich in 2007: "Almost 70 percent of Natives live off reservations now. The flight from the reservation just keeps happening" (Alexie in Peterson 171). Meredith James even estimated the percentage of Indians living off the reservations at a higher 80 percent. With such a high percentage of Indians living off the reservations, it is striking to see that most programs constructed to deal with issues Indians face, such as alcohol abuse, general poverty, loss of attachment to culture and lack of proper health care, are mainly aimed at reservation Indians. Such issues cannot all be restricted to any specific location – think of, for example, how Indians would be genetically more susceptible to diabetes, or how, when they move away from the reservation, they often trade one kind of poverty for another. Caryn Trombino quotes the 2004 Budget Hearings, as put to paper by Kay Culbertson: "[in] 2003, Urban Indian Health Programs received 1,12% of the total Indian Health Service Budget, although Urban Indians […] constituted 66% of the total American Indian Population" (Culbertson in Trombino 131). Such issues show that the so-called 'urban Indian' is not as visible as the reservation Indian and that this visibility ought to be increased. As such, it would seem crucial that Native literatures also represent the urban Indian, something Alexie himself has been vocal about on occasion, though his attitude towards the notion of the urban Indian has changed remarkably over time. In Alexie's collection of short stories from

1993, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, we find the following lines: "When I got back to the reservation, my family wasn't surprised to see me. They'd been expecting me back since the day I left for Seattle. There's an old Indian poet who said that Indians can reside in the city, but they can never live there. That's as close to the truth as any of us can get" (*LRT* 187). This view has obviously changed, seeing as more recently, Alexie has expressed a more positive sentiment regarding the fact that fewer Indians reside on reservations. In a 2003 interview with Matt Dellinger he said: "I left the reservation. And I encourage everyone else to leave" (Alexie in Peterson 127). Alexie has stated that indeed his views on the matter have changed, due to events such as 9/11, which made him increasingly suspicious of tradition:

> I was much more fundamental then [in his earlier writing]. What changed me was September 11th [2001]: I am now desperately trying to let go of the idea of being right, the idea of making decisions based on imaginary tribes. The terrorists were flying planes into the buildings because they thought they were right and they had special knowledge, and we continue to react. And we will be going to war in Iraq soon because we think we have special knowledge – and we don't. We are making these decisions not based on any moral or ethical choice, but simply on the basis of power and money and ancient traditions that are full of shit, so I am increasingly suspicious of the word 'tradition', whether in political or literary terms. (Alexie qtd. in Grassian, 5-6)

Alexie's representation of Indians who venture outside the reservations or spend their lives in the city has obviously changed as well. How can they try to maintain an Indian identity of any kind? What is the view of the reservation of these Indians, and how can they become successful and pursue and find their own American Dream?

Authenticity in the City

The percentage of Indians living away from the reservations is especially remarkable when considered in connection to the notion of the reservation as a space of Indian authenticity and as Indian ancestral lands. This view of authenticity on the reservations has to a large degree been informed by romantic notions of the Indian and his/her spiritual connection to the land, romantic images which, according to Meredith James, "only serve to perpetuate ideas that Indians are merely extensions of the natural, embedded in the landscape, and frozen in a

particular moment in history" (James 10). That this idea of Native authenticity problematizes the possibility of the articulation of Indian identity for those residing away from these authentic home-spaces is made clear by Arnold Krupat when he states that: "Considerations of this sort would make indigenousness as defined by literal relation to the landscape more difficult to achieve for those Native writers [I would add, for all Natives] who grew up in the cities, or far from the home-places of their people" (Krupat 12). So if the connection to a specific location which is generally deemed a crucial factor in the establishment of an Indian ethnic identity is missing to a large extent, what else is there that may constitute such an identity, both for oneself and others?

In the chapter on the reservation spaces, the importance of the possibility to live as a tribe was also mentioned. While Alexie showed that his reservation Indians cluster together in very specific ways (by resenting everyone who tries to leave, for example), the same can be said of the urban Indians that are represented in *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, mainly. Especially the streets of Seattle, which feature in both novels, are swarming with groups of homeless Indians, some of whom are also drunks. *Reservation Blues* shows how Coyote Springs visits Seattle for a gig and Victor, homesick Victor, seems to feel better as soon as he made a connection with the drunken homeless Indians they encounter on the streets. It is this idea of connection which is important, and which also features in *Indian Killer*: "Despite all their pain and suffering, these [homeless, urban] Indians held together, held onto one another" (*IK* 377). It is a matter of need, a need for a sense of community which may then inspire a sense of self, as part of this community, in this case the Indian community. Outside the space of the reservation, the urban Indians create an entirely new kind of community, a new kind of tribe: that of the urban Indians. As Marie Polatkin notes, these homeless urban Indians were all "outcasts from their tribes. They were forced to create their own urban tribe. [...] But, somehow, most every urban Indian still held closely to his or her birth tribe. Marie was Spokane, would always be Spokane. But she was also an urban Indian, an amalgamation that included over two hundred tribes in the same Seattle area" (*IK* 38). This idea of needing a sense of a pan-tribal Indian community within the space of the city comes forward in *Reservation Blues* as well: "Every Indian is a potential lover, friend, or relative dancing over the horizon, only a little beyond sight. Indians need each other that much; they need to be that close, tying themselves to each other and closing their eyes against the storms" (*RB* 151). This shows the 'us versus them' sentiment which is still prevalent in both these early novels, in *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*. This specific dichotomy can also be seen as a way to maintain a sense of an Indian self in the large blend of cultures and ethnicities that is the

cityscape. The notion of constituting a self against a cultural Other is, of course, a concept which has been extensively developed within the field of postcolonial theory. Especially in the cities, outside of the defining boundaries of the reservation space (an equation of ‘exotic dark looks + reservation space = Indian’ could qualify here), there is the danger of losing oneself by mistaken definition from without. Alexie himself has commented on this idea of defining ethnicity in cityscapes: “I know we disappear in New York. [...] So I guess the first issue is to make sure that Indians are a visible and active part of the culture there. But that might be impossible. No one’s an active, visible culture there. Everyone is so blended” (Alexie in Peterson 106). This idea comes forward very clearly in *Reservation Blues* when Coyote Springs enters a bar in New York and the owner says: “ ‘Shit,[...] they don’t look nothing like those Indians in the movies. They look Puerto Rican to me” (*RB* 239). Such confusion does not only happen when two people of different ethnicities face one another – outside the context of a reservation or perhaps an Indian gathering like a powwow, even Indians amongst themselves might experience this kind of ethnic confusion. Such is shown in a short story by Alexie titled “War Dances” (the same title as that of the collection of short stories and poems to which this story belongs), when his protagonist is in a Seattle hospital he sees another Indian man, but is unsure about his ethnicity:

> And then I saw him, another Native man, leaning against a wall near the gift shop. Well, maybe he was Asian; lots of those in Seattle. He was a small man, pale brown, with muscular arms and a soft belly. Maybe he was Mexican, which is really a kind of Indian, too, but not the kind that I needed. It was hard to tell sometimes what people were. Even brown people guessed at the identity of other brown people. (*WD* 35)

That Alexie’s Indians themselves are often aware of this ethnic confusion is shown when, for instance, Coyote Springs is about to board a plane to New York and a squabble ensues because Victor does not want to get on the plane: “The crowd at the gate stared at Coyote Springs. They worried those loud dark-skinned people might be hijackers. Coyote Springs did their best not to look Middle Eastern” (*RB* 218). Such ethnic confusion can be seen as an expression of a specific point of view based on racial assumptions – after all, how often does one wonder about the ethnicity of white people in American cities, purely based on appearance? Do we easily start to wonder whether they are American or Swedish, French or Dutch? American cities, blended as they may be, politically still remain largely ‘white’ places, it seems. At least this is the sentiment we get from both *Reservation Blues* and *Indian*

Killer. *Indian Killer*'s Reggie Polatkin even considers this idea literally: "he knew every city was a city of white men" (*IK* 409). This way of thinking perpetuates the division between Indians and white people, a division which *Indian Killer* shows as being based on mutual feelings of fear, as has also been discussed briefly in chapter 2. A young Indian student has been beaten up by three white young men, and when the police interrogates him he says:

> 'Yeah, I was afraid, but I'm afraid most of the time, you know? How would you feel if a white guy like you got dropped into the middle of a black neighbourhood, like Compton, California, on a Saturday night?'
> 'I'd be very afraid'.
> 'And that's exactly how I feel living in Seattle. Hell, I feel that way living in the United States. Indians are outnumbered, Officer'.
> (*IK* 188)

Outnumbered, largely unseen, scared. The Indians in both *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer* are out and about in a white world they largely perceive as potentially hostile.

For *Flight*'s protagonist Zits things are very complicated – he does not really seem to belong to any group of people, to any community or family. At the beginning of the novel he says that he knows about anything about Native American history: "I know about famous chiefs, broken treaties, the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Indian wars of the nineteenth century. I know all this stuff because it makes me feel more like a real Indian. Maybe I can't live like an Indian, but I can learn how real Indians used to live and how they're supposed to live now" (*Flight* 12). If he cannot have the experience of being Indian, he can at least have the knowledge. Unlike the Indian characters in *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, Zits does not appear to be focusing on the fact that he moves around in a white society. He is bothered by its history, which caused pain and suffering to the Indian community to which he feels he, to some extent, belongs, but he has no issues about bonding with contemporary white people. Zits reckons Officer Dave, the police officer who has picked Zits up on numerous occasions, his friend, even if the man is a large white guy. Zits says: "Good cops are lifeguards on the shores of Lake Fucked. Like Officer Dave. He's never said much about his life, but I can tell he's scarred. And he knows I'm scarred, too. The wounded always recognize the wounded. We can smell each other" (*Flight* 18). There are other ways to bond than ethnicity. You can also bond by the measure of your pain, by shared sentiments. This is what also brings Zits to the white kid Justice, who speaks to his hatred and indeed his

need for a kind of justice. To a large extent though, it is Zits against the world and the color or ethnicity of this world does not matter: “I measure men by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, and I find all of them are assholes” (*Flight* 27). This leads to the defining scene in the bank, when Zits looks around at the people he is about to shoot in the name of his modern Ghost Dance: “Fifty or sixty people are here with me: men, women, and children of many different colors. I hear four or five different languages being spoken. And I guess these people have many different religions. But none of that matters. I know these people must die so my mother and father can return” (*Flight* 34-35). Zits Indian-ness is defined by both his knowledge of the past and by the way he wishes to distinguish himself from the rest of the world by performing an ancient Indian ritual in a modern way. As such it is not his perception of the division between Indians and whites which must be changed, but his perception of historical events and the long history of violent retaliation it inspired.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, there is also a remarkable change in attitude towards Indian-ness outside the reservation. At first, upon arrival in Reardan, Arnold still feels his Indian ethnicity makes him destined to lose, and that his Indian identity, or at least the aspects of it that would be deemed negative, which happened to be the more ‘visible’ ones, like his poverty, his lack of a proper education thus far and his reservation accent, is something he needs to hide in order to be if not accepted, at least left alone. During the course of the novel he realizes that it is possible to be friends with the white kids at Reardan, and that they can indeed be valuable additions to his life; that he can succeed at Reardan High. An important difference with regard to *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer* discussed above is that in Reardan, there are no other Indians, except for the school mascot (which happens to be a rather stereotypical image of an Indian). There is no group of Indians with whom Arnold can bond in order to form a sort of extra-reservational tribe – as such, he is able to see a different, more interesting division: the division between the assholes and kind people of the world. Being Indian, and authentic, in the end does not mean much to Arnold. He knows he is Indian and he knows others are not, and takes that for a fact. His identity formation has always been rather individualistic in that sense; he feels connected to his family and his friend Rowdy, but has other than that always been something of an outsider in his tribe, mostly due to his bookishness and somewhat awkward appearance. As such, his tribal affiliations are something from which he largely disconnects himself in favor of his own future prospects. He defines himself rather by his individualistic traits rather than his ethnic traits, much like Alexie himself said on occasion: “I’m no longer a reservation Indian. I don’t want to be extraordinary anymore, or exotic” (Alexie in Peterson 156).

Even though she has only a small part to play in *Indian Killer*, I felt this discussion would be incomplete without the mention of the old lady named Carlotta Lott whom John Smith comes across only once, on the streets of Seattle. She is a feisty old woman, and seems to be able to live an authentic Indian live *within* the space of the city. This seems to be the only appearance of such a person. She tells John:

> Me, I've got lots of places to stay around here. All these white people think I'm homeless. But I ain't homeless. I'm Duwamish Indian. You see all this land around here [...]. All of this, the city, the water, the mountains, it's all Duwamish land. Has been for thousands of years. I belong here, cousin. I'm the landlady. And all these white people, even the rich ones living up in those penthouses, they're the homeless ones. Those white people are a long way from home, don't you think? Long way from E-u-r-o-p-e. (*IK* 251)

Carlotta Lott seems like a strong person, who knows what she is about. Still, this passage carries a hint of tragedy, of lived nostalgia. Even though Carlotta may say it is Duwamish land and she may very well treat it as such, still the thought of this old woman roaming the streets of Seattle like it was Indian land reeks of a sad kind of delusion. After all, these are no longer Indian lands. Carlotta lives on the streets of a modern city, where skyscrapers are being constructed, where indeed, the white people are also at home. She might still see them as Europeans a long way from home, but I would say that the one who is far from home is she herself. She is a long way from home in both a temporal and spatial sense. Her authentic way of life has sprung forth from a deluded mind, even if this mind seems strong.

Indian Migrants

Interestingly, the idea of urban Indians is often connected to concepts concerning migrancy. The reservation Indian, when moving outside the reservation boundaries, is an immigrant on United States territory, moving from the Indian Nation onto the American, even if such constructions are politically problematic to such a degree that one may wonder what it means exactly when one speaks of the Indian Nation within the United States. Alexie himself has stated that he feels that he is "an immigrant into the US" (Alexie in Peterson 147).

While the idea that Indians look like other migrants/ethnicities (like Puerto Ricans) has already been discussed briefly, there are, of course, many more implications which cling to the notion of feeling like you are a migrant, or being perceived as such. An interesting

moment from the *Diary* springs to mind. Arnold tries to deal with the hostility the older guys at Reardan show him – they call him names and make racist jokes. After they make a really bad racist joke, Arnold decides he has to do something, and punches one of the biggest guys, Roger, in the face, exactly according to what Arnold calls "The Unofficial and Unwritten (but you better follow them or you're going to get beaten twice as hard) Spokane Indian Rules of Fisticuffs", which starts with "1. If somebody insults you, then you have to fight him" (*ATD* 61). However, Roger does not react the way Arnold expects him to (i.e., by beating the crap out of Arnold). Instead, he reacts with unbelief: "I can't believe you punched me" (*ATD* 65). The guys think Arnold is crazy for wanting to fight Roger, which then confuses Arnold: "I had followed the rules of fighting. I had behaved exactly the way I was supposed to behave. But these white boys had ignored the rules. In fact, they followed a whole other set of mysterious rules where people apparently DID NOT GET INTO FISTFIGHTS" (*ATD* 65-66). As is the case when migrating to a new country, there are different rules to adhere to, different moral and behavioral codes, which people assume you *know*, and which they *expect* you to act by. Interestingly, the original inhabitants of the United States have become the odd ducks in the pond.

Arnold is aware of his odd position, but eventually chooses to see himself as yet another migrant into the United States, in search of the American Dream: "There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream" (*ATD* 217). He is one of them, and even though migration has its hardships, he knows it is possible for migrants to succeed, so he will.

Another interesting aspect of the migrant-position of the Indians is that not only are they the 'odd ones' who need to assimilate to the Western-European culture of the United States, they have to endure the same sort of hatred migrants often have to deal with. At a specific moment in *Indian Killer*, some young white guys with masks beat up a homeless Indian couple. The leader of the aggressors yells: "Go back to where you belong, man! [...] Get the fuck out of our country, man!" (*IK* 215). Isn't that ironic? Indeed America is no longer Indian Country. But where then, do these Indians supposedly 'belong'? It is as if there is a strange sort of historical amnesia going on concerning the position of Native Americans. It may be clear that America will never be 'Indian Country'; perhaps this is the reason why this kind of amnesia is being largely allowed to happen in favor of the construction of America as a western nation with a 'noble' past devoid of the blemishes of colonialism and genocide.

A View on the Rez / Utopias

The Indians residing outside the reservations have specific views on the reservation space, which can be read as largely informed by their respective attitudes to their current locations. In both *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, we see the idea of the reservation as a lost home space, a place where even those Indians currently living in the cities ought to live. As *Reservation Blues*' Chess sees the homeless Indians roaming the streets of Seattle, she "knew those old Indians were a long way from home, trapped by this city and its freeway entrances and exits" (*RB* 150). The idea of being trapped which is immediately followed with an image of freeway entrances and exits is curious – it seems to imply a certain amount of freedom of movement, but it should be noted that this specific kind of movement is part and parcel of the cityscape, which is apparently difficult to navigate for those Indians who, in intricate ways, do not truly belong there, and thus have no way to get back home, to the reservation. This idea of the reservation as a central home space for Indians has for years been a recurring trope in Native American literature. As Bevis (among others) explains, in many Native American novels, an Indian character "recoils from a white world in which the mobile Indian individual finds no meaning and as if by instinct, comes home..." (Bevis in Grassian 11), and this home is the reservation. The big difference is that in these other novels by Native American authors, these Indian characters often do find their way back to the reservation. Alexie does not give his characters that 'satisfaction' – *Reservation Blues*' Thomas Builds-the-Fire and the sisters Chess and Checkers, while always worried about perhaps not being able to go back to the reservation, end up leaving the Spokane rez because they realize there is nothing for them there. They decide to move to Spokane to try their luck there: "Spokane was only sixty miles from the reservation, but Thomas figured it was no closer than the moon" (*RB* 252). They move away, with perhaps a little hope, but their adventures away from the reservation had, until then, not been successful, so they move with a degree of trepidation. As they earlier mused about Manhattan, "There were only a few ways to die on the reservation but a few thousand new and exciting ways in Manhattan" (*RB* 231). In *Indian Killer*, we meet several characters who ache to go home to their reservations, but lack the funds to go back or find themselves unable to leave the city for other reasons. Estranged from their former homes, they wander the streets, dreaming of the way things were, idealizing the reservation space.

This idea of idealizing the reservation is shown blatantly by the character of John Smith in *Indian Killer*. John has been adopted by white parents and knows nothing of his heritage – this is posited as the main cause for his confusion and, finally, his madness. In his mind he creates an idealized, utopian reservation space, in which his Indian mother decided to

keep him and love him. The image of the reservation he constructs does not cohere with the image of the reservation construed by Alexie on several occasions: “There is enough food, plenty of books to read, and a devoted mother” (*IK* 43). People like Marie Polatkin, who grew up in a reservation, know the reality of hunger and book burnings. Fátima Vieira discusses the four characteristics according to which the concept of the utopia has been defined over time. The fourth on her list is especially interesting (and Vieira also deems it the most important one) when looking at John’s utopian reservation: “the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in (utopia is then seen as a matter of attitude). [...] Utopia is then to be seen as a matter of attitude, as a kind of reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives” (Vieira in Claeys 6). This shows clearly that John’s imagined reservation says more about his attitude towards his current situation / location than anything else. Because his estrangement to the people around him (who even love him and have the best intentions for him, like his parents) and from his Indian past hurts so much, he seeks refuge in the imagined space of the utopian reservation. It is also important to note that though Vieira emphasizes the idea that the act of imagining utopias has the function of dreaming up “alternative and better ways of organizing society”, she also makes clear that the very notion of the utopia “should not be confused with the idea of perfection” (Vieira in Claeys 7), though it is by nature speculative. What makes John’s utopian reservation problematic is that the space of the reservation is not non-existent, like utopian spaces usually are. The fact that its reality is altogether different from John’s dream vision, and also the notion that his perfect reservation life is based on a different course of historical events that have already taken place (his mother would not have given him up), gives his view of the reservation not the kind of hopeful imaginativeness that usually clings to utopias, but rather a kind of quiet despair reserved for the blatantly impossible, a view contradicted by history and reality. For John, there will be no better home than the one he has.

Meredith James also discusses the issue of what she calls ‘Indian survivor’s guilt’: “Many characters who leave the reservation to pursue the ‘American Dream’ often feel as though they have abandoned family and friends” (James 81). She sees this in *Indian Killer*’s Marie Polatkin. The ‘emigrating’ character’s tribal affiliations at some point do no longer weigh up against the need to pursue a dream of success, and to pursue this dream also means accepting the sense of guilt that comes with it. This sentiment can also be read in the *Diary*, when Arnold, after finishing his first year at Reardan with great success, visits the graves of

his grandmother, his father's friend Eugene and his sister Mary, and cries for his lost loved ones but also for his tribe:

> I was crying because I knew five or ten or fifteen more Spokanes would die during the next year, and that most of them would die because of booze. I cried because so many of my fellow tribal members were slowly killing themselves and I wanted them to live. I wanted them to get strong and get sober and get the hell off the rez. It's a weird thing. Reservations were meant to be prisons, you know? Indians were supposed to move onto reservations and die. We were supposed to disappear. But somehow or another, Indians have forgotten that reservations were meant to be death camps. I wept because I was the only one who was brave and crazy enough to leave the rez. I was the only one with enough arrogance. (*ATD* 216-217)

Arnold has done it, but he cannot help everyone, he cannot *make* them leave the reservation to find happiness. There is frustration there, and perhaps not so much guilt but more a kind of desperate resignation that the fates of all those other Indians are not in his hands.

The Key to Success / Irony

For both Indians who have come from the reservation and those who have resided outside of the reservation all their lives, there is a crucial question: what is the key to success? How can Indians 'make' it in the United States? And what does this require of their sense of identity? Alexie has already located an essential existential problem in the fact that in the eyes of many Indians, success is tied to whiteness: "A lot of people are so dysfunctional, to the point they believe that any Indian striving for success becomes white, that failure is an American Indian attribute. They've internalized the colonialism so much, they've internalized the stereotype so much, that they think any effort towards success is white" (Alexie in Peterson 77). Becoming successful, or simply striving for success, would then mean a denunciation of one's Indian identity. Interestingly, Phil Sheridan and George Wright, agents of Cavalry Records from New York, fax the following to their boss when Coyote Springs comes to audition for a record contract: that they want to "see what they [the band] can do outside their home environment" (*RB* 190). Victor has Robert Johnson's magical guitar, which pretty much plays itself, and is cocky about his supposed skills, but when the band has to audition, the guitar fails him, actually rebels against his touch, writhing and falling to the floor. Why does this happen? It is not made explicit in the novel, but I read it as a rebellion against the possibility

that Coyote Springs would become famous and lose themselves in the process. Sheridan and Wright had it all thought out – they would market the Indians, emphasizing their exotic appeal, make them easy to consume for an Indian-hungry audience. Sheridan and Wright, obviously named after the historical cavalry officers who fought the Indians, belong to a white world which is, in *Reservation Blues*, generally represented as hostile and potentially damaging to Indians. The magic helped Coyote Springs create their own Indian songs, but it would not aid them in their spiritual destruction. As such, Coyote Springs failed in the outside world because their succeeding would mean not staying true to their Indian identity.

In *Indian Killer*, there is no success away from the reservation either. The only kind of success we can find is in those Indians, like Marie Polatkin, who pursue higher education, but Marie makes things more difficult for herself by also maintaining an Indian activist streak, protesting against all manner of things affecting Indians. She is not docile and keeps affirming herself as an Indian woman by busying herself with Indian rights and their political agenda. Reggie Polatkin, Marie's cousin, got expelled from university because he stood up for Indian rights and got into a fight with his professor, Professor Mathers. There is no success for John Smith, only a further descent into madness and eventual suicide with an ambivalent kind of afterlife awaiting him.

As discussed before in chapter 2, in both *Flight* and the *Diary* we find eventual success due to a higher understanding of common humanity and a focus on that which connects as opposed to that which divides, like the ancient history of warfare and retaliation shown in *Flight*. Arnold's awareness that he belongs to more than one tribe is central here:

> I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms.
>
> And the tribe of cartoonists.
> And the tribe of chronic masturbators.
> And the tribe of teenage boys.
> And the tribe of small-town kids.
> And the tribe of Pacific Northwesterners.
> And the tribe of tortilla chips-and-salsa lovers.
> And the tribe of poverty.
> And the tribe of funeral-goers.
> And the tribe of beloved sons.

> And the tribe of boys who really missed their best friends.
> It was a huge realization.
> And that's when I knew that I was going to be okay.
> (*ATD* 217)

If one wants to make it outside the reservation with its intricate and painful history which all Indians are aware of, that which connects is more important than that which divides. This has very much to do with the idea of forgiveness, advocated by for example Arnold's wise grandmother. When Arnold's grandmother was hit by a drunk driver, her last words before dying of her injuries were: "Forgive him" (*ATD* 157). Living with hatred is not constructive, and always fighting will not bring you as much as the quest for reconciliation. This idea can be seen emphasized in the character of Zits' father in *Flight*. The man is a drunk, his mind is not his own, and he harasses random strangers as he staggers through the city. And he's wearing a t-shirt saying "Fighting terrorism since 1492" (*Flight* 133): an altogether different attitude from forgiveness, seeing as it focuses on ongoing struggle ('fighting terrorism', even) and placing the emphasis on a violent history than any possibility of reconciliation.

What is also central is the power of expectations. If even your own people expect you to fail because success is white and failure American Indian, then what are you yourself to believe? Arnold's ability to let the white people of Reardan into his life also opens his eyes to what they expect of him. In Reardan, he is expected to succeed. "I'd always been the lowest Indian on the reservation totem pole – I wasn't expected to be good so I wasn't. But in Reardan, my coach and the other players wanted me to be good. They needed me to be good. They expected me to be good. And so I became good. I wanted to live up to expectations. I guess that's what it comes down to. The power of expectations" (*ATD* 180).

Something which can hardly be ignored in a discussion of Alexie's work, is his use of humor or irony as a specific tool, and which can be seen as part and parcel of Alexie's own success as a writer. While Alexie sees humor as very Indian, he is allegedly one of the first of the famous Native American authors to use it like he does. As David L. Moore states in "Sherman Alexie: Irony, Intimacy and Agency": "his direct comedic style and ironic attitude set him apart from the earnest lyricism of the now canonized elder Native writers such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich, and from many of his peers" (Moore in Porter and Roemer 297). Alexie said: "I think being funny breaks down barriers between people. I can get up in front of any crowd, and if I make them laugh first, I can say almost anything to them" (Alexie in Peterson 149). As such, humor is a way to make people

listen. But Alexie has also made clear that "[...] yes, I am to be funny, and I aim for my humor to be very political" (Alexie in Peterson 149). In this regard, Linda Hutcheon's discussion of irony can be considered very useful, since her work on irony, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, focuses on "how and why irony is used and understood as a discursive practice or strategy, and to begin to study the consequences of both its comprehension and its misfiring" (Hutcheon 3). To start with, Hutcheon defines irony as a "mode of discourse where you say something you don't actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you actually do mean but also your attitude towards it" (Hutcheon 2). She continues by also underlining its political aspects: "The 'scene' of irony involves relations of power based in relations of communication. It unavoidably involves touchy issues such as exclusion and inclusion, intervention and evasion" (Hutcheon 2). Alexie has often said that especially his earlier works have a lot of jokes in them which only Indians will understand. As such, the humor excludes a large quantity of his readers, which is also a political statement. Nowadays, Alexie says he writes for everyone, which might have also changed the accessibility of his humor.

While there are a lot of (ironical) jokes in the reservation sequences, I have chosen to discuss it in this chapter because the humor of the reservation seems more like a coping mechanism linked to a degree of passivity (it is as it is, so you better laugh about it) than a tool to achieve success. It can be used in the same manner in the cityscapes, as can be seen from the reaction an Indian man in *Indian Killer* has to his being called a 'prairie nigger' while being beaten up by three white youngsters: "That one pissed me off, though. I ain't no prairie Indian. I'm from a salmon tribe, man. If they were going to insult me, they should've called me salmon nigger" (*IK* 188). Making jokes about awful situations can be seen as a coping mechanism, though here we also see the young man assert his specific tribal identity in the form of a joke, thus underlining the stupidity of his assailants insult. He is not exactly successful, but he reclaimed that much. Arnold from the *Diary* uses humor and irony in his very own way – by means of his cartoons, mainly. He says at the beginning that he draws cartoons to make sense of the world, which seems a very good reason, especially since he lives in a situation (the reservation) where the world often does not make sense. When his father's friend Eugene is shot by his friend Bobby over the last sip of wine in the bottle, Arnold, sad as he is about Eugene's death, draws a cartoon titled "How to Get the Last Sip of Wine from the Bottom of the Bottle", in which several options are given: with love, guilt, reverse psychology, sacred tradition, and finally, with force (*ATD* 171, see the image on page 48). We see a cartoon of a hand with a gun, firing. It is a ridiculous situation, but the comic

functions in an important way: it underlines the absurdity of what happened, so as not to make it a part of normality.

Illustration by Ellen Forney (*ATD* 171)

Perhaps this is the reason why Arnold does not succumb to the depressing reality of the reservation; he sees its reality in the fullness of its absurdity and wants to strive for something better. In Reardan, he uses his talent for humor in much the same manner. When he has to play basketball against the team from the reservation school, he is detested by his former team mates from the rez and is cheered on by his new white friends. While the attitude of his tribe used to bother him immensely, his attitude appears changed when he notes ironically: “Jeez, I felt like one of those Indian scouts who led the U.S. Cavalry against other Indians” (*ATD*

182). It is precisely such a joke which shows the absurdity of his tribe's reaction, and what then makes it easier for Arnold not to feel guilty about playing
against them. It's basketball after all! No one is going to get shot or anything and the ancient divisions his tribe cling to have been shown largely obsolete by the way in which Arnold has been accepted at Reardan. Humor provides a more constructive way of looking at the world.

Seeing as Indians are usually seen as part of the landscape which they inhabit, identity formation away from the reservation space with its alleged authenticity can prove tricky, especially since identity formation is not just a monologue with the self – it is rather a dialogue with the world at large. Both *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer* show the need urban Indians have to create a sort of urban tribe – they cannot truly participate in the white world, so they have to form their own specific communities and safe themselves from disappearing in the cityscape. The city is always a difficult place to navigate, and the issues the Indians face in the city can be seen as the origin of the idea these urban Indians sometimes entertain of the reservation as a sort of utopian lost home, as they find themselves adrift on the streets of Seattle. In these two older novels, being Indian means being unable to succeed away from the reservation. There can be no success for these urban Indians. Both *Flight* and the *Diary* show a different view on matters – forgiveness, and as such cooperation and participation in the white world, is more fruitful than the endless cycle of mistrust, fear and violence.

Chapter 4: Cosmopolitan Patriots?

In a single polis there is no wisdom.
(Appiah 639)

Kwame Anthony Appiah devoted his essay titled “Cosmopolitan Patriots”, published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1997, to explaining his father’s dedication to both his home country, Ghana, and the world at large, by using concepts of cosmopolitanism and a form of rooted cosmopolitanism he named ‘cosmopolitan patriotism’. He starts by telling how his father wrote in a note to his children: “Remember that you are citizens of the world” (Appiah 618). According to Appiah’s father this world citizenship meant that no matter where they chose to live, they should try to leave that place “better than you found it” (Appiah 618). The concept of the cosmopolitan patriot takes into account that the diversity celebrated by the cosmopolitan subject can indeed exist in a cosmopolitan world: “the cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which *everyone* is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of one’s own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure in the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people” (Appiah 618). It is important to note that “In a world of cosmopolitan patriots, people would accept the citizen’s responsibility to nurture the culture and politics of their homes” (Appiah 619). This can then be combined with involvement in the political programs of multiple groups and even the world at large. Such an approach can be seen in, for example, the goals set by urban Indian community centers, who not only focus on maintaining Indian culture, but also hope to find “a unified voice to affect more global policy change” and create “an organized group to pursue large-scale grants that can serve all urban groups, and allow for shared resources” (Martin par. 13). This is just one example of how ‘locally rooted’ ideals, in this case in an Indian context, can be translated to the world at large. That travel of cosmopolitan patriots, with their own particular locally based affiliations and cultures, implies a high degree of cultural hybridization may be obvious, and we can see it in the world we live in today. That such hybridization accelerates the disappearance of cultural heterogeneity may be worrisome to some, but Appiah says that “as forms of culture disappear, new forms are created, and they are created locally, which means they have exactly the regional inflections that the cosmopolitan celebrates” (Appiah 619). The fact remains though, that what he dubs the ‘asymmetrical processes of homogenization’ has everything to do with unequal power relations which have been in place for a long time already (think of capitalism and the ever

prolific omnipresent western culture). The new forms of culture Appiah speaks of in a positive sense can obviously never be free of such influences.

The cosmopolitan patriotism as advocated by Appiah is also a liberal cosmopolitanism:

> […] we value the variety of human forms of social and cultural life; we do not want everybody to become part of a homogeneous global culture; and we know that this means that there will be local differences (both within and between states) in moral climate as well. As long as these differences meet certain general ethical constraints – as long, in particular, as political institutions respect basic human rights – we are happy to let them be. (Appiah 621)

That such an image of differences adhering to 'certain general ethical constraints' cannot ever be without issues has already been made clear by such scholars as Paul Gilroy, who has pointed out the difficulties cosmopolitan values face when it is implied that such things as human rights ought to be 'universal' – Gilroy explains that such a view on human rights borders on a new imperialism (Gilroy 66). Appiah provides interesting building blocks for the concept of the cosmopolitan patriot, but it seems that there is still room for nuances and general discussion in order for it to develop within this problematic world filled with ideologies. Still, when it comes to testing Alexie's cosmopolitan patriotism, the concept as developed by Appiah will surely suffice, for now.

Cosmopolitan Patriotism in Alexie's Novels?

Sherman Alexie's work has been mentioned in connection to the concept of cosmopolitan patriotism at least once, in *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States Since 1945*, edited by Eric Cheyfitz and published in 2006, notably before both *Flight* (2007) and the *Diary* (2007). In the chapter titled "American Indian Fiction and Anticolonial Resistance", written by Arnold Krupat and Michael A. Elliott, we find the following passage:

> […] the most powerful force of Alexie's resistance to colonialism may finally be in his adamant refusal to represent Native people, *Indians*, in ways that fit prevailing Euro-American stereotypes. Yet few of Alexie's Indians could be enlisted for the cause of cosmopolitanism; they don't want to be citizens of the world or champions of a generalized or, indeed, universalized freedom, nor do they want to be cosmopolitan

> patriots committed to tribal values […] in which all may share. To the contrary, a great many of them are exclusivists, even antiracist racists who pit Indians against whites. Yet they are not nationalists, for there is no specific concern for a given nation-people or for the 'return of the land' " (Krupat and Elliott in Cheyfitz 169).

This view of Alexie's work largely holds for my readings of *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, first published in, respectively, 1995 and 1996. The characters from those novels indeed have no interest whatsoever in becoming citizens of the world, even if they chose to seek their fortunes away from their respective reservations. The 'us versus them'-dichotomy reigns in those novels. While *Indian Killer*'s Marie Polatkin might have entertained hopes of trying to make Seattle 'better than she found it', she finds no pleasure whatsoever in the presence of the diversity the city has to offer and focuses mainly on the plights of the urban Indians she encounters. The Indian characters in Alexie's two older novels all have an awareness which does not reach outside the boundaries of, if not the reservation specifically, at least the Indian community, in a way which can be deemed positive. If they have any kind of 'moral aspirations' for the nation in which they live, it is countered by their lack of faith in any power for working change they might possess. This is especially shown in the character of John Smith, whose dream of growing up on a utopian reservation also features himself as a teacher who would go away from the reservation in order to be properly educated, but who would later return as a teacher in order to provide his tribe with better education. While growing up with his white parents would give him every opportunity to be properly educated as pretty much anything, he is uncertain about his Indian identity and has not taken any steps towards the betterment of Indians anywhere. In general, when it comes to *Indian Killer* and *Reservation Blues*, it can be said that those aspects which as yet remain largely ignored within the scope of Appiah's cosmopolitan patriotism such as the power implications of the processes of cultural homogenization mentioned above, remain central issues in these two novels, and the characters seem to share the sentiment that such issues cannot be overcome in any way.

What I will argue here is that Alexie has moved from a worldview which can be designated as 'the rez *versus* the rest', found in his two older novels, to a worldview which I like to call 'the rez *and* the rest', and that this change makes all the difference in whether or not Alexie's work can be read from the perspective of the cosmopolitan patriot. As stated before, after 9/11 Alexie has seen himself become less 'fundamental' in his opinions, and even said that he was now "desperately trying to let go of the idea of being right" (Alexie qtd.

in Grassian 5-6). This attitude coheres with the importance Appiah ascribes to allowing other worldviews, local differences, to exist. While Alexie's older work still largely expressed a certain fear of the white world, his perspective has obviously changed, as can also be seen from the following quote from in interview with Alexie conducted by Lorena Allam in 2006: "You can still maintain your tribal ties and your culture while also having a much broader worldview" (Alexie in Peterson 165). He also says that while his earlier works have been very much focused on Indian perspectives, "Now I look at more of the world and a wider range of people" (Alexie in Peterson 144). This change can already be seen in both *Flight* and the *Diary*. In *Flight* Zits is dropped in the bodies of individuals dealing with Indian issues, and shares the perspectives of both the white people and the Indians. But he is *also* dropped in the body of a white pilot who trains a migrant who ends up hijacking a plane, which is a perspective which has nothing to do with Indians whatsoever, but everything with the cycle of violence and retaliation Alexie wants to discuss in this specific novel. In the case of the *Diary*, we see Arnold struggling when he arrives at Reardan, but we also see the struggles of those he is able to connect with – the white girl Penelope who suffers from bulimia and has a racist father, and the white smart kid Gordy, who supposedly feels just as lonely and out of place as Arnold himself. As such, Alexie's novels have switched focus from specifically Indian issues to issues that affect the nation as a whole, and he places Indians within it. We all have our burdens to bear. Alexie's patriotism is connected both to the reservation space, the tribal community he hails from, and also the United States, but it is noteworthy that he places his Indian characters and issues within a larger scope – that of the United States and to some extent of the world at large. Alexie's collection of short stories called *War Dances*, published in 2009, even features many stories and poems which do not specifically connect to Indians in any way.

Especially the *Diary* has many aspects which can be read through the lens of cosmopolitan patriotism. At the beginning its scope is already made clear in the form of a joke on Arnold's part, but which I think can be read as a metaphor for the condition of the kind of cosmopolitan patriotism the novel portrays: "Don't get me wrong. I don't have anything against my mother's womb. I was built in there, after all. So I have to say that I am pro-womb. But I have zero interest in moving back in there, so to speak" (*ATD* 26). The place of origin is what shapes an individual, after which he is thrown out into the world. In Arnold's case, the 'womb' could be read as a metaphor for the reservation, the place of his birth and rearing, where he was 'built'. But after he made a conscious decision to try his luck outside the reservation, he is not going back.

As Appiah said, "the cosmopolitan also celebrates the fact that there are *different* local human ways of being" (Appiah 621). This statement can be read in connection to Appiah's later claim that in our own specific patriotisms we should be skeptical about placing national common culture at the center of our lives. He says that "collective identities have a tendency […] to go imperial, dominating not only people of other identities but the other identities whose shape it exactly what makes each of us what we individually and distinctively are" (Appiah 633). Appiah continues with a line of thought which sounds all too familiar:

> In policing this imperialism of identity – an imperialism as visible in national identities as anywhere else – it is crucial to remember always that we are not simply Americans or Ghanaians or Indians or Germans but that we are gay or straight or bisexual, Jewish, Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, Confucian – and also brothers and sisters; parents and children; liberals, conservatives, and leftists; teachers and lawyers and automakers and gardeners; fans of the Padres and the Bruins; aficionados of grunge rock and amateurs of Wagner; movie buffs; PBS-aholics, mystery readers; surfers and singers; poets and pet lovers; students and teachers; friends and lovers. (Appiah 633)

This sounds *exactly* like Arnold Spirit's eye-opener concerning his belonging to multiple tribes (which has been quoted at large in the previous chapter), not just the tribe of Spokane Indians but also that of basketball players, bookworms, cartoonists, etcetera. It is in fact so similar, both in content and elaborateness, that it makes one wonder whether Alexie was inspired by Appiah or consciously put it in as a reference. In any case, it shows a specific attitude towards the politics of belonging which cannot be ignored. Appiah also sees this attitude towards rooted identity as a cause for feelings of patriotism, specifically for those residing in the United States, which makes such multi-layered individuality possible to a large extent. He says that:

> […] so many have loved America, in part, exactly because it has enabled them to choose who they are and to decide, too, how central America is in their chosen identity. Those of us who are Americans not by birth but by election, and who love this country precisely for *that* freedom of self-invention, should not seek to compel others to an identity we ourselves celebrate because it was freely chosen. (Appiah 633).

That is the American Dream for you, an American Dream Arnold has been intent on following, and his realization about belonging to many different tribes can be seen as crucial for his chances of success. This image of America as a place where one might realize one's dreams is perhaps an image that is a bit too positive when taking into account certain limitations due to one's ethnicity or sexuality which are still present within the boundaries of the United States nowadays. Still, the fact remains that the idea that one ought to be able to 'make him-/herself' is central to American identity and a source of a degree of patriotic pride, especially in those who have pursued their dreams with a measure of success.

Despite the idea that both *Flight* and the *Diary* show the possibility of connection between people who supposedly belong to different ethnical groups, it is also important to note the largely individualistic quality both novels have. While the idea of opening up to other cultures or groups and celebrating diversity is central to Appiah's idea of the cosmopolitan patriot, there is also an inherently activist streak to his definition of this specific kind of cosmopolitan subject. After all, his father's belief was that one should always aspire to leave a place better than one found it, but the kind of achievement shown in the final pages of both *Flight* and the *Diary* is not an achievement for the community, but for the individual. Zits has managed to break free from a cycle of violence which influenced his life and as such was able to open himself up to the possibility of becoming part of a (white) family. Arnold's realization that the he can connect with the people at Reardan largely means that he can see himself succeed if he wishes to pursue his studies (and indeed his life) away from the reservation. As such, neither Zits nor Arnold appears to change their environment for the better or have any inclination to do so – they mainly realize that the world is not as bad as it seemed. When it comes to patriotic loyalty the two can be found lacking as well – they decide to choose what it best for themselves. While Zits might be seen as lacking a home at the beginning of the novel and might develop a kind of national attachment, Arnold's connection to the reservation is not particularly patriotic. Appiah says that his father would have died for Ghana if necessary – Arnold chooses to leave the reservation precisely because he does not want to die (either physically or spiritually). He would love to save his tribe, but he does not appear to view the reservation as a space which *can* be saved, by any sort of sacrifice. It should of course be noted that both Zits and Arnold are very young – teenagers, really. They have their own problems and who knows what they will do once they have become comfortable in their new environments, and who knows what other, perhaps more mature, characters Alexie might write in the future will be shown to do. As it is, however, if these characters can be seen as agents of change it is, even if this is a great achievement in itself, only for their own lives.

To conclude it seems safe to state that we can see an interesting change in Alexie's work, which changes the way in which we may read his work in the context of cosmopolitan patriotism as the concept has been construed by Appiah. While Alexie's earliest two novels showed a kind of separation on part of his Indian characters, this changes in his two most recent novels. In both *Flight* and the *Diary* we see a kind of cosmopolitan patriotism which is hard to ignore and which rings with a kind of Appiah-ish positivity, even if a wider activist streak to the characters is not truly present. Political issues have of course largely remained unresolved, but that does not mean one's personal view on the world and one's individual position within that world can change. *Flight* shows this in a dramatic sense: does Zits choose to conform to a world history of violent retaliation and mutual fear and hatred, or does he choose to forgive, break the cycle and live life as best he can? In the *Diary,* Arnold also breaks with tradition, the tradition to stay on the reservation no matter what, and seeks a future, and as such connection, in the world outside the reservation, even if this world only begins just a couple of miles away from Wellpinit. In this sense, Alexie's later works clearly reflect his own changed stance concerning the position of Indians in the world at large.

Conclusion

Since I hope to have made clear that the way *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer* perceive the relation between space and Indian identity is very different from the way in which space and Indian identity interrelate in *Flight* and the *Diary*, I will provide conclusions about the two older novels separately from the two newest. In *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, the reservation space still functions as a central space with regard to Indian identity, even if, mainly in *Reservation Blues*, its alleged purity is belied by the visible interference of power structures in the shape of commodity food and references to pop culture. These two novels feature a large amount of fear and apprehension with regard to the white world, which serves to maintain an ‘us versus them’ dichotomy which impedes intercultural relations and makes the American cityscape largely a contested space for the Indian characters. Of course, the reservation also poses its own issues – *Reservation Blues* shows a reservation of alcoholics, commodity food and plenty of violent jerks, a place which attracts New Agers in search of Indian wisdom. Its very negativity reflects on its social reality and the other way around. Yet still the Indians largely stay there. The discomforts of the reservation are familiar – the dangers the white world may pose are not. *Indian Killer* does not so much feature the reservation as a physical location, but it shows the utopian space it has become in the minds of those Indians who have made their way to the city but failed to find what they came to seek. It features as a lost home-space, contrarily to the city which can never be home to these Indians, even if they try to mimic life on the reservation by constructing a kind of urban pan-Indian tribe. The idea that exists of boundaries in *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer* is of boundaries as divisive and difficult to cross. When characters negotiate these boundaries and come into contact with the white world, this usually has negative implications for them – they might be shunned for consorting with the enemy or their dreams may be shattered due to ethnical conflicts. For the Indian characters in both *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, being Indian means being unable to succeed anywhere, but especially so outside the reservation, where one may at least cling to a sense of self derived from tribal life and the political act of living separate from the rest of the American nation. In both these novels, we largely see a kind of attitude towards space and ethnical identity which I have named ‘the rez versus the rest’. As such, for these two novels the concept of the cosmopolitan patriot seems hardly applicable.

In both *Flight* and the *Diary* this attitude changes. While *Flight* seems to uphold the same sort of divisionary dichotomy at the beginning when Zits still wishes to perform his

modern Ghost Dance, the rest of the novel largely shows the futility of such extremist retaliation. Zits' extreme form of boundary negotiation, his entering the very bodies of others and unique ability to view the world (and its violent history) from their perspectives, serves as an eye-opener which celebrates the possibilities of boundary negotiation and intercultural contact. By seeing through their eyes, he sees the futility of ongoing retaliation and violence and sees the virtue of forgiveness – this is the newness created by his specific boundary negotiation. In the end, participating is better than an unending struggle, and this newly acquired attitude at the end finally appears to bring Zits a loving home. Of course no one can just choose to live a day in someone else's body, but we can at least *try* to step into their shoes and see the world as they do. This connects nicely with something Alexie said in his speech after 9/11, that when his audience would go out that night, they ought to go not with their friends, but with 'people they disagree with'. In the *Diary*, we see the same sort of celebratory boundary negotiation. Arnold Spirit is *the* example that crossing boundaries is not easy (he has to break free from both physical reservation and the reservation of the mind), but also that it can definitely be worthwhile. The *Diary* shows the reservation space as a largely depressing space of passivity, where there is no hope. As in the case of *Reservation Blues*, the negativity of the reservation influences the social reality and vice versa. Within the reservation space, dreams have been largely smothered until there are practically no dreamers left. It seems an endless cycle, but Arnold chooses to break free. That his boundary negotiation creates a similar kind of newness to that of Zits may be clear – he sees that the division between white and Indian is not a rigid line, but a boundary space which can be negotiated much like any other, and that doing so can give him new perspectives on the world. He realizes that color does not matter as much as character, and that one may belong to many different 'tribes', or social groups, at the same time. The white world is not as hostile as Arnold first assumed – and perhaps the Sherman Alexie has realized the same, somewhere between *Indian Killer* and *Flight*.

With regard to the idea of the cosmopolitan patriot: it may be clear that this notion does not work well with *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*. In connection to *Flight* and the *Diary*, however, it works rather well. Both novels in the end show a kind of Appiah-ish positivity with regard to their individual positions in the world, a positivity that is largely based on the merits of connection between humans of any kind and with any political or social perspective. This implies a new perspective on the interrelation between Indian identity and the land – in this new world view, Alexie's Indian characters are no longer bound to 'ancestral lands' or reservations for the sake of their Indian identities, or for the sake of their

safety. Instead, Alexie seems to propose that the world is an open space, and one can reside and succeed pretty much anywhere, should you choose to make the effort – anywhere perhaps *except* the reservation. Cooperation and participation is key in this new world view. What such a world view would mean for the continuation of the Indian community and various tribal cultures remains to be seen, but as we have seen the same issue goes for the reservation spaces. The reservation does not imply a kind of unproblematic cultural preservation, in any case. At least this new perspective is hopeful. While in *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer* the Indians did not appear to be able to succeed anywhere, at least *Flight* and the *Diary* show the possibility of fruitful boundary negotiation. All the world to those who are bold. With his final two novels, the idea of 'the rez *versus* the rest' has changed into 'the rez *and* the rest'.

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Appendix: Summaries

Reservation Blues (1995)

In *Reservation Blues* we witness the birth and fall of the all Indian band Coyote Springs. The band consists of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the reservation story-teller, Victor Joseph the reservation bully, Junior Polatkin who is mainly Victor's sidekick and eventually also the sisters Chess and Checkers Warm Water. The band is born after Thomas got his hands on the magical guitar originally possessed by blues-legend Robert Johnson, who comes to the Spokane reservation in search of the wise woman who lives there. The band is doing quite alright at first, playing gigs in bars, until they are given the chance to audition for a record contract with the ominously named Cavalry Records. This is where it all goes awry, when Robert Johnson's guitar refuses to perform and the band is sent home. Junior kills himself, Victor tries to find a job but when rebutted decides to start drinking himself to death. The reservation does not seem to have anything to offer to the other members of Coyote Springs, so Thomas and the Warm Water sisters move to the nearby city of Spokane.

Indian Killer (1996)

As a mystery novel, *Indian Killer* is rather unsatisfying. It partially reads as a sort of whodunit, but the reader never finds out who commits the murders. The bodies are left with feathers, sometimes scalped, so everyone assumes an Indian must be doing the killings. In the scene of a fear-consumed Seattle where tensions are running high, we meet the Indian student Marie Polatkin with her activist streak, her nephew Reggie Polatkin and his friends who start beating up white guys, the white student David Rogers who is found killed near an Indian casino, David's brother and friends who take up beating random Indians, a white Professor who wants to be Indian, a white author who claims to be Indian… And then there is John Smith, the mentally disturbed man who was born to an Indian mother and adopted out to white parents and who has murderous thoughts and eventually kills himself. *Indian Killer* is a terribly violent novel, featuring a lot of mutual fear and hatred and no hope or solution of any kind.

Flight (2007)

Zits is a teenage boy who hops from foster family to foster family. His father, an Indian man, left his mother while she was giving birth to Zits and his mother, an Irish-American woman,

died of cancer when Zits was very young. After that, it went downhill for Zits. He finds no connection anywhere and is well-versed in the history of Euro-Americans crimes against Indians. He wants a kind of revenge, of retaliation, and when he meets the white kid Justice he lets Justice inspire him to perform a modern version of the Indian Ghost Dance which would expel the white people from America: he would shoot everyone at a local bank. The moment he pulls the trigger however, he is transported across time and space and dropped into the body of an FBI agent at the border of a reservation in the 70s. He is dropped in several other bodies after that: the body of a young Indian boy at the Battle of Little Big Horn, that of an Indian tracker who is supposed to lead the Cavalry to an Indian camp, that of a pilot who trained a friendly terrorist and finally that of his own drunk, homeless father roaming the streets. All these ‘incarnations’ show violent retaliation from different perspectives and emphasize the futility of it all. When finally Zits finds himself in his own body, he sees that he has in fact not pulled the trigger – and he decides to stop the cycle of violence. He turns in his guns with the friendly Officer Dave, who finally helps him find a proper foster family.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian (2007)

Arnold Spirit has always been rather different from the other people at his reservation – he is a bookworm and wants to achieve something. He is intelligent and when he sees that he is studying from the same book as his mother before him, he decides to switch schools and go to school in the nearby white town, Reardan, where the only other Indian is the school mascot. His family supports his decision, but his friend Rowdy and many other members of the tribe do not take Arnold’s decision kindly. He is deemed a traitor and shunned. At Reardan, Arnold has some trouble fitting in at first – what are the rules of conduct? How will the other kids deal with his apparent poverty? But he finds out that it is very well possible to connect with white people. He makes a friend who helps him study and even gets a girlfriend. His marks are not bad, and eventually even Rowdy lets him back into his life.