

ARE YOU NOW, OR HAVE YOU EVER BEEN, AN INDIAN?

REFLECTIONS ON (NATIVE) AMERICAN
IDENTITY IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S WRITINGS

Are You Now...

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Abstract:

This presentation reflects upon how American Indian identity is defined and discussed in selected works by Sherman Alexie.

Contents:

1. Politics of Identity
2. Alexie and Native Issues Today
3. Depiction of Specificity vs. Stereotypes
 - 3.1. Brief introduction to *Flight*
 - 3.2. Brief introduction to *The Business of Fancydancing*
4. Conclusion: „What is an Indian?“

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1. Politics of Identity

Why do we still need to talk about identity?

1. Politics of Identity

Why do identity – yet again?

- polemical Criticism of Identity Politics:
 - Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble With Identity*
 - Larry Elder, *Ten Things You Can't Say in America*
- Identity matters mostly if it concerns CLASS, as economic inequality is hidden by accepting „diversity“
- Race and gender seen as less important
- identity as a smokescreen?

1. Politics of Identity

The trouble with *The Trouble With Identity*:

- culture is local
- culture provides a connection through time
- culture has been tribal since ... ever
- even today, new cultures are emerging that create new locality and new tribalism:
 - ▣ gangs, cliques, clubs, communities, ...
 - ▣ new syncretic religions: Santería, Rastafarianism, ...
 - ▣ creolization

1. Politics of Identity

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some general observations:

- globalization and nationalism also lead to increased localization/regionalization
- cosmopolitanism as an elite project vs. „Rooted Cosmopolitanism“ (Appiah)

- history does not end:
Indians are not a thing of the past
- neither is tribalism
- How do we deal with a loss of culture?

1. Politics of Identity

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Loss of culture through:

- loss of land
- loss of language
- loss of inter-personal connections
- loss of traditional knowledge (often through stories and language)
- loss of family knowledge
- loss of rituals
- domination by larger culture
- ...

1. Politics of Identity

However, cultures are not static anyway:

- drift
- language change
- immigration/emigration = interaction between cultures
- war

- Still, there exists the assumption of stable/essentialist cultural identity → imagined communities
- illusion of continuity
- if cultures change anyway, what's the big deal?

1. Politics of Identity

Change has consequences:

- crisis of identity, of self-definition
- psychological trauma, may be inter-generational
- abuse and violence, may also be inter-generational
- drug (ab)use
- fundamentalism
 - by traditionalists (e.g. Cheyenne Dog Soldiers)
 - by converts to the new cause (Larry Elder?)
 - by converts to the old tradition (New Age-ism)

1. Politics of Identity

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Are Indians maybe a special case?

Indians still have

- obvious tribal bonds (which are rediscovered also)
- tribal lands (threat of termination still exists)
- tribal languages (many with too few speakers)
- blood quanta

- could we speak of a
conscious/obvious Indian tribalism
vs. lost/denied „White“ tribalism (ethnicity)
vs. destroyed African-American tribalism (slavery)?

1. Politics of Identity

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How would a modern Indian identity be depicted?

example: Sherman Alexie's writings

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

Current issues in Indian country, and how they are portrayed in Sherman Alexie's writings

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- Sherman Alexie
 - born 1966
 - Spokane (WA) & Coeur d'Alene (ID), lives in Seattle (i.e. off-reservation)

 - 10 poetry books,
3 story collections,
3 novels, 1 young adult novel,
2 films (1 directed, 1 screenplay)

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- central topic: „What is an Indian?“
- there exists...
 - Whitestream perspective on being „Indian“
 - Indian stereotypes of Indianness (oftentimes similar)
- difficult living conditions, both on and off-reservation
- Indians are most discriminated group in the Americas, social problems due to past and current abuse
- seen as tragic/romanticised pointers to an anthropological past (cf. Pearce)

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- loss of land and resources



Bear Butte State Park,
SD

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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□ loss of life



Wounded Knee
Cemetery,
Pine Ridge
Indian Reservation, SD

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- loss of cultural identity



Mount Rushmore,
Pahá Sápa (Black Hills),
SD,
illegally occupied by U.S.
in violation of Ft. Laramie
treaty

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- loss of economic resources

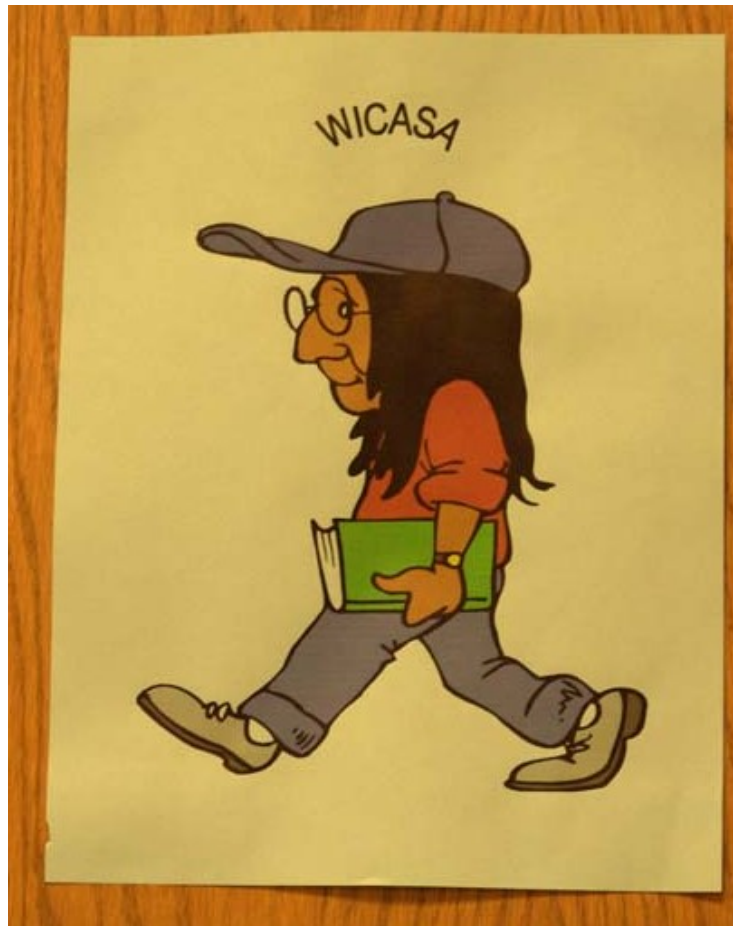


Macy's Market,
Warm Springs
Indian Reservation, OR

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- loss of languages



Oglala Lakota College, Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, SD

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- boarding school experience



Old Agency Buildings,
Warm Springs
Indian Reservation, OR

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- extreme poverty and unemployment



Queets,
Quinault
Indian Reservation, WA

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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□ alcoholism



Browning,
Blackfoot
Indian Reservation, MT

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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□ drugs



Ft. Belknap
Indian Reservation, MT

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- diabetes due to loss of traditional diet



Ft. Belknap
Indian Reservation, MT

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- insufficient medical care



Lame Deer,
Northern Cheyenne
Indian Reservation, MT

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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□ violence



Pine Ridge
Indian Reservation, SD

2. Alexie and Native Issues Today

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- humor and perseverance



Little Big Horn Battlefield,
Crow
Indian Reservation, MT

3. Specificity vs. Stereotypes

Discussing these issues and prevalent stereotypes using literary examples

3. Specificity vs. Stereotypes

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- How are these issues represented in Sherman Alexie's Work?
- poem
„How to Write the Great American Indian Novel“

3. Specificity vs. Stereotypes

- In the poem: focus on „traditional“ stereotypes:
 - prevalence of horse cultures
 - nature
 - spirituality
 - anything you've ever learnt from Wild and Noble Savages in literature in film
 - in the end, White Culture has created its own, perfect Indian, and specific, living Indians do not matter
- Are there nevertheless commonalities amongst Indians?

3. Specificity vs. Stereotypes

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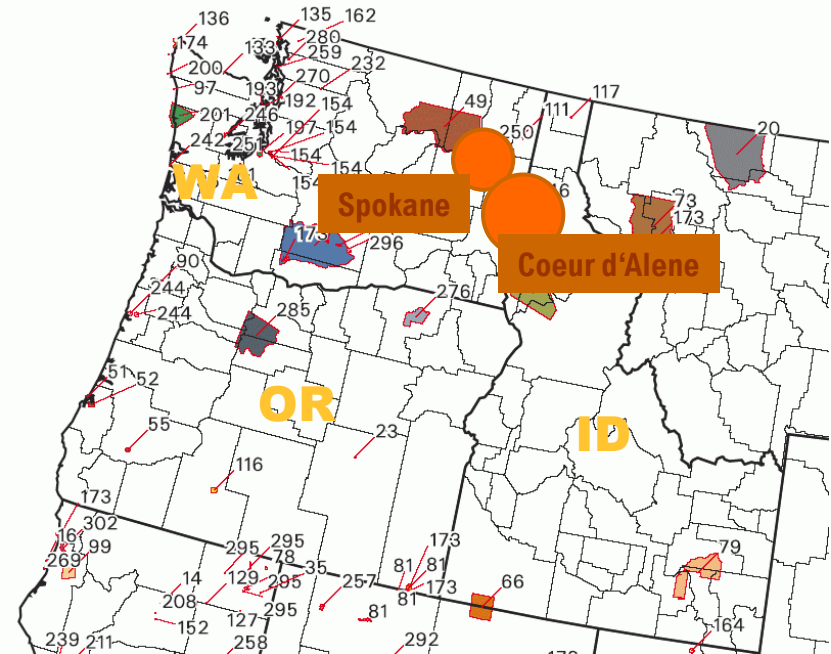
- forging of common „Indian“ identity through
 - ▣ commonality of experience
 - ▣ shared history
 - ▣ shared social problems today
 - ▣ intermarriage
 - ▣ discrimination doesn't care about tribal differences

- ▣ commonalities of culture groups based on shared environments (e.g. Salmon --- Buffalo --- Pueblos / Coast Salish --- Plains --- Arizona/New Mexico)

3. Specificity vs. Stereotypes

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- focus on concreteness in Alexie's work: tribal identity
- (mostly) depiction of his own tribes (Spokane, Coeur d'Alene) – „Salmon tribes“
- thus representing one's own culture – not speaking for the „Subaltern“ (Spivak)
- culture is **specific**
- culture means *belonging*
- tribal identity tied to **land, people, stories**
- **then:** also connection to others possible



3.1. *Flight*

- novel *Flight* (2007):
- „Call me Zits“ (1)
 - 1st-person narrative by an Indian/Irish orphan who goes into a bank and tries to shoot people.
 - Pulling the trigger, he is suddenly pushed into a *Quantum-Leap*-like voyage through several historical persons, Indian and white.
 - Towards the end, he is also his father.
 - adopted by a white policeman.
- „I am Michael. Please, call me Michael.“ (181)

3.1. *Flight*

- classical Voyage of the Hero (Campbell), search for identity tied to father quest
- referencing *Moby-Dick* („Call me Ishmael“)
- scheme of soul-searching through other characters underlines **commonality of human experience**
- simply put:
people are people, whether Indians or Non-Indians

3.1. Flight

- „Since I’m not a legal Indian, the government can put me wherever they want. So they put me with anybody who will take me. Mostly they’re white people. I suppose that makes sense. I am half white. And it’s not like any of this makes any difference. I’ve had two Indian foster fathers, and they were bigger jerks than any of my eighteen white foster fathers.“ (9)

3.1. *Flight*

- recurrent themes throughout the entirety of Alexie's work:
 - absurdity of Indian-White dichotomy
 - thus criticizing both Indian and White preconceptions (and racism)
 - subalternity of Indians and also poor non-Indians
 - stressing of common humanity

- humor as a coping mechanism –
but also as a genuine expression of joy
and a realization of the absurdity of life

3.2. *The Business of Fancydancing*

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- other recurrent theme:
alienation between Reservation Indians and Non-Reservation (oftentimes Urban) Indians

- e.g. in his film *The Business of Fancydancing*
 - ▣ telling the story of a gay Spokane Indian writer living in Seattle, estranged from his tribe
 - ▣ once on the reservation, he is criticized for not keeping it „real“
 - ▣ this represents ongoing conflicts – and the search for identity

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4. „What Is An Indian?“

4. „What Is An Indian?“

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- from „Dear John Wayne“:
- „A: [...] I have lived in your world, your white world. In order to survive, to thrive, I have to be white for fifty-seven minutes of every hour.
Q: How about the other three minutes?
A: That, sir, is when I get to be Indian, and you have no idea, no concept, no possible way of knowing what happens in those three minutes.
Q: Then tell me. That’s what I’m here for.
A: Oh, no, no, no. Those three minutes belong to us. They are very secret. You’ve colonized Indian land but I am not about to let you colonize my heart and mind.“

(The Toughest Indian in the World, 194f)

4. „What Is An Indian?“

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being Indian:

- resisting colonialization
- being both modern and traditional at the same time
- this is an ongoing struggle

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Suggested Further Reading

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- **for a selection of pictures from Indian Reservations, visit www.philjohn.com/ndn**