

# THE EXILED NATIVE:

QUESTIONS OF CULTURAL REMOVAL AND  
TRANSLOCAL AMERICAN INDIAN IDENTITY  
IN NOVELS BY SHERMAN ALEXIE AND JAMES WELCH

# Overview

## **Abstract:**

How is American Indian identity defined, and how are Indians portrayed by Native authors themselves? How do fictional Indians fare in exile? This presentation looks at how authors like James Welch and Sherman Alexie deal with these issues.

## **Contents:**

1. Official Indians: Identity per Blood Quantum
2. Historical Indians: Charging Elk in Europe
3. Experienced Indians: Reservation U.S.A.
4. Conclusions

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# 1. Official Indians

Identity per  
Blood Quantum



BIA Building, Warm Springs IR, Oregon

# 1. Official Indians

- American Indian identity today is defined through
  - nations/„tribes“ being recognized on Federal or State level
  - blood quantum:  
measuring ancestry and quantifying identity
    - directly relates to questions of tribal enrollment
  - this may be related to locality...  
(living on the reservation, though many non-Indians live on reservations as well, e.g. Flathead)
  - ... and participation in tribal functions

# 1. Official Indians

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- Who is in control of official definitions?
  - ▣ treaties were oftentimes abrogated unilaterally by the US, such as in the Termination era (1953-64)
  - ▣ Indians are not seen as equal partners but „domestic dependent“, not as sovereign nations
  - ▣ consequences for identity matters:
    - “ if approximately one-third of all American Indian tribes and Alaskan Native villages are without recognition status as a direct result of U.S. exercises of plenary power in nullifying or refusing the terms of treaties or unilaterally terminating or otherwise dissolving the sovereign rights of individual tribes, what does that say about the authority of federal recognition policies to determine who is and who is not an Indian tribe? (Barker, “Indian<sup>TM</sup> USA,” 31)

# 1. Official Indians

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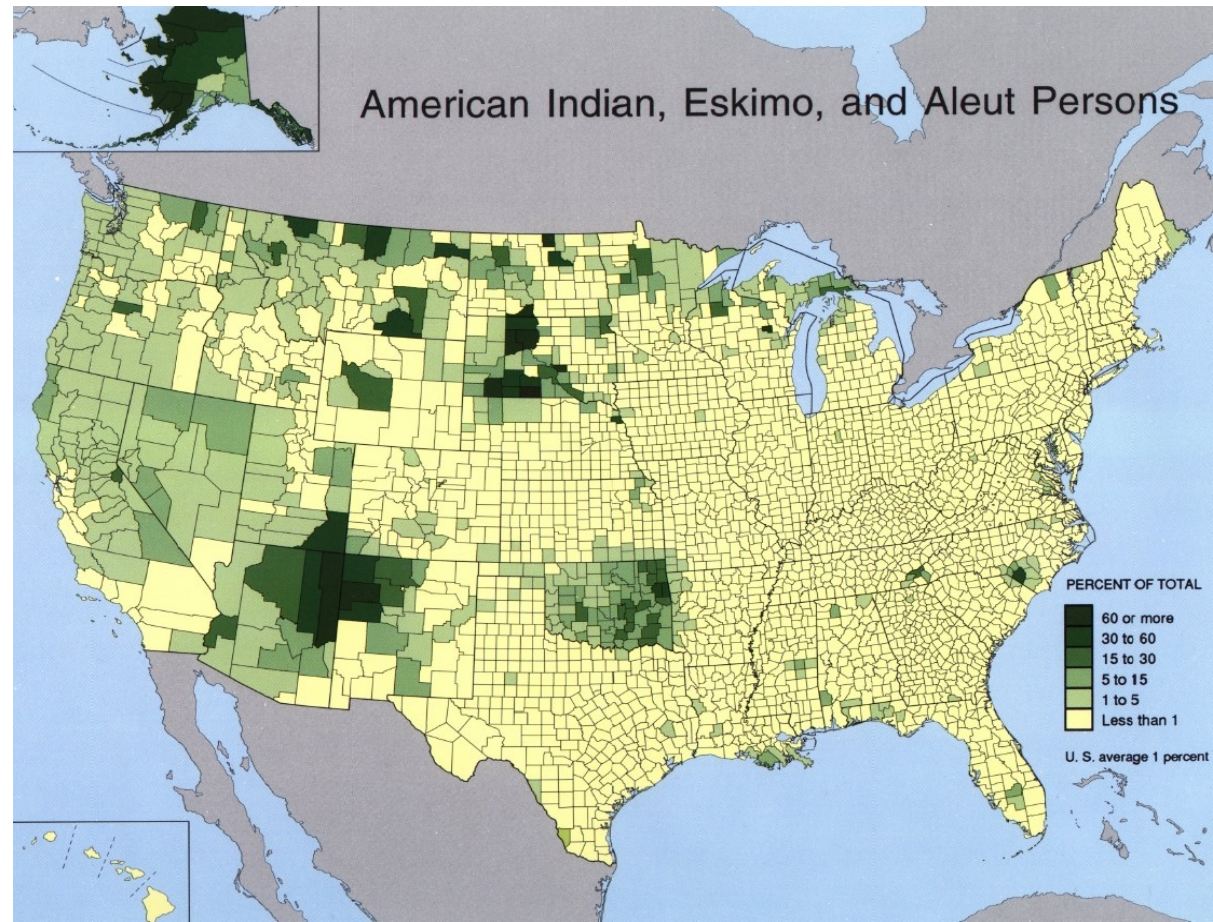
- blood quantum policies are „thinning“ the number of tribal members eligible for enrollment (tied to government „services“ which are treaty obligations in exchange for lands ceded)
  - example: tribe A needs  $\frac{1}{4}$  tribal Identity
    - Generation 1: 2 „full bloods“ from tribe A and B have a child
    - Generation 2: child,  $\frac{1}{2}$  Indian from tribe A and B, meets someone tribe C
    - Generation 3: grand-child down to  $\frac{1}{4}$  tribe A
    - Generation 4: great-grand-child  $\frac{1}{8}$  tribe A – ineligible even if „full blood Indian“ but all other „parts“ from different tribes
    - this is a real problem affecting Indian communities today
    - put cynically: problem of government services solved?



# 1. Official Indians

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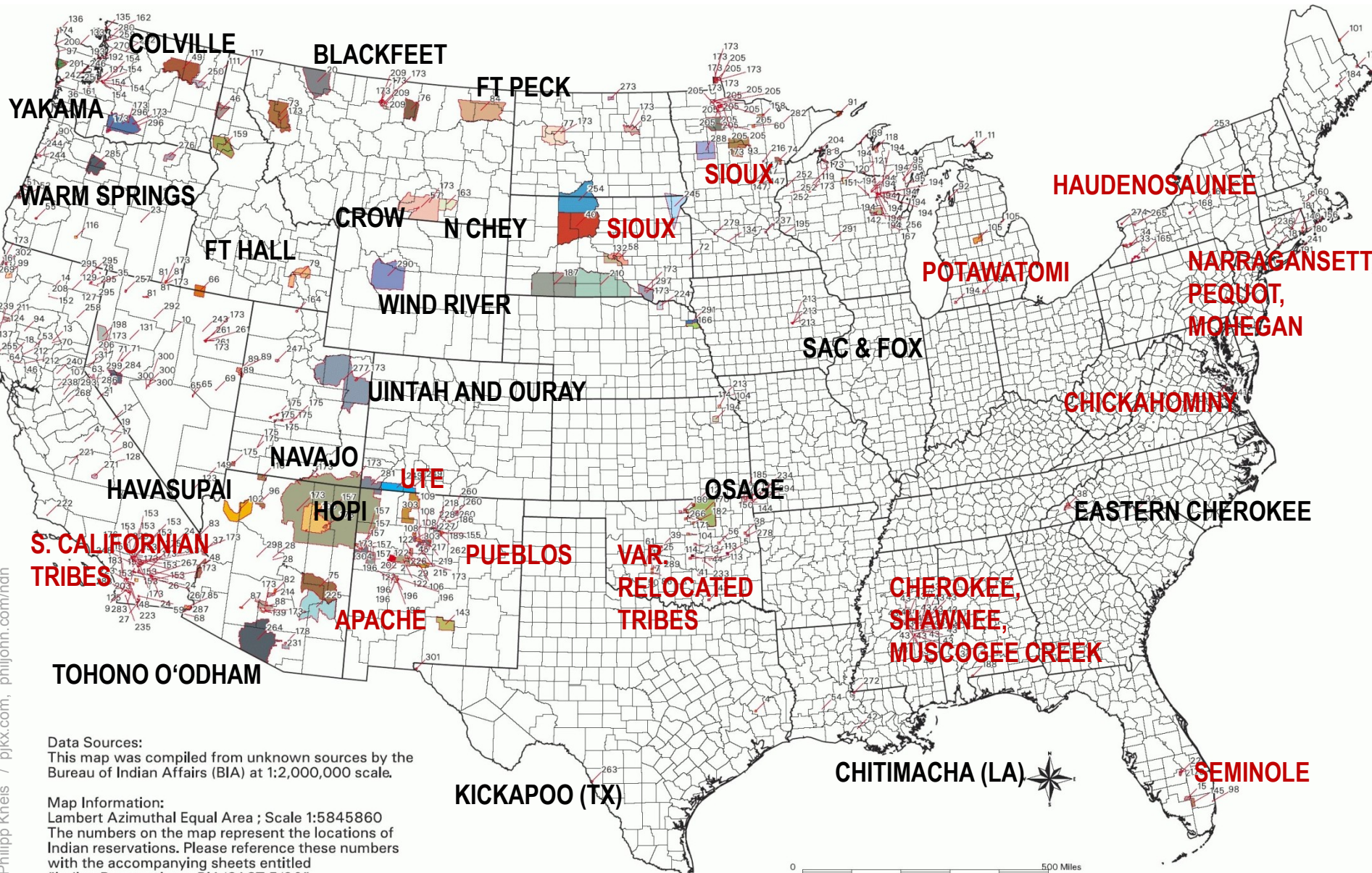
- cultural identity is often tied to the land
- History of removal and continued dispossession



US Census 1990: American Indians



# 1. Official Indians



**Data Sources:**  
 This map was compiled from unknown sources by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) at 1:2,000,000 scale.

**Map Information:**  
 Lambert Azimuthal Equal Area ; Scale 1:5845860  
 The numbers on the map represent the locations of Indian reservations. Please reference these numbers with the accompanying sheets entitled "Indian Reservations- BIA/CAST 5/96".





# 1. Official Indians

- questions of tribal sovereignty begin with being able to determine who is a member of your nation, and who is not
- this is difficult when all the tools to „measure“ identity belong to the colonizer
  
- literary examples:
  - How to define identity differently?
  - What role does locality play?

## 2. Historical Indians

### Charging Elk in Europe



Indian Memorial,  
Little Big Horn Battlefield, Montana

## 2. Historical Indians

- James Welch (1940-2003, Blackfeet/Gros Ventre)
  - 5 novels, 1 nonfiction book, 1 poetry book
  - 2000: Chevalier (knight) in the „Ordre des Arts et des Lettres“ for his contributions to French culture in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000)

# 2. Historical Indians

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- story:
  - Charging Elk travels with William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody to France, is part of his Wild West show
  - he gets sick and is left behind in Marseilles
  - the novel tells about his struggles to arrive in French society and build a life there



## 2. Historical Indians

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- can be read as counterstory to the life of Black Elk:
  - Black Elk travels with Buffalo Bill, but returns to America
  - Charging Elk, by force of circumstance, remains and takes charge of his life – outside America

# 2. Historical Indians

- his identity as a Lakota is defined through
  - ▣ Lakota concepts and words: „othering“ English – shaping the language / Welch as a poet (Alexie as well)
  - ▣ his belief in *Wakan Tanka*
  - ▣ initial aversion to fish
  - ▣ his outward appearance (skin color, hair)
  - ▣ the reaction of others towards him
  - ▣ political status: Lakotas not yet American citizens
  
- mixture of self-described and outwardly-ascribed markers of identity

## 2. Historical Indians

### □ Lakota perspective on French culture:

“ He liked this wide street with the rows of knobby trees on the street-side edge of the broad walkway. There were many places where he could look in windows at clothes and sweets and knives and everything a man might want. There were cafés, but he hadn't the courage yet to enter one for a small cup of the bitter pejuta sapa. But he always stopped at a particular kiosk with a bright green-and-white-striped awning that sold the flimsy papers with wasichu writing on them. Often they had pictures on them, drawings, mostly of men he thought all looked alike, with their beards and stiff collars.

(Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, 165)

## 2. Historical Indians

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### □ being defined by others:

“ [after being shouted at in a restaurant, ] Charging Elk sat for a moment, looking down at his half-eaten meal, confused. He understood why the wasicun miners in Paha Sapa hated him, but why would these sailors hate him in Marseille? There were many people of many colors here. Why would they choose him? He had spent the past three winters making himself invisible, yet they knew him right away. [..] Suddenly, he saw the crowds in the stands at the Wild West show with their big eyes and shouting voices as he rode hard after the buffaloes.

(Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, 200)



## 2. Historical Indians

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### □ perceptions of home from exile:

“ He had never heard of the buffalo returning. All he ever heard about America – well, he heard almost nothing. Because he couldn’t read, he didn’t know what the journals said about his homeland. Sometimes he unloaded ships from America. Sometimes he heard his fellow workers curse America for being greedy and arrogant. President Roosevelt had attacked the small country of Cuba for no reason. Now they were in the Philippines. The rabblers among the dockworkers often talked about refusing to unload American goods. Charging Elk didn’t understand their anger and didn’t know enough about American to come to its defense – even if he wanted to.

(Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, 420)

## 2. Historical Indians

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- Charging Elk eventually becomes accepted in France as a Lakota, not a U.S.-American
- by setting the story in France and depicting a still free and non-colonized Lakota, Welch allows for cultural self-definition

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# 3. Experienced Indians

Reservation  
U.S.A.



Pine Ridge Oglala IR, South Dakota

# 3. Experienced Indians

- authenticity & authority and the power to narrate:  
lived experience vs. conventional stance:
  - “ Only an Indian knows who he is [..] an individual who just happens to be an Indian – and if he has grown up on a reservation he will naturally write about what he knows. And hopefully he will have the toughness and fairness to present his material in a way that is not manufactured by conventional stance.... What I mean is – whites have to adopt a stance; Indians already have one.

(James Welch, quoted in  
Lincoln, “Back-Tracking James Welch,” 24)



# 3. Experienced Indians

## □ growing up Indian in America:

“ Amos After Buffalo will grow up, thought Loney, and he will discover that Thanksgiving is not meant for him. It will take him longer because he lives in Hays and Hays is on the edge of the world, but he will discover it someday and it will hurt him, a small wound when you think about it, but along with the hundred other small cuts and bruises, it will make a difference, and he will grow hard and bitter and he might do something bad, and people will say, “Didn’t we tell you, he’s like all the rest,” and they will think Indians do not know the meaning of the word “Thanksgiving.”

(Welch, *The Death of Jim Loney*, 166)

# 3. Experienced Indians

- no matter how Indian „identity“ is defined, native communities share similar problems resulting from a long, continuing history of ongoing colonization – almost akin to living in exile on their own land

# 3. Experienced Indians

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- loss of land and resources



Bear Butte State Park

# 3. Experienced Indians

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## □ loss of life



Wounded Knee Cemetery,  
Pine Ridge Indian Reservation



# 3. Experienced Indians

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- loss of cultural identity



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

# 3. Experienced Indians

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- loss of economic resources

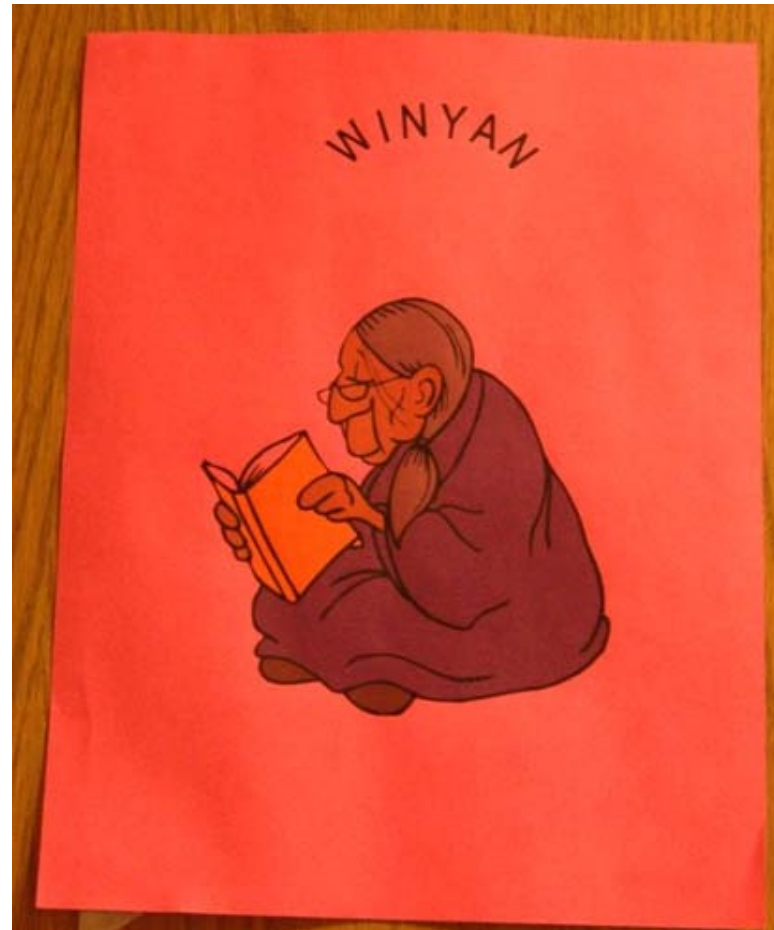
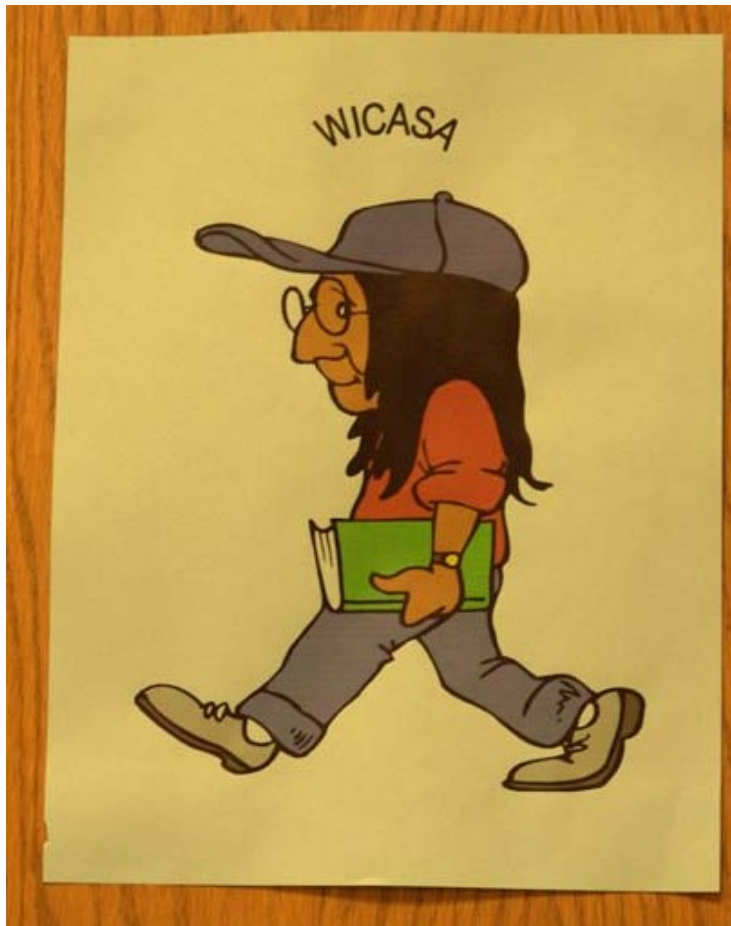


Macy's Market,  
Warm Springs Indian Res.

# 3. Experienced Indians

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- loss of languages





# 3. Experienced Indians

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- boarding school experience



Old Agency Buildings,  
Warm Springs Indian Res.

# 3. Experienced Indians

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- extreme poverty and unemployment



Queets,  
Quinault Indian Reservation

# 3. Experienced Indians

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- inadequate housing



Lame Deer,  
Northern Cheyenne Ind. Res.



# 3. Experienced Indians

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## □ alcoholism



Browning,  
Blackfeet Indian Reservation

# 3. Experienced Indians

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## □ drugs



Ft. Belknap Indian Reservation

# 3. Experienced Indians

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- diabetes due to loss of traditional diet



Ft. Belknap Indian Reservation



# 3. Experienced Indians

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- insufficient medical care



Lame Deer,  
Northern Cheyenne Ind. Res.

# 3. Experienced Indians

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## □ violence





# 3. Experienced Indians

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- but there is also humor and perseverance



Little Big Horn Battlefield,  
Crow Indian Reservation



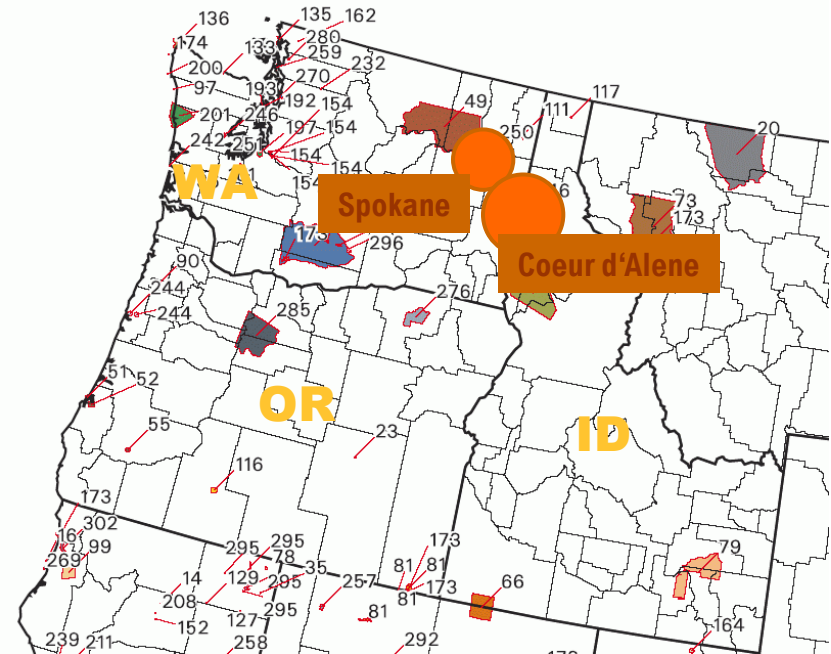
# 3. Experienced Indians

- Sherman Alexie (1966-..., Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), 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)

# 3. Experienced Indians

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- Indian identity in Alexie's work:
  - culture is **specific** to different tribes (for him mostly Spokane, Coeur d'Alene)
  - culture means **belonging**
  - tribal identity tied to **land, people, stories**
  - **experiences** often shared with whites



# 3. Experienced Indians

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## □ priority of experiences vs. racial identity:

“ 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.

(Alexie, *Flight*, 9)

# 3. Experienced Indians

## □ retelling/decentering/reclaiming history:

“ I am standing in the middle of a real Indian camp, complete with thousands of real Indian tepees and tens of thousands of real old-time Indians. [...] Yep, a bunch of real old-time Indians. I'm not exactly sure what year it is. It's tough to tell the difference between seventeenth- and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Indians.

These are how Indians used to be, how Indians are supposed to be. [...] These old-time Indians have dark skin. There aren't any half-breed pale-beige green-eyed Indians here. Nope, unlike me, these Indians are the real deal.

I don't hear any of them speaking English. [...] Even the dogs seem to be barking in Indian.

(Alexie, *Flight*, 60)

# 3. Experienced Indians

## □ reclaiming historical agency:

“ Crazy Horse is here. And that older Indian dude standing over there by the horses? He sure looks like Sitting Bull does in the history-book pictorials.

I realize this skinny river is the Little Bighorn, and I have been transported back to June 1876. [..]

Custer is marching towards his slaughter.

Custer is a crazy egomaniac who thinks he is going to be President of the United States. Custer is one of the top two or three dumb asses in American history. [..]

Thousands of hot and angry Indian dudes ride out to meet Custer and his doomed soldiers.

(Alexie, *Flight*, 68f)

# 3. Experienced Indians

- stressing cultural sovereignty and ownership:

“ Thesis: I have never met a Native American.  
Thesis repeated: I have met thousands of Indians.  
[..]

“Why do you insist on calling yourselves Indian?” asks a white woman in a nice hat. “It’s so demeaning.”

“Listen,” I say. “The word belongs to us now. We are Indians. That has nothing to do with Indians from India. We are not American Indians. We are Indians, pronounced In-din. It belongs to us. We own it and we’re not going to give it back.”

So much has been taken from us that we hold onto the smallest things left with all the strength we have.

(Alexie, “The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me,”  
from *One Stick Song*, 13)



# 3. Experienced Indians

## □ resisting further colonization of identity:

“ 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.

(Alexie, “Dear John Wayne,”  
from *The Toughest Indian in the World*, 194f)

# 3. Experienced Indians

- resisting further colonization of identity:

“ the subaltern, however disempowered in the contexts of official institutions, public media, and government, certainly can and does speak, but not necessarily to you.

(Turner, “Sovereignty, or The Art of Being Native,” 93)

# 4. Conclusions



Warm Springs IR, Oregon

# 4. Conclusions

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- American Indian identity is defined
  - ▣ politically: by the government and government-imposed definitions
  - ▣ culturally: language, traditions, original lands, stories
  - ▣ through common experiences today, transcending place
  
- Core problem: who owns these definitions?
  
- Cultural sovereignty is a necessary component for sustained political sovereignty

# 4. Conclusions

- Indian literature is national literature – differs from “ethnic” literature by immigrants:
  - “ [T]ribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the *tree*, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. *We are the canon.* [...] For much of this time period [i.e. American history], we have had literatures. Without Native American literature, *there is no American Canon.*

(Craig Womack, *Red on Red*, 6f)

# Online Materials:

- for a selection of pictures from Indian Reservations, visit [www.philjohn.com/ndn](http://www.philjohn.com/ndn)
- the handout and this presentation will be available online at the same location



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# Thank You



Julyamsh Pow Wow 2007,  
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho