

ABSTRACT

THE LAYERED LITERARY EXISTENCE OF THE YOUNG ADULT NATIVE AMERICAN MAN

By Trenton J. Sorensen

Within Native American literature, young adult Native American men face many obstacles to success on the journey to a layered existence that straddles the reservation line. The men face stereotypes, tribal attitudes, poverty, alcoholism, and an overall mental struggle to survive as Native American men that leaves them wobbling on the dividing line between two worlds. The men have to overcome the obstacles in order to achieve a sturdy balance of existence and successfully go back and forth between the Native world and the outside world. Within Sherman Alexie's texts *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and *The Toughest Indian in the World*; Alexie's films *The Business of Fancydancing* and *Smoke Signals*; Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed*; and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, the protagonists struggle to balance their culture with the Western-influenced outer world. The writers investigate tribal and non-tribal influences and pressures on their Blackfoot, Dogrib, Spokane, and Coeur d'Alene Native American male characters as well as the inner mental struggles that the protagonists undergo on a path towards a balanced existence. This layered existence connects with two-spirit identities through issues of self acceptance and tribal and non-tribal influences on personal identity choices and classifications, particularly within Alexie's texts and films. Overall, tribal peoples, as well as surrounding populations, collude to create a hostile environment for Native American men within the selected texts, and the protagonists are forced to fight for their own existences and to achieve a life that combines the best of their culture with the opportunities available off the reservation, albeit at varying levels of balance. Alexie, Van Camp, and Welch present complex characters who face obstacles that can push them closer to their Indian heritage or further away in order to gain a sense of belonging and acceptance, and these colluding forces have to be balanced in order for these young adult Native American male characters to live a harmonious life within a layered literary existence.

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by

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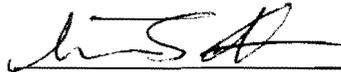
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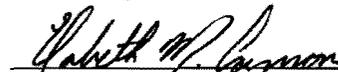
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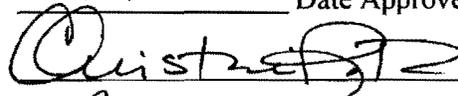
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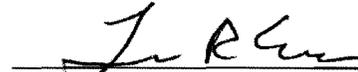
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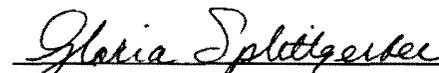
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INTRODUCTION

Straddling the line among multiple worlds is a complex task that many young adult Native American literary characters face as they try to reconcile their tribal lives with the outside world. The characters face the challenge of achieving acceptance and success within conflicting worlds. This layered existence is something that Sherman Alexie, James Welch, and Richard Van Camp address within their writing. The protagonists are presented with divergent potential paths in life. For example, one life is embedded within the reservation, and the other is enmeshed in the outer world that surrounds the reservation. The characters that pick one life over another lack an important piece of the puzzle of self-fulfillment and inhabit an unbalanced existence. However, the characters that straddle boundaries and are able to keep a foot within multiple worlds are able to gain a greater level of self-fulfillment. These characters end up being the hope and possibility of the future.

Alexie, Welch, and Van Camp give their characters varying levels of connection with their tribal heritage; sometimes the characters are forced to leave the reservation behind, and other times the characters must reconnect with their heritage in order to be successful. Alexie often presents his characters as succeeding only when they have a connection with the world outside the reservation that overrides their ties to their heritage. Alexie leaves out the possibility of having a meaningful tie to the reservation and still succeeding in life with a more minor connection with the off-reservation world. For instance, Arnold within *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has to

maintain a strong off-reservation connection in order to be successful, and Alexie then presents the tribal members as turning their backs on Arnold. Arnold's situation is perhaps due to Alexie's own experience of leaving the reservation in order to achieve success. However, within *The Lesser Blessed* and *Winter in the Blood* Richard Van Camp and James Welch do provide a balance that often leans more toward tribal connections, which may be indicative of their own more positive experiences with their respective tribes. Their protagonists go through more of a cultural awakening process that is aided by outside influences and ties, but all three authors use first-person narration to allow the characters to express their struggles within a layered existence. This identity struggle is filled with internal conflict as the characters battle their own selves in order to leave their limited existences behind and to fill their lives with meaningful connections. The characters' psychological and ethnological stances and backgrounds are important for analyzing what the final identity outcome will be for the characters. The selected authors present the characters with varying temptations and struggles, and these allow the characters to lean in varying directions in relation to a layered existence as they struggle to create their own identities.

Young adult Native American male characters are ripe for the challenge of living a layered existence within distinct worlds, but, as the male characters age, the possibilities for balance within the worlds dissipate. The aging men still have a chance to reach a stable existence by successfully balancing reservation and off-reservation lives, but the prospects for success are greatly reduced. The push and pull from each side of the line gets stronger and angrier, and the characters are more apt to fall to one side or

another. The unbalanced life leads the characters to either give up their culture or to eliminate possibilities within the outside world.

Two-spirit characters present this layered existence with multiple combinations for life. The two-spirit characters have variant identities in relation to sexuality and/or gender practices and alliances and are able to transform their identities and to cross traditional boundaries fluidly. These characters also go through an identity struggle as they try to temper their personal identities with the attitudes and beliefs that surround them. Two-spirit characters are able to cross gender and sexual boundaries within a practice that has traditionally been accepted within numerous Native American tribes. Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang write in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* that “[i]n Native North America, there were and still are cultures in which more than two gender categories are marked” (2). However, the traditional practices of tribes are now overshadowed by present-day identity definitions, making two-spirit a relatively new identity classification. Even though heritage and culture are integral to the core of a two-spirit existence, this classification is pan-tribal, so tribal specificity is no longer necessary. Any tribal member of any tribe can adopt a two-spirit identity even if the specified tribe did not historically practice two-spirit identities. With this classification, the characters take on a combination of male and female traits; however, the characters face assimilation pressures from outside worlds and, increasingly, Indian communities that do not recognize and/or accept divergent gender and sex practices. The characters have to fight for acceptance within their literary worlds in order to be true to themselves and remain a

part of the world around them. The characters embark on a quest for balance between their true identities and the accepted practices of the reservation and outside worlds in order to create a meaningful and honest existence.

The layered existence is the ultimate world of equilibrium because the characters are allowed to maintain the best of multiple worlds while straddling the boundaries among divergent courses. The worlds exist in combinations of reservation and off-reservation life along with sexual and gender diversity. These combinations of existence place the characters on numerous distinct paths that can be combined in order to achieve an existence connected to heritage and individual identity. The worlds have to be reconciled in order for the characters to achieve a place of harmony within themselves, and this leads to many issues within the layered existence. However, without the balance, the characters end up missing a piece of their identity and falter in their existence.

This faltering is sometimes aided by the protagonists in the selected texts facing the common theme of father issues. The characters must come to terms with the damaged nature of their fathers in order to gain a sense of acceptance and move out from under the shadow of their fathers' failures. Some of the characters have absent fathers, others have diseased fathers, and some have deceased fathers. The fathers represent what will happen to the protagonists if they fail in their quests to create meaningful lives. The characters struggle to create identities as they battle with the internal and external forces related to their connections or disconnections with their fathers on their quests to fulfilling connected existences.

Alexie creates young adult male protagonists who are filled with possibilities and struggle to achieve balance within the layered aspects of their identities. And while the characters' struggles are fictional within the literary world, the layered existence does serve as a possibility for Native American men within the real world. The men can exist within their heritage while accomplishing more off the reservation. Alexie presents his characters as what Native American men can become, and he shares autobiographical connections with many of his characters through personal traits and family traumas in order to illustrate these realistic possibilities. Alexie's characters are the literary hope for what young adult Native American men can achieve within a layered existence, but Alexie also presents characters that only follow his, Alexie's, own path through life. Alexie only presents his own realities, so he often leaves out the alternative life possibilities that Richard Van Camp and James Welch address in regards to keeping a closer connection to the characters' respective tribes.

Van Camp and Welch also create characters that struggle with their identities and fight for existence on the borders of multiple worlds. Their characters must reconcile their pasts with their present and possible future realities in order to achieve an identity balance that is conducive to living a life filled with success. Without this balance, the characters will lose part of their potential identities and give up on pieces of the future. However, unlike Alexie, their characters do not have to remove themselves from their reservations in order to be successful. Van Camp's and Welch's protagonists go through a spiritual and cultural awakening that has less opposition from their tribes than what

Alexie often illustrates in regards to characters such as Arnold from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

However, all the texts are grounded within Native American structure. The authors write of their tribes and infuse their cultural experiences and backgrounds into their fictional characters within the selected texts. For example, Welch frames his text with stories from *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* by George Bird Grinnell that tell historic tales relating to Blackfoot culture. The texts the authors write are unique to the backgrounds of the protagonists and their cultural and spiritual connections. In addition, Sherman Alexie notes in an interview with Jessica Chapel that “the big difference in Indian literature is that Indians are indigenous to this country, so all non-Indian literature could be seen as immigrant literature.” In a sense, the selected tales are about survival within a natural setting that is unique to Native Americans. The protagonists all face obstacles that impact Native American culture that include poverty, isolation, identity struggles, and alcoholism. These issues build a theme of loss that is unique to Native Americans due to their indigenous status, values, and self governance.

All of the protagonists within the selected texts fight for their survival and are faced with opposition from their own Native peoples as well as the outside world, although at varying levels. They are on a path towards personal redemption that is unique to those around them, but they must blaze a trail for the future or risk losing themselves in the shuffle of existence that is inhabited by poverty, fear, and failure. They must resist the urge to fall into the trap of despair. The characters must be true to themselves while maintaining a connection with their heritage and the ever developing

outside world in order to develop and maintain a balanced identity that allows them to succeed in life. However, the authors present varying levels of balance within reservation and off-reservation worlds that allows their characters to create their own unique existences on their paths to personal fulfillment and redemption to correct their past wrongs.

THE CONFLICTED REALITY OF STEREOTYPES

Lazy. Drunk. Stupid. The Western-influenced off-reservation world often makes these comments about Native Americans in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* within the stories "Witnesses, Secret and Not," "The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor," "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore," "Somebody Kept Saying Powwow," "Every Little Hurricane," "Indian Education," and "All I Wanted to do was Dance." The young adult male characters that vary from story to story must learn to exist within the confines of the reservation, which is filled with poverty, alcoholism, despair, and limited opportunities, but then they must also be ready to change their ways of life if they leave the reservation in order to gain acceptance in the Western-influenced world. The characters must leave a piece of their heritage behind in order to fit in with the outside world. The young adult male characters are surrounded by fellow Native Americans that have succumbed to the outside world's stereotypes, and these characters make the formerly false stereotypes an accurate reality, which only allows the stereotypes to perpetuate. The protagonists are surrounded by the defeatist attitudes of their tribal peoples that only allow them to exist within the confines of Western-influenced stereotypes. These defeated characters have given up on their battles to achieve more.

With this depiction, Alexie creates a very bleak picture of reservation life. This harsh depiction creates great obstacles for the young males trying to bridge the divide

between the reservation and the outside world. The characters are often stuck between staying true to their heritage and families, which Alexie often associates with alcoholism and dysfunction, and staying true to whom they want to become. One of Alexie's characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* states that "as soon as I get off the reservation, among all-white people, every Indian gets exaggerated" (Alexie 219). When the characters leave the reservation, they are often placed within stereotypical roles and have to either fight to correct the wrongs to stay true to who they are or retreat to the reservation to live out a stereotypical existence.

This conundrum is unique to the Native American protagonists in Alexie's texts because they are indigenous characters trying to preserve their culture while facing the mentality that progress only occurs off the reservation. Many of the characters surrounding the protagonists have bought into this, and these characters are making this previously false assumption true. The situation that the protagonists are in is also unique due to the heritage and values associated with being Native American; the characters are tied to the reservation and their families but have to rectify this with evolving personal identities that can fly in the face of traditional and accepted aspects of Native American heritage. These identity components set the protagonists off from those around them both within and outside the reservation boundaries. In addition, the ethnicity, family structure, and psychological components of the characters that focus on loss make their life situations unique and not pan ethnic. Overall, the characters are creating who they are through the texts, so Alexie is writing creation stories, which are central to Native American ethnicity and heritage.

With his characters' Native American existences, Alexie humorously writes about the realities of poverty, alcoholism, and stupidity. Joseph Coulombe notes in "The Approximate Size of His Favorite Humor: Sherman Alexie's Comic Connections and Disconnections in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*" that Alexie "uses humor – or his characters use humor – to reveal injustice, protect self-esteem, heal wounds, and create bonds." For example, within "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore," Victor and Adrian fool around with a gun while conversing. "Go for it,' Adrian said. 'You chickenshit.' While I still held that pistol to my temple, I used my other hand to flip Adrian off. Then I made a fist with my third hand to gather a little bit of courage or stupidity" (Alexie 43). Adrian and Victor are fooling around and joking about killing themselves, and there is no seriousness displayed by them. However, depictions such as this do not mean that Alexie is making light of serious issues; he is just defusing the tense and uncomfortable nature of the situations through humor. The use of humor allows his characters to deal with the imbalance of their lives as they try to counterbalance reservation realities with the stereotypes of the outside world.

These reservation realities and Western-influenced stereotypes create a paradox for Alexie's characters. While the outside world imposes stereotypes on characters who do not exhibit the stereotypes, there are other characters on the reservation who embody the stereotypes and illustrate a truth behind them. So the stereotypes are false in general, but they do specifically fit with certain individual characters. This correlation provides a sense of truth behind the generalized false assumptions, so the stereotypes cannot be

written off as fiction. This conflicted reality of the truth and fiction surrounding stereotypes is what Alexie addresses through numerous characters within his texts, but this is also what condemns him.

Alexie is often criticized for making light of serious Native American issues and profiting from Native American degradation by perpetuating stereotypes when, in truth, he is making light of the stereotypes, such as when characters joke about being alcoholics, and trying to defuse the pain. Stephen F. Evans notes in his article “‘Open Containers’: Sherman Alexie’s *Drunken Indians*” that “[f]ollowing publication of *The Lone Ranger* and *Reservation Blues* (1995) [. . .] Alexie also came under fire from certain quarters for his purportedly negative use of irony and satire – namely, literary connections to (white) popular culture and representations of Indian stereotypes that some consider ‘inappropriate’ and dangerously misleading for mainstream consumption” (46). Many critics were concerned that Alexie’s humor would be lost on a mainstream audience and come off as reality. In addition, even though Alexie’s own experiences are true to his reality, they are not the only truth of Native American existence. Sherman Alexie presents young adult male characters who live difficult lives; humor is infused into the characters’ lives as a coping mechanism to defuse hurt and to balance reservation life with the outside Western world. The characters are in search of a real, connected existence instead of a shallow, disconnected reality filled with stereotypical assumptions. Humor allows the characters to deflate false assumptions. Ase Nygren writes in her article “A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie” that “[o]ne of the most intriguing aspects of Alexie’s fiction is his use of the comic. Although the

subject matters in Alexie's fiction are morally and ethically engaging, the same texts are often ironic, satiric, and full of humor." However, the humor is not appreciated by all readers. Alexie deals with real issues but laces them with humor in order to allow the characters an out; if they were not funny they would be too sad to still exist. These characters are multilayered and complex, and the humor allows the male characters to live a more honest and engaging life.

Humor gives his characters a coping mechanism for dealing with the false and real aspects of stereotypes that divide their worlds, and readers are also able to easily relate to the characters through the humor. Stephen F. Evans writes that "much of Alexie's work to date comprises a modern survival document from which his readers gain strength by actively participating in the recognition of reality as viewed through Alexie's satiric lens or from the reflections of his satiric mirror." The humor is used to abate the outside stereotypes that are used to judge the characters, but the humor is also used to lessen the pain that exists on the reservation because some of the characters have fallen into situations and identities that prove the drunken Indian stereotype true.

The characters are also able to exhibit and live within humor to cope with addictions and hardships by embodying the Native American mythological character of the Trickster that fits the humor within many of the pieces that make up Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. The Trickster can shift shapes and forms and can also infuse the comedic into situations. Franchot Ballinger notes in his article "Ambigere – The Euro-American Picaro and the Native American Trickster" that the "Trickster [. . .] is a comic dramatization of experience flying in the face of ritual" (31).

Alexie's humor fits with this depiction; many of his characters are alcoholics, and this was a reality within Alexie's own life. Instead of focusing on traditions and heritage, the characters are enveloped within the experience of alcoholism. This is what they are surrounded by and know instead of the traditions of the people. However, Alexie uses the Trickster idea to transform his characters into comically dark figures that make jokes about being alcoholics or staying sober. Alexie's humor is dark and often sarcastic, but beneath the humor is the true pain of reality. Alexie infuses his writing with Trickster-like figures in order to defuse sensitive situations and allow his characters to have a means of coping with their addictions. Jimmy is one such Trickster-like character within "The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor" that uses humor to ease his pain with having cancer. He is addicted to making light of serious situations; he does not vocally take his cancer seriously, and he constantly makes jokes about his medical predicament. This joking leads Jimmy's wife to leave him for a period of time. However, humor is what eases Jimmy's pain and allows him to live happily in the face of defeat. Jimmy says, "[Y]ou have to realize that laughter saved Norma and me from pain, too. Humor was an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds" (Alexie 164). Humor gave Jimmy the means to continue on. Ase Nygren writes that "[i]n 'The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor' (from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*), we can read about the Indian man [Jimmy] who is dying of cancer, but who still manages to joke about his situation." Laughter and the Trickster role help to heal psychological wounds because the only way to get over the despair-filled situation is to ease the pain through comedic devices.

However, there is more to the Trickster figure than just humor. A Trickster also disobeys normal rules and behavioral norms. This relates to the characters making jokes about alcoholism, but the real Trickster role is often filled by Alexie himself. He creates characters that break down barriers and do not exist within an accepted sphere of behavior, and he writes of changing identities and alternative structures that contradict European centric behavior. Alexie writes his characters as he pleases without any accepted behavioral or identity patterns. In addition, Alexie creates his protagonists with the strength to fight oppression from within. They have to change themselves and not accept the oppression of stereotypes in order to discredit the stereotypes while moving out of the confines of a reservation existence to achieve personal goals. Alexie plays the Trickster to move his characters outside of traditional comfort zones in order to quash the despair that is infiltrating their existence.

Alexie also connects despair with the perpetuation of stereotypes, and one fundamental stereotype that Alexie plays with regarding alcohol and Native Americans is that all Native Americans are drunks. For example, Victor says, “When a glass sits on a table here, people don’t wonder if it’s half filled or half empty. They just hope it’s good beer” (Alexie 49). They are only focused on drinking. If they wanted to make something of their lives, they could; they are just too stupid and lazy to quit drinking. However, stereotypes like this are often not questioned because they are presented as fact, and Alexie explores the truth that exists within the stereotypes. Deborah Gersh Hernandez writes that “stereotypes don’t get questioned because they are part of what people do know, or presume to know” (21). Alexie presents characters in his texts that struggle

with alcoholism, but he also presents characters that are sober and just struggle with the stereotype that places them as alcoholics. These characters are grouped with their surroundings and judged based on others.

The use of alcohol-related stereotypes is also just an easy way for Alexie's outside world to degrade the Native American characters; some of the non-Indian characters know that the stereotypes of the drunken Indian are inaccurate, but they still use them because they hate Native Americans. The narrator of "Indian Education" discusses passing out at a basketball game and says, "As my white friends revived me and prepared to take me to the emergency room where doctors would later diagnose my diabetes, the Chicano teacher ran up to us. 'Hey,' he said. 'What's that boy been drinking? I know all about these Indian kids. They start drinking real young'" (Alexie 178). The narrator does not drink, but he is grouped in with the ones that do. Debra Merskin writes that "[a]s a method of actual as well as symbolic annihilation, Native Americans have been categorized as one homogeneous group of 'Indians' and considered on the basis of over generalized physical, emotional, and intellectual characteristics" (333). Alexie infuses this reality within his fiction to create a sense of reality in which the Native Americans are reduced to the sum of a few other Native Americans that happen to be alcoholics. This correlation leads to a sense of degradation and defeat, and the characters are then stuck between the truth of stereotypes and the false logic that is further divided between reservation and off-reservation realities of life.

Alexie further uses the stereotype of the drunken Indian to illustrate how damaging the perpetuation of the stereotype is to the mental wellbeing of his

protagonists. Jimmy from “The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor” recounts a time when he and his wife were pulled over for no reason. When Jimmy questions why he was pulled over, the officer responds, “Have you been drinking?” (Alexie 165). Even though Jimmy and Norma do not drink, others, such as the officer, still question them and degrade them by applying the drunken Indian stereotype. This creates personal wounds that are hard to recover from. Brian Maracle states in his text *Crazywater: Native Voices on Addiction and Recovery*, which is filled with first-person narratives on addiction and recovery, that “[m]any native people are also deeply affected by another powerful image – the linkage of native people and alcohol in the ‘drunken Indian’ stereotype” (140). The connection of Native Americans to alcoholic stereotypes applies to Alexie’s fictional characters. They are often degraded by the stereotype because it makes a blunt connection between alcohol and Indians that is universally applied to all Native Americans. The Indian characters then have to deal with the reality that those in the world around them think Native American societies have alcohol issues simply because they are lazy. Alexie’s outside world thinks that Native Americans are worthless and lesser individuals. Within *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, when Arnold goes to his new white high school some of his classmates degrade him by calling him “‘Chief’ or ‘Tonto’ or ‘Squaw Boy’” (Alexie 64). Arnold is looked at as a joke and not a real person due to the negative attitudes and assumptions that many of his classmates hold of Native Americans. Arnold does not fit the stereotypical mold even though some other tribal members do.

This stereotypical reality often places Alexie's characters between the realities of the reservation and the stereotypes that have been placed on the tribe. Causes of alcoholism, such as the destruction the Western-influenced outside world has brought upon the Native populations, are not considered, and these unacknowledged realities cause Alexie's characters to struggle and often to falter in the face of the stereotypes. Alexie uses a sarcastic tone to dislodge the stereotypes from reality, but he could also just leave out the stereotypes and create characters that do not deal with the false assumptions. But ignoring the stereotypical realities would be like his characters ignoring their alcoholism; the problems have to be addressed in order to make them go away. This conundrum creates a dilemma for Alexie; he can ignore the stereotypes and allow them to perpetuate on their own, or he can address the stereotypes and show their reality in order to quash them. Either way, the stereotypes live on. However, Alexie does offer several young adult male protagonists that are young enough to have a fight still left in them to disprove the stereotypes. They grapple with the stereotypes and struggle to break out of the restraints so that they can coexist on the reservation and within the outside world.

Adrian and Victor are two characters that appear in numerous stories within Alexie's collection of stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and they struggle to emerge from the blanket of stereotypes that label them as inferior. The characters are both set within degraded existences on the reservation, and this is similar to the existence that surrounds Arnold within *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Alexie proposes that all three of the characters must leave the reservation behind

in order to achieve success in life, which paints a very negative picture of reservation existence. Adrian and Victor's lives are fraught with obstacles on the reservation, and the characters' lives only allow them to go through the motions instead of actually living conscious, connected lives. This goal of a connected existence, which allows the characters to connect their individual identities with their heritage, is common within many of Alexie's texts.

However, Alexie's protagonists are often impeded from creating a connected existence by the opinions of Western society, so they address the stereotypes in creative ways. For example, one stereotypical opinion is that Indians are just too dumb to quit drinking. Within the selected stories from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and the related film *Smoke Signals*, Alexie presents selected protagonists who face their biggest alcohol-related struggles in regard to their faulty memories; they just cannot remember what they are not supposed to do. The characters' faulty memories provide a humorous setup for many of Alexie's characters, and "humor allows his characters to display strengths and hide weaknesses, to expose prejudices and avoid realities, and to create bonds and construct barricades" (Coulombe). Characters can use humor as a coping mechanism or as a sarcastic way to debunk the faulty logic, and the humor also serves as a connection with cultural members. As Adrian asks for another beer, Victor replies, "Hey we don't drink no more, remember? How about a Diet Pepsi?" (Alexie 44). The humorous aspect of the verbal exchange is that the characters are trying to give up one vice for another, and this new vice acculturates the characters to the Western world specifically with pop culture. This is Alexie's sarcastic way of trying to

end alcoholism. If Adrian and Victor did not need constant reminders that they do not drink anymore, they could stop consuming alcohol, and this situation illustrates the faulty reasoning that the two face off the reservation. Stephen F. Evans writes that “[a]lcohol and its effects are omnipresent, as usual, but often in humorous contexts, as when Adrian momentarily forgets that he is on the wagon and asks Victor for another beer.” By presenting his characters in this way, Alexie is making light of the paradoxical stereotype and showing its absurdity, and, ultimately, the stereotypes veil many characters and hide their true identities from the outside world.

These true identities are often fraught with confusion and inner struggles. The chances of remaining sober are slim and the chances present a perpetual obstacle for the characters to overcome in order to not slide into despair. At one point Victor drinks his coffee straight, but he muses that there is “[n]othing more hopeless than a sober Indian” (Alexie 87). If Victor is sober he will be conscious to the despair and hardships that surround him, and he will realize how hard it will be to overcome the immense obstacles that encircle him. But the haze of alcohol defuses the hurt and despair and leaves open foggy possibilities. Victor thought that “one more beer and every chair would be comfortable. One more beer and the light bulb in the bathroom would never burn out. One more beer and he would love her forever. One more beer and he would sign any treaty for her” (Alexie 88). Beer is like an anesthetic because succumbing to the temptation numbs the ache and leaves one unaware of his/her surroundings. For Alexie’s characters, sometimes remaining in a fog within a shallow, disconnected existence is easier than facing obstacles and demons and seeing life for what it really is.

Adrian and Victor are also in a fog as they struggle with the stereotypes imposed upon them and try to break free. Victor says, “How many times do I have to tell you? We don’t drink anymore.” Adrian replies, “I keep forgetting. Give me a goddamn Pepsi” (Alexie 50). Adrian and Victor are disconnected from reality and not living connected, meaningful lives since they have to be reminded to stick with a decision that will improve their existences. The characters move from being consumed by alcohol to being consumed by popular Western culture through the acceptance of Pepsi. James Cox notes in his text *Muting White Noise: Native American and European American Novel Traditions* that “popular culture literally occupies and dominates Alexie’s fictional Spokane Reservation and the imaginations of his characters” (146). Pepsi is just one aspect of the Western-influenced outside world that has permeated the existence of Alexie’s reservation inhabitants, much like stereotypes.

In addition to the false assumptions regarding Native Americans and alcohol, the switch between Diet Pepsi and beer relates to turning a switch off and on in relation to cultural allegiances, assimilation, and stereotype acceptance. Acceptance of pop culture is used to represent assimilation, but Alexie does not present the use of pop culture, such as Pepsi, in a straightforward manner. Alexie sarcastically writes that Native Americans can decide to accept icons of US culture as their saviors in order to turn their lives around and be happy. Arnold, within *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, says that his hunger can be cured by Kentucky Fried Chicken, even though any food would put his hunger pains to rest. Arnold says, “[S]ometimes, my family misses a meal, and sleep is the only thing we have for dinner, but I know that, sooner or later, my parents will come

bursting through the door with a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken” (Alexie 8). Like Pepsi, KFC is sarcastically seen as a savior that can immediately solve the characters’ problem. Alexie’s sarcastic tone infuses an undercurrent of black humor into the connection among several of his characters. Joseph Coulombe writes that “Alexie’s shifting treatment of humor serves as a means of connection as well as an instrument of separation.” The humor connects the characters with members of their heritage, but it also separates them from the outside world. In addition, Alexie separates the false generalizations from Native Americans while at the same time he allows more people to connect with his writing since he defuses the cultural tension with humor. However, this type of humor can also cause those who do not understand his sarcasm to take the stereotypes as truth; this misunderstanding can then further perpetuate the belief in the stereotypes. Alexie’s humor often falls across a very thin line that readers could interpret in two completely different ways, but the humor also serves as a connection between some of his Native American characters. All in all, Alexie’s dark humor makes fun of the absurdity of Western views in order to offer more realistic views of Native peoples.

One of the omnipresent images in popular Western culture that permeates the existence of some of Alexie’s characters is Pepsi. As Adrian and Victor, within *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, sit in the hot summer sun, Pepsi dominates their conversation. Adrian says, “‘Give me another beer.’ ‘Hey, we don’t drink no more, remember? How about a Diet Pepsi?’ ‘That’s right, enit? I forgot. Give me a Pepsi’” (Alexie 44). Adrian and Victor have replaced their beer with Pepsi, and during this conversation the two are relaxing and enjoying their conversation. Alexie uses Pepsi as a

representation of acculturation to Western pop culture, but Pepsi also symbolizes acceptance and happiness. Joy and satisfaction are at the forefront of the Pepsi marketing machine. Pepsi commercials are filled with people dancing, singing, and having a great time in life (*Pepsi*). The people have no cares or worries and are accepted in America. So Alexie derisively contemplates the possibilities for Native Americans. If they just decide to stop drinking alcohol and pick up the acceptable habit of drinking Pepsi, all their problems will go away, and they will be accepted by society. But if they don't accept popular culture as their salvation, they will forever be drunks. The choice is between being a stereotypical reservation drunk or pop culture and assimilation to Western ways. Without the acceptance of Western culture, the characters will be blocked from entering the Western world by stereotypes. The characters can fix themselves by accepting the stereotypes as truth and succumbing to Western popular culture, but accepting Western-influenced mass media messages moves the characters further away from the truth of their tribal existence and heritage. The characters can only be successful if they assimilate to the outside world, and there is then no in-between or fluid existence for these characters. They are either a stereotype or acculturated to whiteness. They are not allowed to be their true selves; there is no possibility for reality within their existences. Thus, the characters are stuck between two distinct worlds. But Alexie does not write this void in a straightforward manner; he infuses his humor in order to ease his characters' pain, while, at the same time, he eases his other characters and readers into his criticism of Western culture.

With this criticism of Western culture, Alexie sarcastically creates characters who embody the absurdity of stereotypes. One such character is Lester FallsApart, who is also from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Alexie writes, “A few of the really smart-asses about the whole A.A. thing carry around little medals indicating how long they’ve been continuously drunk. ‘Hi, my name is Lester FallsApart, and I’ve been drunk for twenty-seven straight years’” (Alexie 204). Lester is a raging alcoholic who finds his drunkenness humorous. Alexie addresses alcoholism but also humorously shows how the stigma of alcoholism gets exaggerated to create the stereotype of the drunken Indian. However, Lester can also be interpreted to show the reality of alcoholism that exists within Alexie’s literary world because tribal members do not take the issue seriously. Lester can be seen as a sarcastic counter to false assumptions while also being viewed as a cautionary tale for the young inhabitants of Alexie’s world. The alcoholism is not so bad that the characters cannot overcome it, but being an alcoholic is also what the characters can solely become if they do not actively seek out a more connected and true existence. Lester is the divide between truth and potential, and humor helps to bridge the divide between the two versions of what the reality of alcoholism is on Lester’s reservation. The humor also makes the subject matter more palatable by diffusing the uncomfortable topics.

On a more serious level, Victor is a man who struggles with his demons and fears a metaphorical drowning. If he gives into the temptation of alcohol and drowns his sorrows, he will drown within the fog of alcoholism and lose his identity. In addition, Victor is also metaphorically drowning because, through alcohol, he is losing his

conscious grip on reality and losing all connections to the world around him. As he drinks, he is transformed into a different, unconscious person. Even worse, he may die from his alcohol abuse. Victor's thought process is explained:

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

Victor knows what the consequences are for succumbing to alcohol, and he is scared of losing himself to the addiction. But the temptation is a huge obstacle that he has to deal with. When Victor's father drank, "Victor could hear that near-poison fall, then hit, flesh and blood, nerve and vein" (Alexie 6). Victor realizes that alcohol alters a person and changes his/her reality. However, the reality is that a lot of people around him have succumbed to the temptation, lost all sense of personal identity, and are moving through the shallow existence of alcoholism.

In Alexie's novel, so many people have succumbed to the temptation of alcohol and the despair present on the reservation that life starts to begin with the consumption of alcohol instead of just a sexual act. Another character within the collection states, "I was conceived during one of those drunken nights, half of me formed by my father's whiskey sperm, the other half formed by my mother's vodka egg. I was born a goofy reservation mixed drink, and my father needed me just as much as he needed every other kind of

drink” (Alexie 27). Alexie is commenting that the obstacle of alcoholism is so hard to overcome because it is ingrained into his characters, and they are at a greater risk of becoming a truth within the stereotype. Alexie presents almost insurmountable obstacles for his characters, and, in a sense, he creates a society that is doomed to fail most of his characters. In a sense, succumbing to alcohol would allow the characters to bridge the outside stereotypes with the realities of reservation life and remove what was once their individuality. The sliver of truth that exists within the stereotypes would then be proven true, and the reality of those that have not succumbed to stereotype fulfilling activities would be erased.

Alexie creates another doomed society in his semiautobiographical text *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* where Arnold must conquer the false logic and truth within stereotypes. Arnold, like Alexie, is surrounded by alcoholics throughout his childhood, so the fact that Alexie creates a story infused with alcoholism does not necessarily show that Alexie is perpetuating stereotypes; he is only presenting one reality that does not apply to all Native Americans. In a sense, Alexie’s reality is stereotypical, so creating this environment for Arnold allows him to break out of the constraints of his tribe but also the constraints that the Western world places on him through stereotypes. Alexie perpetuates the stereotypes in order to break them down. Arnold is the one that can prove the stereotypes wrong, and he is very blunt with his reality. Arnold simply states what his life is like, “My mother and father are drunks” (Alexie 16). So even though drunken Indians are stereotypes, Alexie is using the stereotypes to show that they apply to some but not all Native Americans, and he is specifically using stereotypes with

Arnold in order to debunk them, even though there is a semblance of reality behind them that is often not explained or considered. Devon A. Mihesuah notes in her text *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities* that “liquor was used by many Indians as a way to escape the grief of losing one’s family, friends, lands and culture, as well as to mitigate the social isolation and homesickness they felt” (97). Personal and tribal problems lead many of Alexie’s characters to abuse alcohol, and this mirrors real-life conditions on some reservations. Alexie also infuses Arnold’s world with the reality of why the stereotypes exist. Arnold explains his reservation life, saying, “[P]lenty of Indians have died because they were drunk. And plenty of drunken Indians have killed other drunken Indians” (Alexie 158). This drunken Indian stereotype relates to what Arnold experiences on his reservation, and the reality of his life allows the stereotypes to serve as a possible bridge between the outside world and life on the reservation; the stereotypes serve as the obstacle that Arnold must conquer in order to gain acceptance in the off-reservation culture.

Conversely, the perpetuation of the reality of the drunken Indian also stems from the characters’ refusal to admit a problem. There is a divide between reality and drunken reality, and characters such as Arnold’s dad cannot get to reality if they are always in the fog of a drunken reality. Arnold’s father does not admit that he is a full fledged alcoholic. He says, “I’m only an alcoholic when I get drunk” (Alexie 107). His refusal to acknowledge that he has a problem is indicative of his refusal to treat his problem. But Arnold does not just go along with this false logic. He knows that his father has a perpetual problem, and he does not understand how his father could say something like

this. Arnold's father is not ready to change who he is; he wants to continue to live his life as an alcoholic. However, Arnold admits, "Yeah, Dad is a drunk" (Alexie 46). Arnold's father is stuck in a shallow existence of denial, and Arnold wants to avoid such a reality for himself.

Like alcohol, death also presents an obstacle for Arnold that is hard to overcome. Arnold expresses that the biggest difference between white people and Indians is the number of funerals they have gone to. Arnold says, "All my white friends can count their deaths on one hand. I can count my fingers, toes, arms, legs, eyes, ears, nose, penis, butt cheeks, and nipples, and still not get close to my deaths. And you know what the worst part is? The unhappy part? About 90 percent of the deaths have been because of alcohol" (Alexie 200). Death and funerals are a continuous reality on Arnold's reservation, but most of the deaths are the result of stereotype fulfilling activities. This leads to a sense of despair and defeat on Arnold's reservation that can cause others to fall into the trap of stereotype realities. Arnold sees his father willingly falling into alcoholism. This denial and defiance causes some characters to distance themselves from the reservation. For example, Seymour within the film *The Business of Fancydancing* only comes home to the reservation for funerals. Seymour, like Arnold, has a very bleak reality in relation to his ties to the reservation. Arnold and Seymour have reasons for why they want to distance themselves from their reservations. They cannot remove the pain of loss from their lives unless they remove the realities of reservation life from their existences. Alexie is making these characters distance themselves from the reservation in order to have a life that is not filled with pain and loss.

Even though Arnold is trying to break out of the stereotypical mold, his honest and productive life is still adversely affected by the degenerate actions of those around him, and Arnold's confusion and anger in relation to his family and tribe hits a boiling point when his grandmother's life is cut short. Arnold explains that "she was walking back home from a mini powwow at the Spokane Tribal Community Center, when she was struck and killed by a drunk driver" (Alexie 157). The grandmother's death illustrates the reality of Arnold's world, but to some it is just another funeral. Even though Arnold does not drink, his existence is still being controlled by alcoholism due to the actions of the characters around him. The tribe is impeding Arnold's progress to an honest and fulfilling life; obstacles are constantly placed in Arnold's path to progress. Arnold is devastated by his grandmother's death, but Arnold's "grandmother's last act on earth was a call for forgiveness, love, and tolerance" (Alexie 157). She wants her death to serve as a lesson and bring people together in a quest to rid themselves of the horrors that alcoholism creates and craft a new future for the reservation.

A new future would encompass recovery, and Alexie uses humor to illustrate the process of alcohol recovery that has the potential to bridge his fictional reservation world with what is beyond the reservation boundaries. Instead of providing the truth to the stereotypes, the characters can break down the stereotypes and prove them wrong by not engaging in stereotype-fulfilling activities. Alexie places his characters within a bleak reality that is filled with alcohol and despair, but he allows his protagonists to remain separated from the rest of his characters so that they can see their flaws. The protagonists

have to be able to shrug off and joke about what happens around them in order not to fall into the despair of poverty.

Poverty ends up being a defining feature for Arnold that holds him back. Arnold says, "I am really just a poor-ass reservation kid living with his poor-ass family on the poor-ass Spokane Indian Reservation" (Alexie 7). Arnold has to live off of government subsidized food, and he frequently goes without a meal. Arnold ties poverty and hunger together; "Poverty = empty refrigerator + empty stomach" (Alexie 8). This equation immediately puts Arnold at a disadvantage for learning and succeeding because he is often hungry and preoccupied with where his next meal will come from, and poverty quashes Arnold's potential. Arnold states that "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" (Alexie 13). Arnold is reduced to the basics of survival, and being poor really limits Arnold's possibilities for integration into the world beyond the reservation. He will be looked down upon and treated as a lesser human due to his socioeconomic level and the fact that he lives on the reservation and receives government assistance.

Being poor and the stereotypes associated with being poor place Arnold at a high risk for failure in school because both he and the people around him feel that poor people do not deserve opportunities. Arnold works hard for his education at Reardan High School, but the stereotype of Indians being lazy drunks puts him at an even greater risk of not being successful and crumbling under the outside influences and stereotypes. Without money and opportunities, choices are eliminated, and survival, not advancement and progress, becomes the focus of life. Arnold is stuck with the label and reality of

being poor and all of the negative connotations that go with this, and poverty creates a very shallow existence for Arnold as he battles to survive. His lower class status creates many obstacles that those in higher classes do not have to face and do not understand.

Arnold also says that it is easier to stay poor than try to break out of poverty.

Arnold says, "Poverty doesn't give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor" (Alexie 13). Poverty and despair is the reality for most of the tribal population that surrounds Arnold including his parents; they have fallen into the despair and reality of the poor, lazy Indian stereotype. Arnold says that his parents "dreamed about being something other than poor, but they never got a chance to be anything because nobody paid attention to their dreams" (Alexie 11).

Arnold's parents did not have the strength to overcome the obstacles that surround them. They did not pursue an education or careers and have fallen into despair and alcoholism; they have become the label that the outside world placed on them.

Even though Arnold wants to avoid this stereotypical reality, walking away from the reservation is a complicated task. If Arnold stays, he, like his parents, will have to give up his dreams and goals. However, if he leaves he will suffer a backlash from his tribe. While Arnold's parents support his decision, the tribe as a whole has a negative reaction. Bruce Barcott notes in his review of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* that "[o]n the rez he's considered a traitor" (2). In the tribe's eyes, Arnold should be happy with what he has. Arnold not only has to face the obstacles of poverty, but he also has to face this backlash from his tribe. The tribe has created the stereotype that

anyone that decides to leave the reservation is a traitor and should be cast aside; Arnold is dead to them.

The tribe's negative response causes Arnold to think that he only deserves the reservation, and he is in danger of following in his ill fated parents' footsteps. Arnold says, "Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of me. I didn't deserve to be there. I knew it; all of those kids knew it. Indians don't deserve shit" (Alexie 56).

When opportunities are presented to Arnold he is not sure what to do; he seems to have a fear that it will all be taken away from him if he accepts these new avenues in life.

Arnold is experiencing culture shock. Even though Arnold makes the tough decision to go to Reardan and follows through with his plan, he still has this sense of zero entitlement. Since he is surrounded by poverty, pain, and depression, he does not feel that he is good enough to have a more advanced and up-to-date education. Even though Arnold is smart and determined, the sense of defeat still permeates his being and leaves him questioning his value. He continues to fall back into the reality of the stereotypes that surround him off and on the reservation even though he is on a path to proving the stereotypes wrong.

Obviously, Arnold faces obstacles related to being the new kid in school, but he also faces obstacles in relation to being Native American in an all-white population. Arnold describes his confusion by saying, "What was I doing at Reardan, whose mascot was an Indian, thereby making me the only *other* Indian in town?" (Alexie 56).

Immediately, Arnold is faced with the stereotypical image of an Indian embedded within the school mascot. The mascot makes Arnold appear as something fictitious that can be

bended and shaped to meet the needs of the school; Arnold is not real and will just be used by others. He immediately has to fight off the connotations associated with the school mascot caricature. A lot of what the other students know about Native Americans is tied to the false ideas and images that the mascot creates, and Arnold now has to fight off these false assumptions and get people to understand him as an individual. His tribe does not understand his educational desires, but his school does not understand his heritage. Once he gains one element of his life, another one crumbles. Neither one of Arnold's worlds understands who he truly is.

One reason for this sense of impossibility is that a majority of the tribal members hold Arnold in contempt. Arnold explains the thought process on the reservation, “[S]ome Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you *become* white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful” (Alexie 131). The tribe itself ties poverty and despair to being Native American, and they conversely tie success to being white. Alexie is illustrating the unfavorable conditions that the tribe creates in order to stop Arnold from deserting the reservation, but Alexie pushes Arnold away in order for him to gain success. Alexie places the tribal characters in a perpetual cycle of despair, and Arnold is also called racist names by his fellow tribal members. Arnold says, “A lot of them call me an apple” (Alexie 131). They are saying that Arnold looks like an Indian on the outside, but he is really white on the inside. Michael Garrett and Eugene Pichette write in their article “Red as an Apple: Native American Acculturation and Counseling With or Without Reservation” that “derogative terms such as ‘apple’ [. . .] reflect a racial/cultural no-win situation that some Native

Americans experience when caught between two cultures in which they are 'red' on the outside and 'white' on the inside." This degrading comment stems solely from Arnold's desire for a better education. Because he wants more, Arnold is labeled as a fake and degraded by his own tribe. In their eyes, he is a deserter who is commingling with the white enemy, and they want nothing to do with him.

After the tribe has degraded Arnold for a while, he comes to realize that "Indians can be just as judgmental and hateful as any white person" (Alexie 155). The progression within the tribe is stunted, and they no longer know how to move forward with success. Arnold states, "We Indians have LOST EVERYTHING. We lost our native land, we lost our languages, we lost our songs and dances. We lost each other. We only know how to lose and be lost" (Alexie 173). Alexie writes that, without the outside world, the tribal inhabitants will not achieve their potential. However, Alexie's tribe does not know how to accept Arnold not being happy with loss; Arnold wants to gain in life and make more of himself. This leads to Arnold realizing a pan ethnic truth; "The world is only broken into two tribes: The people who are assholes and the people who are not" (Alexie 176). The people who see him for who he truly is and do not make superficial judgments are now the people that are good, and Arnold decides that he belongs to a lot of different tribes. He says, "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" (Alexie 217). Arnold is a complex person who cannot be judged or classified according to one trait or aspect of his life. He has become a more well-rounded person through his experience of leaving the tribe for an education

even though the tribe presented a huge obstacle to his success. In a sense, the tribe proves to be Arnold's biggest obstacle because with their support he would have had a much more seamless transition with opposition from only one part of his life. All in all within Alexie's world, Arnold represents forward progression and defiance in the face of severe limitations and stereotypes, and Arnold creates his own identity that allows him to bridge the worlds he wants to be a part of, even if others do not accept him and make false judgments.

Alexie creates realistic views of Native American life that fall in line with prevailing stereotypes, specifically with alcohol and poverty, and Alexie illustrates the effect the stereotypes have on the populations within his texts. With this, he creates a very bleak picture of reservation life filled with alcoholism and poverty. The perpetuation of the myths and realities that surround stereotypes cause Alexie's characters to face great obstacles in bridging the realities of reservation life with the outside Western-influenced world in part because their own actions prove the stereotypes true. Arnold and other characters have to deal with the perpetuation of alcoholism on the reservation, but the characters also have to combat the stereotype that they are all drunks with no ambition. These realities create a divide among multiple worlds; however, Arnold offers a fighting chance for the future with his perseverance and determination to overcome the obstacles that are thrown into his path as he creates a true identity for himself that is free of stereotypes.

ALEXIE'S NORMATIVE TWO-SPIRIT CHARACTERS

Sherman Alexie creates striking protagonists who inhabit alternative existences that go against the norms of Western culture within *The Toughest Indian in the World*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and the film *The Business of Fancydancing*. The concept of alternate existences is most evident when some of Alexie's characters are viewed through a two-spirit lens. These characters must reconcile not only their tribal and non-tribal existences with each other but also the traditional lines within Western normative gender and sexuality practices. Wesley Thomas, Sue-Ellen Jacobs, and Sabine Lang write in “‘...And We Are Still Here’: From Berdache to Two-Spirit People” that “two-spirit people try to reconcile themselves with their respective communities and create a role for themselves within those communities instead of withdrawing from them” (115). Two-spirit individuals strive to maintain a connection with their traditional heritage while incorporating sexual and gender constructions in various ways. The traditional boundaries of Western sexual and gender categories are not followed, and two-spirits combine these pieces of identity to create fluid existences that allow them to blend traditional Western gender, sexuality, and sex roles. For instance, a male two-spirit individual can combine traditional female gender roles and traits with the male sex; however, the individual is not then limited to the female traits and is able to move between the male and female traits that are characteristic of Western culture. Two-spirit individuals, thus, do not have static existences and identities, and the identities and practices vary for each two-spirit individual.

This fluid identity often creates confusion within Western-influenced society. The combination of gender, sexuality, and sex that does not follow the Western norm combined with identities that are not static causes some to label two-spirit practices as deviant. The identity variation is not standard procedure within Western-influenced society, so it is considered wrong. This paradox between Alexie's characters' individual identities and accepted Western practices creates a stressful and tense existence for the characters. This tense existence continues because accepted European ways of life have infiltrated tribes and caused a severe reduction in the practice of two-spirit identity. Two-spirit identity is original to Native Americans, so the protagonists' identity pieces directly tie to Indian ancestry and heritage. The protagonists are trying to reclaim their identities and a piece of their heritage through a layered existence. The young adult Indians have to rectify their inner selves with the societies around them; this leads to obstacles from European influenced societies that include reservation inhabitants.

The two-spirit characters grapple as they come to terms with their true identities in the face of opposition from reservation inhabitants and the outside Western-influenced world, so two-spirit identities allow the characters to create modern identities with ties to the past so that they can inhabit individual and historical existences. Additionally, Native American cultures and practices are often at odds with Western-influenced cultures. For example, the Navajo have historically allowed gender and sexual variance. Tribes such as the Navajo have a plethora of two-spirit documentation, but in other tribes there is not

a lot of hard evidence of two-spirit roles, which makes the topic all the more intriguing.¹ However, tribal specificity is no longer as acknowledged as it once was since two-spirit identity is a modern concept that any Native American that practices gender and sex variance could apply to him/herself. Daniel Heath Justice writes in his article “Two Spirits: A Story of Life with the Navajo” that “[o]f all facets of Indigenous life, none has perhaps been more fascinating, titillating, repulsive, or bewildering to Euro-Western observers than those of Native gender mores and sexualities” (223). Though tribal specificity is no longer as acknowledged as it once was, the Navajo serve as a historical reference.

Alexie illustrates a hostile outside world that has influenced Native American practices so that his two-spirit characters are not universally accepted. He writes of how the Western world’s confusion towards individuals with alternative identities has infiltrated reservation acceptance, but Alexie makes his characters go through a process of self discovery in order to lead lives that fulfill their true identities. In addition, Alexie does not portray his characters as deviant. Even though many of the characters surrounding the male two-spirit protagonists lack an understanding of two-spirit identities and make fun of and do not accept alternative lifestyles, Alexie creates the two-spirit characters as being completely normal.

Alexie boldly creates these characters that diverge from Western normative practices, and he offers no apologies or explanations. This allows Alexie’s characters to inhabit lives that are not only defined by their sexual and gender identities. The

¹ The two-spirit term was coined in 1990 to replace the term berdache, which is often viewed as offensive due to the etymology of the word.

characters are thus more fully formed and allowed to progress through life without being first labeled as abnormal; Alexie's characters are able to inhabit a two-spirit identity and live their lives while maneuvering through homophobic society. Alexie places his characters in a positive light and allows them to be full individuals. Lisa Tatonetti, in her article "Sex and Salmon: Queer Identities in Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*," notes that "Alexie's work in *The Toughest Indian* is representative of his outspoken championship of queer issues" (6). In this text and many others, Alexie creates two-spirit characters that are written as normal; the characters are not the problem. Instead, homophobia is one of the major problems. The characters face this opposition while developing their own lives and pursuing their own destinies. Within *The Toughest Indian in the World*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and the film *The Business of Fancydancing* Alexie creates characters that express two-spirit identities and make no apologies for their ways of life and emotions while moving forward and developing sexual and gender identities that challenge the notion of the fixed, Western binary system of sex and gender. In addition, the characters also construct two-spirit identities through their connections with their heritage and the outside world that place them on the dividing line between two very distinct ways of life.

The most layered and in transition two-spirit character that Alexie creates is the narrator within the title story of the collection *The Toughest Indian in the World*. The narrator is a Spokane Indian reporter who only picks up Native American hitchhikers. He is always reporting on events from the outside, and this outside view causes him to have few real experiences. The narrator says, "I'm a feature writer, and an Indian at that,

so I get all the shit jobs. Not the dangerous shit jobs or the monotonous shit jobs. No. I get to write the articles designed to please the eye, ear, and heart. And there is no journalism more soul-endangering than journalism that aims to please” (Alexie 25). The narrator is living on the periphery of everything and feels that he has lost his soul and identity. He is also immersed in the white world that surrounds the reservation and has thus grown distant to his heritage. He is just going through the motions in life with his job, his girlfriend, and his heritage. He has no real connections or experiences with anything. This leads him on a quest to find something real outside of and within himself; he is looking for a physical and spiritual awakening. He finally experiences a real connection and actively participates in his life when he picks up a hitchhiking boxer that he ends up having sex with; he experiences pleasure and pain with the sexual encounter, but he also experiences honesty and real emotions. The sexual encounter with the boxer awakens the narrator to life and pushes him on a path to reconnecting with his life and heritage. The next morning the narrator says, “I traveled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die” (Alexie 34). The narrator is returning to his reservation and heritage, and placing the narrator within a two-spirit identity allows him to come across as strong and independent instead of just rebellious. Even though the narrator does not place himself under the two-spirit banner, the narrator as a two-spirit individual gives more meaning to his identity, and his actions then place him as being normal and natural instead of different and deviant. The two-spirit identity allows Alexie’s character to freely exist.

The narrator's quest for a true and connected life leads him to an identity that includes a fluctuating sexuality that guides the way to a reconnection with his heritage, and the narrator's shifting identity helps to place him within traditional and historical Native American two-spirit practices, even though he would probably not identify himself as two-spirit since his actions serve as an awakening and are new to him. He is following through on desires and impulses, and he is experiencing a fluctuating identity that is new to him. Until he is sure where his desires ring true, he will not be in a mindset to clearly define his identity structure, and, prior to his moment of recognition, he unconsciously meanders through life. There is no real feeling behind anything he does; he just does what he thinks a heterosexual man should do. But these shallow experiences leave him empty, and he searches for something meaningful in his life that produces true, honest, and spontaneous emotions. The narrator knows something is missing, but he has not figured out what that missing element is. He continues to evolve, but he is on a meandering quest.

The character's awakening allows him to build a real connection with his culture through a modern identity that Alexie writes as being completely natural. This identity allows the narrator's fluctuating sexual practices to be considered normal, and this fits within Alexie's more nonchalant writing of this character in regards to switching from sex with a woman to sex with a man. Alexie is showing that the narrator's actions are perfectly normal and no big deal, even though many people around the character may see this as deviant behavior. The narrator's actions meander just as his identity is malleable so that he can traverse the course of varying channels of identity and existence.

For example, the narrator's two-spirit identity relates to his sexual pairings with men and women, as well as his search for a reconnection with his tribal heritage. He is seeking out a new identity that allows him to center himself with his true feelings and his culture. In the past the narrator was with a woman, but the narrator speaks of an unfulfilling sexual relationship with his former white girlfriend Cindy. He went through the motions because he felt like he had to, and that was what he was supposed to do as a man. However, there was no feeling or enjoyment behind his having sex with her. The narrator states, "During lovemaking, I would get so exhausted by the size of her erotic vocabulary that I would fall asleep before my orgasm, continue pumping away as if I were awake, and then regain consciousness with a sudden start when I finally did come, more out of reflex than passion" (Alexie 25). He feels no connection to her, and, like his reporting, sex with her is more of an out-of-body experience than a union. But when sleeping with a woman, the narrator fits in with the accepted norms of society that surround him because he appears heterosexual. However, "[t]he narrator's reaction to his partner is inconsistent with expectations regarding the performance of heterosexual masculinity" (Tatonetti 13). He does not crave sex with his girlfriend; he does not have the urges and desires that a heterosexual man would have. However, he goes through the motions in order to fit in with a dominant heterosexual society. "The narrator's description of his short-lived relationship with his co-worker Cindy... appears to be a sort of locker-room story, a performance of masculinity designed to situate the teller firmly within an accepted version of heterosexuality" (Tatonetti 12). He does not want to be judged or deemed as an outcast by society, so he sleeps with a white girl as an

assimilation practice to fit in with the Western-influenced world that he has become a part of. The narrator is trying to fit in with white, heterosexual culture by acting like those around him. However, Alexie makes it clear that it is not normal for this man to be having sex with a woman; it is pulling the narrator further away from his identity that includes a connection to his heritage. With Cindy, the narrator continues with his unconscious existence. He says, "In daily conversation, she talked like she was writing the lead of her latest story" (Alexie 25). He has no natural connection with Cindy just as she has no real connection with him; he is unconnected with her just as he is with his reporting. He only reconnects with the world and himself after having sex with the Native American fighter. When he is with Cindy, he is like a robot and not really alive to what is happening; he is not living his life. He is just on autopilot and superficially rejecting a two-spirit existence that includes a cultural connection.

However, when the narrator gets the chance to have a real experience with a Native American hitchhiker, he lengthens their encounter in order to allow more to happen. He is seeking out a genuine experience that fulfills his desires and reconnects him with his culture and who he is; he is no longer with a white woman and is now with a Native American man. Alexie writes, "The narrator's fascination with the hitchhiker's physicality, his attention to the small details of his passenger's appearance, portends the two men's impending intimacy" (Tatonetti 13). The novel idea behind this male/male sexual pairing is that Alexie's narrator does not make a huge choice about his sexuality. There are no thoughts of sin or danger, and there is no crisis. "The narrator's yearning to 'know about' the fighter is merely one of many implicit signals of his ultimate decision to

know the fighter sexually” (Tatonetti 13). Alexie creates a character that just flows into a sexual encounter with another Indian man; this is just the natural progression that the character takes. Gilbert Herdt writes within *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* that “[s]pirituality, power, sexuality, gender, identities, and desires are what constitute an individual” (Jacobs 280). The narrator’s desires, gender, and submissive nature when having sex with another man lead him in a direction that ultimately reconnects him with his heritage and himself in order to bridge together the various aspects of his life. Like the hitchhikers whom he picked up who were “usually headed home, back to their reservations or somewhere close to their reservations,” the narrator finally returns home (Alexie 24).

However, this reconnection is tempered by the homophobic nature of society, which spilled over into the reader reaction this story received when it was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1999. The explicit gay sex scene, though brief, caused intense reader reactions. In an interview with Joelle Fraser in 2001, Alexie noted that the story “really brings up the homophobia in people.” Alexie also said that due to the often autobiographical nature of his work, people question whether this experience is pulled from his own life, though people are too uncomfortable to actually ask him. Lisa Tatonetti writes that “Alexie’s inclusion of queer sex provokes [a] strong response among reviewers” (10). Readers were uncomfortable and caught off guard by the nonchalant writing of an alternative lifestyle and sex scene even though Alexie tempers the narrator with some semblance of homophobic reluctance. The narrator espouses some commonly used homophobic phrases in order to place himself within the confines of mainstream

society, even though he does not actually know what his true identity and sexuality are anymore. Once the fighter is ready to have sex, he asks the narrator if he is ready. The narrator responds, "I'm not gay" (Alexie 31). The narrator is saying that he is not gay, but he has assumed the position to have sex with a man. His actions and words do not align; he wants the sex without the identity. He just wants to have this experience on his quest for a real connection. In addition, he is not sure how he is going to feel after the experience, so he does not want to be defined by it. Furthermore, Native American and non-Native American societies have perpetuated the use of stereotypes in relation to sexuality. Within Ase Nygren's article "A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie" Alexie notes that "Indians have accepted stereotypes just as much as non-Indians have" (158). So the narrator is unsure of what composes reality. He is unsure of his true identity, so he tells the hitchhiker fighter, "I've never done this before" (Alexie 31). The narrator does not want his sexuality to be judged, and at the same time the narrator does not want the hitchhiker to think he is experienced at having sex with men. Revealing his level of inexperience allows the narrator to go along with what the fighter wants, and, in addition, he is also not sure what to do. The narrator hides from his sexuality and his heritage partly because he is still not sure of his identity because he is still going through a conversion process. The narrator is at an in-between state because he has not fully investigated his feelings and desires that are developing with his actions.

The narrator also thinly veils his past sexual thoughts of men. He remembers, "I had never been that close to another man, but the fighter's callused fingers felt better than I would have imagined if I had ever allowed myself to imagine such things" (Alexie 31).

This has been in his mind, it is what he wants, and he is finally allowing it to happen. He is very much conscious during this encounter with the hitchhiker as opposed to sex with his former girlfriend. He is also awakened and revitalized after having sex with the fighter, which is symbolized through Alexie's reference to salmon. "[T]he scent of salmon suggests that Alexie's protagonist is productively enabled by his sexual encounter with the fighter" (Tatonetti 17). The narrator is now enabled to make connections with his identity. Like a salmon, the narrator has fought his way back to his center; after the sex, he is able to reconnect with his place of birth. The experience enlivens him and allows him to have real emotions; he is finally honest with himself after experiencing something real and full of meaning. He has no feeling after sex with Cindy, but after sex with the fighter he throws "a few shadow punches" (Alexie 33). The narrator has spontaneous reactions instead of planned responses that fit with what he thinks people expect. He conquers a fear and crosses over into a new reality. He feels strong after what he did; he is full of energy and alive instead of unconscious. However, the narrator also falls asleep "[l]onely and laughing" (Alexie 33). He is happy yet lonely because the fighter is gone; he feels real emotions, even though they are confusing. He finally enters a real-life that is full of confusion and contradiction; he is no longer just following a rote script. This is the type of experience he needed to have in order to feel alive and regain his connection with his heritage and the land. He no longer wants a simplified existence; he wants a complicated network of existence that allows him to feel and to be connected to the various worlds that define his life and identity.

With these newfound feelings and actions, he unknowingly makes a connection with contemporary two-spirit practices. He assumes a modern identity by switching from sex with a woman to sex with a man; however, he also moves from being assimilated into a dominant Western-influenced culture to returning to his roots and reconnecting with his heritage. He is consciously making decisions and living life instead of just going through the heterosexual motions that are not true to his real identity. He finally experiences what he was craving, and now he knows how it makes him feel. He reconnects with his heritage by having sex with the Indian hitchhiker, and the sex is a new experience for him that is filled with happiness and pain. But the physical pain awakens him to what he is doing and allows him to feel an honest emotion and have an awareness of his body. He is able to have a cultural, racial, and sexual connection through his interactions with the fighter, and his actions answer a question for him even though the confusion may just really be starting with his identity. "Alexie's unnamed narrator in 'The Toughest Indian in the World' finds queerness and a venue for cultural identification" (Tatonetti 27). This personal and cultural identification is brought back to him through sex with a man, and the pairing did not lead to bad things. The narrator reconnects with his tribe and leaves the confines of homophobia behind. The narrator says, "In bare feet, I traveled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die. At that moment, if you had broken open my heart you could have looked inside and seen the thin white skeletons of one thousand salmon" (Alexie 34). He is able to reconnect physically and spiritually with the land, so homosexuality is connected with renewal and rebirth within this piece by Alexie. "In 'The Toughest Indian in the World,' then, Alexie figures gay male sex as

an avenue for cultural renewal” (Tatonetti 13). Through a variant sexual identity that aligns the narrator with a contemporary two-spirit existence, he is able to reconnect with what he lost in his life. He is now on a quest for personal and spiritual enlightenment that leads him back to the foundations of his existence with his culture and connects all the pieces of his identity.

Fitting the pieces of the identity puzzle together for young adult Native American men through the renewal of life, education, and the triumph of Native peoples is also the focus within Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Arnold leaves his reservation in order to seek out better opportunities at an all-white high school. He is fed up with his tribe’s poor education system and feels that he needs to attend an all-white high school in order to get the education that he deserves. Arnold is surrounded by poverty and degradation, and most of his family members are alcoholics. His best friend Rowdy is outwardly homophobic due to his father’s influence. Arnold struggles with all of these issues in addition to being the only Native American student at his new school off of the reservation. He meets hate on both sides of the reservation line, but he is resolute in his quest to create an honest and fluctuating identity for himself.

While Arnold is not directly defined as being two-spirit, he possesses many two-spirit qualities, and the term helps the reader understand the components of Arnold’s identity. Like the narrator in “The Toughest Indian in the World,” Arnold sorts out his identity and life as he goes and does not make any grand proclamations about his existence, and both characters are on a path towards personal fulfillment. However, unlike the narrator Arnold inhabits more gender variance than he does sexual variance,

and “[t]here is more to Native American two-spirit identities than sexual orientation” (Jacobs 113). Arnold possesses a well-rounded existence within a two-spirit identity; he has gender variance along with a connection to his heritage. Arnold cares about his education, is thoughtful, and loves his best friend Rowdy. These traits help Arnold to connect with his best friend Rowdy even though he hides some of his identity in order to fit in with the Western societal mold. For instance, Arnold begins to tell Rowdy of his decision to leave the reservation school for Reardan; Arnold says to himself, “I wanted to tell him that he was my best friend and I loved him like crazy, but boys didn’t say such things to other boys, and *nobody* said such things to Rowdy” (Alexie 48-49). Arnold obviously cares for Rowdy a great deal, but homophobia has infiltrated the reservation along with a lack of acceptance for any identity that deviates from what Western society deems as normal or acceptable. This causes Arnold to be unable to express his love for Rowdy, but he does inwardly admit to his feelings. Within this thought, Rowdy is placed as being like the narrator at the beginning of “The Toughest Indian in the World.” Rowdy cannot outwardly handle anyone expressing feelings towards him that could indicate something other than a traditional heterosexual friendship because receiving these words would cause guilt by association for Rowdy. He ends up overcompensating in order to cover up his true feelings.

However, the strong bond between Arnold and Rowdy is very evident when Arnold tells him his school news. Arnold is very concerned about how Rowdy will take the news, and after receiving the news Rowdy says, “You better quit saying that” (Alexie 49). Rowdy is upset that Arnold would even think of leaving him behind, but Arnold

does not want to go alone. He wants Rowdy to come with him, but Rowdy rejects Arnold when he tries to show physical affection. Arnold says, "I touched his shoulder. Why did I touch his shoulder? I don't know. I was stupid" (Alexie 52). Arnold knows that he is not allowed to touch Rowdy because Rowdy does not want to be associated with any variant behavior that is not completely defined as masculine. Rowdy retorts, "Don't touch me, you retarded fag!" (Alexie 52). Rowdy instantly degrades Arnold with a homosexual slur in order to get Arnold away from him and to prove his dominant male heterosexuality. Rowdy is hurt by Arnold's decision; however, Arnold is resolute in his quest to get a better education.

Arnold could stay and try to change Rowdy's attitude and life; instead, Rowdy is left to stew within his own convoluted, homophobic family. Rowdy does not provide Arnold with complete acceptance and has succumbed to homophobic influences, and he has also been raised by a father that does not accept variant identities and gender/sexual practices. When Arnold asks Rowdy's father to give a cartoon to Rowdy he tells Arnold that "it's a little gay" (Alexie 103). Rowdy's father sees males as very aggressive and tough with no room for feelings and sentimentality; so, if Rowdy rejects the dominant identity norms, he is also rejecting his father. For the most part, Rowdy is willing to be alone in order to sustain his masculine appearance.

This dilemma allows anger to build within Rowdy, but Rowdy's anger also stems from Arnold abandoning him and leaving him alone; Rowdy will no longer have anyone like himself to associate with, so he eases his fears with humor. Rowdy's loneliness eventually gets the better of him later on in the text. When the two boys start to

reconnect, Arnold sends Rowdy a picture of his “smiling face,” and Rowdy sends Arnold a picture of “his bare ass” (Alexie 130). The two are reconnecting, and Rowdy is going out on a limb by sending a more provocative picture while still maintaining the cover of humor. Rowdy has advanced a little further in his actions, but his actions could still be easily construed as a heterosexual joke. After the absence of Arnold, Rowdy is a little more forward with his actions and assumes a leading role that could be meant to entice Arnold. But again, because of the image that Rowdy has created and cultivated, he can do a lot under the veil of sexual humor. Humor gives Rowdy the “out” that he can take if he feels his image is in jeopardy. The humor allows Rowdy to straddle the line of existence between accepted practices and what is labeled as deviant behavior; altogether, this places Rowdy within a two-spirit identity.

In contrast to Rowdy’s family, Arnold’s parents and grandmother do support Arnold’s decisions and let him live a life with them that is free from judgment. This allows Arnold’s emotional and more feminine side to develop with his feelings towards his parents. This also allows Arnold to shift his feelings towards females and males, and he is not forced to choose a specific, static identity. “[T]wo-spirit identities shift constantly; they are never definite or static” (Jacobs 289). This practice permits Arnold to show his more feminine side with his feelings for his parents, and he is not locked into a sexual or gender specific identity. All of this plays a role in his spiritual identity that revolves around the love he has for his family. Arnold says of his father, “[H]e loved me so much. He hugged me even closer” (Alexie 55). Arnold has no problem expressing his love for his father, and his father has no problem expressing this love right back.

Arnold's combination of emotions and connection to Rowdy place him within a two-spirit identity, and Arnold's mom and dad support him. They support his decisions and do not try to change him, which allows him to have a happier existence and strive for what he wants in life instead of feeling repressed like Rowdy.

Arnold's grandmother also guides and supports his identity. She accepts him for who he is, and she does not accept homophobia. Arnold thinks that his grandmother is the best thing about the reservation because she practices tolerance. While discussing how people with variant identities and practices have often been seen as something special, Arnold states, "My grandmother had no use for all the gay bashing and homophobia in the world, especially among other Indians" (Alexie 155). Arnold is also deeply affected by the stories that his Grandma tells of divergent sexual and gender identities. Arnold says that "Indians used to be forgiving of any kind of eccentricity. In fact, weird people were often celebrated" (Alexie 155). And Arnold's grandmother continues this tradition by being tolerant and celebrating diversity. When speaking with his grandma, Arnold is left in awe of gay people because she still believes in variant identities. Arnold feels that "[g]ay people could do anything. They were like Swiss Army knives" (Alexie 155). Arnold is embraced by his grandmother's acceptance and feels proud of himself.

Arnold is limited to seeking out his grandmother for acceptance, and when he is with his grandmother he is not judged. "On some reservations there is still a cultural script..., which allows parents and elders to teach feminine boys that they can embody womanly traits without shame" (Jacobs 4). Arnold's grandma wants him to know how

important and special he is, and she espouses her tolerance and acceptance of others while teaching him about tribal traditions. Arnold says, “Gay people were seen as magical, too. I mean, like in many cultures, men were viewed as warriors and women were viewed as caregivers. But gay people, being both male and female, were seen as both warriors and caregivers” (Alexie 155). Arnold’s grandmother is teaching Arnold that different does not equate bad. She hopes that two-spirit identities will once again be accepted on the reservation and that she can spread the seed of acceptance and tolerance so that Arnold can have an honest and accepted life. Arnold says, “My grandma’s last act on earth was a call for forgiveness, love, and tolerance” (Alexie 157). Arnold’s grandma does not want him to succumb to homophobic influences and tries to keep the two-spirit identity alive. Sabine Lang writes within “Lesbians, Men-Women and Two-Spirits: Homosexuality and Gender in Native American Cultures” that “in some cases an elder or relative, usually a grandmother, who recognizes that a child is manifesting personality and behavioral traits of a woman-man or man-woman, will see to it that that child is allowed to grow up to fulfill a gender role according to this special gender status” (99). This is Arnold’s grandmother’s goal; she sees the strength and power within Arnold and does not want him to be repressed.

In addition to having a two-spirit identity, Arnold also takes on additional diverging identities when he steps through the doors of Reardan High School. He is still Native American by heritage, but he is also now considered white by his tribal members due to his association with an off-reservation white high school. He has assimilated himself into the Western world that surrounds the reservation, and the tribe sees him as

giving up on his heritage and people. Arnold's white friend Gordy explains the situation to him. "[T]hey think you're a traitor" (Alexie 132). Arnold has deceived them, so they no longer want anything to do with him. So, in contrast to the narrator in "The Toughest Indian in the World," some aspects of Arnold's two-spirit existence are actually causing him to strain his connection within his tribe. For instance, Arnold now has two other diverging identities in addition to his gender variance since he is a part of two different racial worlds. His home and school lives are very distinct and separate cultures. Arnold says, "Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. It was the opposite of me" (Alexie 56). However, Arnold only leaves the reservation for school and returns each night. Alexie creates the Indian world and the outside white world that Arnold traverses between.

The Reardan life conflicts with life on the reservation, and this creates an identity dilemma for Arnold. He has to act one way on the reservation in hopes of fitting in, and he has to act another way at Reardan in order to try to fit in and combat the stereotypical views that his classmates hold. He faces racism and taunts from his new classmates. Arnold says, "[M]ostly they called me names. Lots of names" (Alexie 63). He does not fit in at Reardan, but he still wants more than what his reservation can offer. Arnold says, "Traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger. I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other" (Alexie 118). The tribe sees Arnold as partly white because he wants more than what they can offer him, but Reardan sees Arnold as Native American, even though he is trying to integrate. Eventually Arnold is accepted by his new classmates, but his

appearance and place of residence still set him apart from them. Arnold can never be his true self no matter where he goes. This creates a major dilemma in Arnold's life; he has reached a turning point and must decide what is important to him. He is being split in two because neither portion of his life meshes with the other portion, but he is also living a two-spirit existence since his identity changes based on his location. Arnold's identity is very fluid. Arnold is smart enough to live any life that he chooses, but he is full of conflict. Arnold must choose between hope and the suffocating reality of despair. If he decides to stay on the reservation, then he must accept the reality of poverty, squashed dreams, and a life that will likely be filled with hopelessness since Alexie offers nothing positive about the reservation experience. But if he selects Reardan, he must give up some of his connections to his tribe and continue to suffer a backlash for his actions. For Arnold, the possibility of bridging the two worlds in order to take the best from both seems almost impossible.

While traversing the two worlds that Alexie has created for him, Arnold does not give up his tribe, even though many of the characters on the reservation feel that he has abandoned his heritage. Arnold no longer fits in on the reservation, yet he does not fit in at Reardan either. Arnold undergoes a change every day that places him within another form of a two-spirit identity that allows him to straddle the line between two societies. He "woke up on the reservation as an Indian, and somewhere on the road to Reardan, [he] became something less than Indian" (Alexie 83). Arnold is not happy about this loss, but he feels it is inevitable with going to a predominately white, off-reservation school. Arnold says, "Some Indians think that you *become* white if you try to make your life

better, if you become successful” (Alexie 131). Some of the tribal characters do not see being successful off the reservation as a benefit to the individual; they see hardship as being part of what makes an Indian an Indian. Arnold’s success off the reservation separates him from his tribe even though he is creating another level of existence to his two-spirit identity. His tribe rejects him for leaving the reservation, but he is also rejected by some of his new classmates because he did not stay on the reservation. However, in Reardan, he is just one ethnicity within the mix of a heterogeneous white identity. Even though the population is considered white, this population classification includes German, Canadian, French, and European among many others, so there are possibilities for acceptance within the mix. This identity crisis causes Arnold to often feel lost. “Traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger” (Alexie 118). He does not fit within any one environment or existence because he represents a blend of multiple environments and existences. Arnold’s identity is not static, and this confuses many people that he associates with.

Arnold’s two-spirit identity further develops as an attraction to females comes into his life, which complicates his relationship with Rowdy. Upon meeting the blond Penelope, Arnold says that he “was emotionally erect” (Alexie 59). But Arnold does not revert to more typical heterosexual male comments in relation to physical attractions and penises. Arnold connects his penis with his emotions and keeps a connection to two-spirit gender identity. He is still a boy, but he infuses more traditionally female emotions into his level of existence. He mixes his gender and sexual identities to create his own

identity. “[W]omen-men and men-women are classified as neither men nor women, but as genders of their own” (Lang 92). His attractions, emotions, and actions place Arnold outside of the binary system of identity since he is a mix of the male sex and female sentimentality and emotions. Arnold also reveals a previous crush on an Indian girl, Dawn. He admits this to Rowdy, and Rowdy tells him that “Dawn doesn’t give a shit about you” (Alexie 75). Rowdy resorts to anger and putting Arnold down because he is jealous. He does not want Arnold to desert his feelings for him, even though he is not ready to outwardly express his own feelings for Arnold. Rowdy, like Arnold, also allows his more feminine emotions to flow when he cries over Arnold’s words. But this remains a secret between the two of them as many other things do. ““Have I ever told anyone your secrets?’ Rowdy asked” (Alexie 74). The two keep a lot to themselves concerning their identities in order to avoid resistance from others. Rowdy and Arnold have hidden their true identities in order to eliminate negative external forces, but Rowdy is still negatively influenced by those around him. Rowdy rejects physical affection from Arnold, so he is not as far along in the process of acceptance as Arnold. They are both still working on their own internal emotions and are not yet comfortable enough to share their identities outwardly. They are working on themselves and their relationship in a private environment. “Due to the influences of white concepts and Christianity, gender variance and homosexual behavior have come to be met with strong disapproval on and off-reservations” (Lang 101). They are both in a world of their own that is met with approval by few people, and right now those people are only within Arnold’s immediate family.

As Rowdy and Arnold battle with their identities and a longing to fit in, Arnold continues to develop his attraction for Penelope. He stares at her, but his connection with her is more about helping her with her eating disorder and racist father. He feels sorry for her and understands what it is like to have damaged parents. However, he also gets sympathy from Penelope, so the physical attraction acts as a smokescreen to cover up his emotional but not physical connection with Penelope. Alexie writes Penelope and Arnold as being mismatched. Arnold says, "I don't know anything about romance" (Alexie 113). They do not work as a romantic couple, but they do have a shared platonic connection. However, Arnold tries to hide behind a romantic smoke screen to conceal his multilayered identity. Arnold says, "Mostly I loved to look at her. I guess that's what boys do, right? And men. We look at girls and women" (Alexie 113). Arnold is not really sure what he is supposed to do to show a physical attraction to Penelope. He just takes a guess in order to cover up his true identity. Arnold is trying to fit in, and this again places Arnold in position with the narrator from "The Toughest Indian in the World." Both are unsure of what their true identities are; they are on a quest for a real and connected experience. However, both go through the traditional motions with their female counterparts in order to maintain the semblance of a heterosexual identity.

Through all of their ups and downs, Rowdy and Arnold do come back together at the end of the text. They send some friendly emails in which they refer to each other as faggots. They play with the white homophobic ideals that have been placed upon them, but they reclaim some of their identities by taking the sting out of the words. Arnold says, "Now that might just sound like a series of homophobic insults, but I think it was a

little bit friendly” (Alexie 197-98). And several of the later encounters culminate in Rowdy and/or Arnold crying; when with each other they exhibit more feminine emotions. They are again revealing their emotions to each other, and Rowdy lets his masculine demeanor crumble. Alternatively, Alexie could allow the characters to remain more traditionally masculine and still have a romantic or sexual chemistry; Alexie seems to fall into a stereotypical path by creating a male bond filled with feminine emotion. However, Arnold admits, “I would always love Rowdy. And I would always miss him, too” (Alexie 230). Arnold will always love Rowdy even if they cannot be together.

Arnold’s feminine feelings and emotions sometimes contrast starkly with some of his actions, such as when he punches another student. “Terms referring to two-spirit people in Native American languages usually indicate that they are seen as combining the masculine and the feminine” as defined by Western culture (Jacobs 103). Arnold may be emotional, but he also resorts to violence in order to stand up for himself when degraded. When he turns more emotional and towards the traditional role of a woman, he does not give up his male related identity. He takes on multiple roles in life through his gender variance, sexuality, and heritage. His identity fluctuates, but he never abandons his heritage and allows himself and his tribe to be degraded. Even though not all of his life is an open book, he still stands up for himself in situations where he is on more equal footing with the taunting individual. For instance, Roger tells Arnold a joke: “Did you know that Indians are living proof that niggers fuck buffalo?” (Alexie 64). Arnold is outraged by this racist comment, so Arnold “punch[e]s Roger in the face” (Alexie 64). Arnold stands up for himself and his culture, and he resorts to male centered aggression

in order to get his point across even though he has also adopted feminine aspects within his identity, which allows Arnold's sexual and gender identities to overlap each other and work together to create his overall identity. This physical event sets Arnold more firmly within a two-spirit identity because Arnold lives a very fluid existence. He meanders across traditional gender boundaries and establishes a moment to moment identity or connection that fits his needs and situation. Arnold is a gender variant chameleon that serves as a prominent example of what it means to be two-spirit.

With Arnold, Alexie creates a teenage character who is not fully ready to admit who he is or outwardly define the components of his identity, but in *The Business of Fancydancing* the male protagonist is older and more comfortable in his own skin. He is then able to more freely admit and define the components of his identity. Although, Alexie also writes the aging male as having more defiance and distance in regards to tribal connections, so he is still striving to reach the full ideal encompassing a two-spirit identity. Without acceptance, the character Seymour seeks distance from his tribe as he hardens as an individual. In this film, Seymour embodies a mix of feminine and masculine traits, but he is missing a complete tribal connection that is a key element of a two-spirit identity. This is why he struggles within himself; he is not fully complete. He grows up on the reservation but then experiences a sexual and spiritual awakening while off the reservation in college. The awakening leads Seymour to abandon his tribe for the outside world. He has found a society that accepts him and is in a relationship with a white man, and he also achieves artistic success off the reservation, which causes him to further distance himself from his tribe. His success and acceptance have strained ties to

the reservation, so, while he has developed his own true identity, he has, in a sense, assimilated to the Western white ways and abandoned his heritage. In addition, he has animosity towards his tribe, and the tribe has animosity towards him because they view him as a deserter. He feels that the tribe never supported him because he never felt comfortable enough to reveal his true identity, but the tribe feels that he has turned his back on them and abandoned his heritage. These feelings lead to a very awkward and emotional encounter when all are brought together on the reservation for a funeral, which is the unifying element in the film.

From the first moments of the film, Alexie establishes Seymour's identity as two-spirit. Seymour expresses his feminine gender practices through dance, and this allows Alexie to immediately place Seymour within a two-spirit identity. Quentin Youngberg, in his article "Interpretations: Re-encoding the Queer Indian in Sherman Alexie's *The Business of Fancydancing*," writes, "In this case, Seymour, the gay male, literally becomes a woman through his performance of the Shawl Dance, a dance that is intended to be exclusively in the cultural sphere of women" (63). This dance is also important because it connects Seymour with his Native American heritage, and Alexie places the gender distinction early in order to show who Seymour naturally is. He has a connection to his heritage and also his individual identity, and the process seems very natural for Seymour. This is the natural identity and path for Seymour even though he has faced many obstacles by choosing to express who he really is with his two-spirit identity.

When Seymour leaves the reservation for college, he is able to shrug off some of the homophobia that surrounds him and explore his true sexual desires within his two-

spirit existence. However, Seymour, like Arnold, has a difficult time reaching a balance between his reservation and off-reservation lives, but he does openly admit his identity with variant sexual and gender practices. Unlike the narrator and Arnold, Seymour has already gone down the path towards an open and honest existence that allows him to outwardly express his two-spirit life. Seymour is able to be open with himself once he leaves the reservation and enters into a more free flowing social atmosphere, and his art serves as the connection with his heritage. Julienne Gage writes in her article “Which Tribe?” that “[i]n the midst of Seymour’s college romance with Agnes Roth, a half-Jewish, half-Spokane native who did not grow up on the reservation, Seymour decides that he is gay” (55). He realizes where his attractions lie, and he is finally comfortable enough with his surroundings and self to admit who he is. Richard Allen Stevens writes, in his article “Gay Identity Development Within the College Environment,” that “environmental contexts are important to fully understand gay identity exploration” (186). Seymour is in an environment that celebrates exploration and diversity, and this environment puts him at ease, much as the boxer eventually puts the narrator at ease and Arnold’s grandmother puts him at ease.

However, Seymour’s comfort is more limited to his off-reservation life since he only returns for funeral ceremonies. Quentin Youngberg notes that the connection “between the Indian and the queer serves to establish a frame for Seymour’s betrayal of his Indian kin” (65). He turns his back on his people in order to be able to live his life without criticism, and arrogance surrounds Seymour in what he has made for himself off of the reservation. He maintains the strained tribal connection while infusing Native

American dance into his life to sustain a spiritual connection with his heritage. Seymour will not compromise the layers of his identity to fit into the narrow scope of existence that inhabits the reservation, and he takes pride in what he has become, which further puts him at odds with his tribe. Alexie again reverts to creating a very hostile tribal environment like he did for Arnold.

Seymour's sexuality and prosperity put him at odds with his tribal existence, and he is seen as a deserter. The tribe is cold towards Seymour, and he does a lot of defending in order to account for his own mixed feelings in relation to deserting his tribe. He leaves to have an honest and open life while exploring new possibilities, but at the same time he distances himself from the reservation. Seymour is wrapped up in his new life, and he left his old life behind. "In the end *The Business of Fancydancing* enacts a process of interpenetration between Indian and queer coding practices that mutually reinforce one another and serve to complicate the viewer's understanding of cultural conflict by dramatizing an intersection between ostensibly separate cultural phenomenon, namely ethnic and sexual identities" (Youngberg 58). The film allows sexuality and gender identities to overlap with cultural identity, illustrating how interdependent all areas of identity are in creating an overall self, even if some of the areas have strained connections. There is conflict among the various identities that Seymour has within his two-spirit existence, but Alexie never portrays Seymour as "wrong" or "deviant." Seymour's way of life is shown to be the right path for him, and his way of life is not wrong because he does not easily fit in with his tribe and expresses variant identities.

This natural process of identity discovery is a key theme within Sherman Alexie's work. He develops two-spirit characters that are not written as being wrong and deviant. Though they face opposition from society, the characters are able to develop their identities and be true to themselves. Lynne Cline writes, in her article "About Sherman Alexie," that "[h]is work carries the weight of five centuries of colonization, retelling the American Indian struggle to survive, painting a clear, compelling, and often painful portrait of modern Indian life" (197). Alexie writes of the "then" and the "now," and he allows readers to understand the influences that have shaped Indian life, such as homophobia. With this, Alexie presents a very bleak picture of defiance in regard to the tribal acceptance of divergent identities. Alexie is realistic with the identity process and shows that time and acceptance go a long way to allowing the characters to fully express their true selves. Arnold, the narrator of "The Toughest Indian in the World," and Seymour all embody two-spirit identities through their sexual attractions, emotions, gender variance, and honesty with themselves and others, and Arnold is left at a point where he can either remain connected with his tribe or continue to create distance between himself and his heritage. In the end, the narrator and Seymour offer two alternative paths for Arnold to choose between.

THE CONFLICTED REALITY WITHIN
THE LESSER BLESSED AND WINTER IN THE BLOOD

While Sherman Alexie creates obstacles for his characters to maneuver on their paths towards existences that connect the various pieces of their identities, James Welch and Richard Van Camp also create obstacles for their protagonists to overcome as they try to connect the various aspects of their identities within *Winter in the Blood* and *The Lesser Blessed*. The male protagonists within the texts must deal with family troubles and dysfunction in order to awaken to their true identities and create new lives for themselves, and, like many of Alexie's characters, the protagonists in Van Camp's and Welch's texts have father issues. All of the protagonists deal with deceased or damaged fathers. The protagonists also both begin by living under a fog of hurt, but coming to terms with their pasts and their families allows the characters to express their true selves. This expression allows the characters to move on from their present reality and create a future existence that is composed of their own actions and beliefs; they must learn to create their own existences and be judged on their own paths in life.

Welch's and Van Camp's protagonists also go through a process to rediscover connections with their heritage that is similar to Alexie's narrator within "The Toughest Indian in the World," and Welch's text also mirrors narratives from *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* by George Bird Grinnell that relate to Blackfoot culture. The selected texts are tribal specific and tell tales that are indicative of Native American culture and experiences where heritage is a layer of identity that the protagonists are seeking to recover. A reconnection with tribal heritage is integral to the identity formation of the

protagonists, so the protagonists are going through an ethnic renewal process that reconnects them with their heritage and the natural world to experience a rebirth. This rebirth renews the spiritual connection between the protagonists and their Indian spirituality. The selected texts boil down to cultural survival with the protagonists striving to maintain all the levels of their existence and identity. If the protagonists are not successful in this quest, they will lose pieces of their heritage and have a disjointed existence that is missing foundational layers. The protagonists within *Winter in the Blood* and *The Lesser Blessed* deal with aspects of a layered world composed of their personal, familial, and geographic conditions that they must integrate so that they can create successful worlds of conscious, active existence.

The confusion between worlds of reality and potential are evidenced within Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed*. Van Camp's protagonist Larry is a Dogrib Indian that has to survive in the face of oppression and hardship. He is sixteen and deals with typical teenage hormones as he lusts after Juliet, a promiscuous teenage girl that dates his friend Johnny. He also has to deal with an abusive father that he witnessed commit rape. He does not really know where to go in life because all he has for an example are his deceitful parents. However, Larry does know that he does not want to end up like his parents. Larry's life is further complicated by the lasting impacts of an accident that he had when he was younger that left him severely burned and unwilling to open up his true identity to others because he is trying to hide his scars and past actions. This infestation of pain is what Larry must struggle with, and he struggles to find his true self that is buried beneath all of the hate and hurt. As a child, Larry speaks of being

buried beneath the pain of his family and illustrates this to a therapist. Larry says, “I see a therapist who asks me to draw how I see myself. I hand in a picture of a forest. He looks closely, says there is no one. I say, ‘Look, there. I am already buried’” (Van Camp 1). Even as a child Larry already felt weighed down by the oppression and hate around him, and this is an overwhelming burden that Larry must conquer in order to take control of his identity.

Larry suppresses the reality of his existence, and he admits this when talking with Juliet and his friend Johnny. “‘Sounds like you’re suppressing something,’ she said. ‘Yeah,’ Johnny said, ‘like his little happy hard-on.’ ‘More like my whole fuckin’ life,’ I said” (Van Camp 34). Johnny knows that Larry is not having sex with anyone and has had his eye on Juliet. However, at this point Johnny has no idea what Larry has gone through in life. This is the first indication Larry gives to either Johnny or Juliet that he has a dark past, and this foreshadows Larry’s eventual revelation to both of these characters. He is currently holding back the truth of his existence because he feels embarrassed and ashamed, and he also does not know how to move forward from his past. He is trapped in an in-between world because he is unable to reconcile the reality of his existence with the truth of who he wants to be and how his past continues to affect his state of mind.

Larry is also stuck between reality and a world filled with stereotypes that quashes his own individual identity. While on a field trip, Larry is verbally accosted by Jazz. Jazz says, “Lysol Larry, I got some warm piss for you to drink. You Indians drink anything, doncha? I got a forty-ouncer with a worm at the bottom. Bite the worm, Larry,

... You gonna walk away from me, faggot? You gonna turn away from me?" (Van Camp 46). The drunken stereotype is further laced with degradation by stating that Indians will drink anything to get drunk, and Jazz also ties in the insults with a more contemporary gay slur that has infiltrated Native populations from Western culture. Larry has to deal with the issue of homophobia even though he is not gay. The homophobic influence, when paired with the drunken Indian stereotype, removes the reality of Larry's existence and makes him something less than an individual. In addition, Larry is a prime example of a man getting judged by a stereotype even though he does not actually fit the stereotype. The alcoholic stereotype is not accurate in regard to Larry because he does not drink, and Johnny confronts Larry on this issue. "'Larry' Johnny said. 'Do you drink?' 'Oh,' I said, 'I had a bet going with my dad that I wouldn't touch a drop of liquor until I turned eighteen. He said he'd give me a hundred bucks if I make it'" (Van Camp 52). Larry illustrates the deceptive and false nature of stereotypes with the realization that stereotypes do not apply to all people.

Larry's reality is also filled with the stereotypes and realities of poverty that correlate with a poor school system; this places Larry at an educational disadvantage. Larry states, "The sad thing about our school was that we were so far behind the system. It's true, and as a result, the students in our school were baby birds falling to their deaths while the school was guilty of failure to breathe. The teachers often sent their own kids down south to get an education" (Van Camp 8). Within this school there is a defeatist attitude, and this flourishes within the students. This is the same situation that Alexie sets up for Arnold within *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Arnold has to

learn from outdated texts with teachers who have given up on a defeated student population. If the teachers are bad and do not care, why should the students? The impending sense of doom permeates Larry and severely limits the possibility that he will be able to survive in any environment.

Larry is also influenced by his friend Johnny, another character that meanders through life and sees the inadequate quality of the school system. Johnny is nice to Larry, but he has succumbed to the influences around him and is more concerned with having sex than doing well in school. Johnny is also “a half-breed” (Van Camp 2). He is stuck between Native and non-Native worlds, so he is not able to fully integrate into either. He is an outcast, and this identity places Johnny within a struggle for acceptance because he feels that he does not completely belong to any race. In addition, Johnny has the same type of school experience as Larry, but this does not hold him back from trying to teach his little brother that school is important. He may have given up on himself, but he has not given up on his brother. Johnny states what is important to his brother Donny. “The only thing you have to worry about right now is how you’re gonna raise those marks!” (Van Camp 48). Even though Johnny and Donny’s mother does not care about school and has the defeatist attitude, Johnny still wants more for his little brother even though Johnny himself falls into the trap of despair. Johnny pushes Donny to do his work because he realizes that he has screwed up his life by not taking school seriously. Johnny does not want Donny to quash his possibilities by his own hand like Johnny did to himself.

While discussing Johnny's brother's grades, Larry asks Johnny what his mother thinks about Donny not doing well in school. Johnny replies, "Mom doesn't give a shit" (Van Camp 49). The mother does not care, and Van Camp indicates her apathy through her absence from the text. However, Van Camp does not make Johnny's brother leave the reservation in order to get a good education. Johnny just tries to get his brother to rise above what is around him. Johnny wants his brother to be able to cross the boundary between the reservation and the Western-influenced outside world; he wants his brother to have options and not just be stuck in a life of despair. However, Johnny does not say that his brother can only be successful if he abandons his reservation and culture; he sees the outside and inside reservation communities as both being part of the success.

The educational possibilities that exist for Larry and Donny directly relate to the realities of the reservation school system that Sherman Alexie creates for Arnold within *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The educational possibilities on Arnold's reservation are not up to par with what he needs in order to be successful and achieve his goals; this is also the reality for Larry and Donny. Poverty has affected the schools in a way that puts the students at a severe disadvantage when compared to the off-reservation schools. Arnold, Larry, and Johnny are angry, embarrassed, and ashamed by the education that their tribes offer. Arnold says, "My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. That is absolutely the saddest thing in the world" (Alexie 31). Arnold realizes that what his parents studied did not help them to succeed, so he realizes that he has even less of a chance of succeeding with an education that is based upon outdated textbooks. This

outdated environment leads to an attitude of failure with many students just giving up; Johnny is an example of this. The students around Arnold and Larry wonder why they should put any effort into their education when no one within their tribes is putting any effort into making the education system better. They also see a bleak reality around them that foreshadows a limited future; they have no possibilities, so why should they even try? This attitude coupled with an inadequate level of education makes a connection with the off-reservation world more difficult and more unlikely, and a poor education even makes it less likely for the characters to be successful if they stay on the reservation.

Larry eventually perseveres and proves the stereotypes wrong by slowly revealing small pieces of his identity to those he trusts. Van Camp is patient with revealing Larry's motivations in order to mirror his path of self discovery. This allows a hint of mystery and anticipation to infuse Van Camp's text, and the mystery in the text mirrors Larry's own struggle to reconcile his past with his future. He reveals small bits of his life to himself and others, and it takes a process to discover his identity as he tries to fuse together his world of hurt with his own true identity and potential. This allows Larry to move from a more detached and shallow existence to a true and interactive identity and life where he is making conscious decisions and not just going through the motions to survive.

In order to accomplish this identity expression, Larry must remove the veil of black humor that covers him so that he can reveal his demons and life of pain. Kristina Fagan writes that "[w]hen asked how he was burned, [Larry] jokes, 'I got kissed by the fuckin' devil, man. They're fuckin' hickeys. He sucked me good' (87). This joke is an

escape from a difficult question” (213). In order to get away with not answering the question, Larry makes a joke to defuse the situation and remove his burns from the focus of attention. Larry does not yet know how to reconcile his past with his present reality that will lead to his future

Larry’s dark past and family life infiltrate his reality and hinder his process of identity creation. His father was abusive and sexually assaulted his mother; Larry was also severely burned while sniffing gas and lighting a match when he was younger, and he copes with these issues that cause him to be very self-conscious. He does not want other people to see his scars, which inhibits him from living a free existence. In addition, he also has other pent up issues from seeing his father rape his aunt, and Larry’s mother knew about the rape but kept it a secret. Larry says, “My aunt came over the next day and said, ‘I feel like someone’s been inside me,’ but my mom talked her out of it. My mom fuckin’ knew!” (Van Camp 88). His family life is filled with deceit and hurt, so Larry does not have anyone in his family that he can trust and go to for advice. He is lacking any real mentor in his life. Coming from such a convoluted past filled with abuse and fear causes Larry to be leery of others; he has trust issues. Kristina Fagan notes that “[t]he story is a complex exploration of the consequences involved in communicating or not communicating about trauma” (213). Larry’s family does not want to address any issues, so he follows in their footsteps, even though the pain and anger are destroying his existence. If he cannot talk about the problems and get them out into the open they will just continue to eat way at him. This type of family life also puts Larry at a severe disadvantage to having healthy relationships in life; he is more apt to accept relationships

with people who are harmful since he is looking for some sense of belonging and may settle for any connection to fill his void. He just wants to attach himself to anyone that is willing to accept him and have some sort of real relationship even if it is not a healthy connection.

The biggest obstacle that Larry faces is confronting his past; in the beginning of the text he hides from his past. He is not able to reconcile what he has gone through with the person he wants to be. He hides what happened to him as a child and what he witnessed his parents do. “Within his family and his culture, Larry is not encouraged to deal with his trauma by directly talking about it” (Fagan 212). His mother never addresses the issues of the past, so Larry is locked in silence. He has an inner struggle with whether or not to continue to hold in his pain; however, as he later starts to confront his past, he begins to deal with some of his issues and explores the dark part of his life. His relationship with Johnny, though it does not last, allows Larry the opportunity to discuss his life and get out what has happened to him. And Johnny is a relatable person that has also experienced hardships in life. Johnny is much like Alexie’s Rowdy within *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*; Johnny and Rowdy, though both damaged, help their respective protagonists to come to terms with their identities in their own separate ways. Even though Larry’s parents have perpetuated the problems that occur within their family and region, Larry is eventually able to start to deal with his issues, and his stepfather offers Larry some guidance and acceptance.

This connection creates the stability that Larry craves in order to make connections with others and to develop a sense of belonging that is healthy. Larry can

then also address his past act of self-mutilation much like Alexie's Arnold deals with his physical deformities. Arnold comes to terms with the way he looks, and this is something that Larry must accomplish in order to reveal his true identity and put his life back together. He alters his outward appearance by being reckless as a youth through sniffing gasoline, and while sniffing he lights a match that causes he and his cousins to be severely burned. There is no real connection to his existence, and he is willing to die in order to hide all the pain that is enveloping him. He lost all real connections and was falling into the trap of despair that surrounds him. Lacking any respect for his life, in this moment he does not care about the deadly consequences of his actions. Larry says, "I lit a match. I pushed the air with it and the air pushed back. And me, the Destroying Angel, screaming, 'Let's die! Let's Die! Let's Die!!'" (Van Camp 79-80). Destroying himself is easier than dealing with his pain. Larry lights the match because his past got to him. A lack of boundaries makes him feel that he has nothing to live for; Larry is in a reckless state. He is also forever scarred from the accident, and symbolically Larry's outside is made to match his inside.

Larry is mentally and emotionally scarred from his family and their actions, and, in a sense, Larry took control when he lit the match. He was no longer allowing someone else to scar him and was going to do it himself even though it was destructive. He falls into despair but at his own hands. When Larry is forced to look at himself after the accident, he says, "They make me naked. I see raw hamburger on a human face" (Van Camp 81). Larry sees that he is raw and intertwined with the components of many parts of life. His family and the living conditions he endures lead him to this turning point of

self-mutilation. But now he is in control of his life. Even though he is permanently scarred, his entire thought process changes from destruction to a desire for life.

However, Larry is not initially open to others about this change and realization. He hides his scars, just as he hides his past from others. He is afraid to reveal himself. Larry says, "I usually slept buck to let my skin breathe. But if I took off my clothes, Johnny might see my scars, and I didn't want that" (Van Camp 86). He does not want to be looked at differently or admit what his parents are even though he can now see them clearly for who they are; he is still hiding a piece of his true identity. When he finally does admit his past to Johnny, he cries and experiences a sort of cleansing that allows him to finally admit to his demons and move on. "I had nothing left to lose. I was tired of keeping it in, and it wanted to be told" (Van Camp 87). Larry was held under by the despair around him, but, when he breaks out from it and confronts his past, he becomes conscious of his life. He makes a conscious decision to go after more in life. This consciousness also makes Larry long for a real connection with another person, and this culminates with Larry sleeping with Juliet. During their sexual encounter Larry says, "'Look into me, just look at me.' She did / and I wasn't alone / I wasn't forgotten / I wasn't dead / There was no small town / There was no killing / I wasn't bad I was clean" (Van Camp 110). When Larry finally reveals his past pain, both physical and mental, he leaves himself open to Juliet. This experience provides the final awakening that Larry needs to break out of the restraints of despair and start to put together the fractured pieces of his identity.

With this connection, Van Camp offers a possible happy future for Larry, even though those around him have fallen into the confines of despair and are weighted down by their disadvantages and subsequent decisions. Larry ends his story by saying that he has become his own person:

I wept because I knew I had someone
someone to remember my name
someone to cry out my name
someone to greet me naked in the snow
someone to mourn me in death
to feel me there
in my sacred place
and I wept because I did not belong to anyone
I was not owned
not with mate
but I smiled too knowing this because I knew my life was still
unwrapped. (Van Camp 119)

Larry removes himself from the confines of his surroundings and realizes that he is in control of his own destiny. He is now free from the degradation and shame of his family. In addition, Larry finally achieves success in opening himself up to another person. He makes a real connection and experiences something that brings real emotions to him. He is finally conscious of his reality and is taking control of his life. Larry is able to make

decisions and see choices because he is filled with opportunity, and nothing has been finalized.

Once the fog of deception and hurt has been lifted, Larry is able to reclaim his heritage that has been bogged down by so much pain and hurt. As he reawakens to his life he experiences a sort of ethnic renewal by returning to the land and burying a bird. Larry says, "I dug and dug until I hit the frozen earth. I placed the ptarmigan in the snow and covered her" (Van Camp 118). Larry removes the impediment to touching the land and recreates a burial ceremony. He returns to what is important in his heritage, the land and ceremony. Joane Nagel writes, "Ethnic renewal is the reconstruction of one's ethnic identity by reclaiming a discarded identity, replacing or amending an identity in an existing ethnic identity repertoire, or filling a personal ethnic void" (947). Larry amends what defines him; he no longer wants to be identified by the pain he experienced, so he breaks out of it and lets his heritage and own life come through. He will be defined for who he is and what he makes of himself. Dealing with the issues allows Larry to create a bridge connecting his past and future lives.

The narrator in James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* also has to face his life head on in order to realize what it is composed of and put the pieces of his identity in place. His life is filled with personal and familial tragedy, and he has also lost his connection to his heritage. He is not grounded to or with anything. He is disconnected from his family, and he is searching out the girl that left him behind. Welch's narrator lives with a sense of despair and hurt because he is reeling from the death of his brother, and he later experiences the pain of his grandmother's death. He also experiences life through a

derogatory view because when he gets hired at a clinic he thinks it is because he is well-qualified and smart. He later finds out that he was only given the job to meet ethnic grant qualifications. He says, "It took a nurse who hated Indians to tell me the truth, that they needed a grant to build another wing and I was to be the first of the male Indians they needed to employ to get the grant" (Welch 18). The narrator does not take this in stride and is offended to the point that he leaves the job and returns home. He is defeated and gives up on opportunity. He was used as a pawn in an outside game that benefited others and not him. His mental struggle involves making a decision. Does he want an empty life filled with advancement due to his heritage or a true life filled with rewards due to accomplishments and a connection with his heritage?

However, returning home is not such a simple task for the narrator; he realizes that the distance between himself and his homeland has grown over the years. He does not blame anyone for this distance but himself. He says, "[T]he distance I felt came not from country or people; it came from within me. I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon" (Welch 2). He realizes that he removed himself from his heritage, and he has no one to blame but himself. During this removal process, he also lost track of his own identity and what he wants out of life. He just became a game piece in other people's lives. The narrator also realizes that returning to his roots is not going to be easy. He says, "Coming home was not easy anymore. It was never a cinch, but it had become a torture" (Welch 1). As he ages, it becomes harder and harder for the narrator to return to his existence and to create a space for himself within his surroundings. Each time he leaves home he loses part of his connection to his homeland that he cannot

recover. He no longer has the advantage of being a resilient young adult with more open options.

Once the narrator returns home, he faces many obstacles such as stereotypes and family tragedies. He is told that Native Americans are cunning and deceptive. His boss, Lame Bull, says of Native Americans, “They get too damn tricky for their own good” (Welch 24). And the stereotypes are also abundant within the Native American communities in regards to other tribes; some tribes are degraded, and their members are seen as basically worthless. Later, the narrator states his opinions in relation to Cree people: “She was Cree and not worth a damn. Not worth going after. My grandmother, before she quit talking, had told me how Crees never cared for anybody but themselves” (Welch 27). The narrator and his family look down upon another group of Native Americans and create obstacles for the Cree people to overcome. This tribal degradation creates divisions within the Native American community as a whole, which makes it hard for the tribes to come together for common purposes: “The unnamed protagonist of *Winter in the Blood* lives an isolated, confused, and emotionally fractured life” (Cox 153). Each part of his life is separated from the other parts. He has to accept his past while jumping over the obstacles that his family and tribe have placed in front of him in order to become a true person.

The family struggles are at the heart of the narrator’s convoluted background. His father froze to death one night when he was drunk, and his brother also died when he was young. The narrator has a physically absent father, much like Larry’s father in *The Lesser Blessed* who is emotionally absent; this theme also ties to Alexie’s Arnold whose

father is sometimes physically and/or emotionally absent due to his drinking. All three of these protagonists have to deal with absent or damaged fathers. However, Welch's and Van Camp's protagonists both find father figures within a step father and a mother's boyfriend. They find replacements for the void of not having a present and involved biological father. The narrator's replacement is Lame Bull; he is someone that the narrator can look up to. The narrator speaks of Lame Bull in lofty terms: "At forty-seven, he was...a success" (Welch 10). Lame Bull is in a relationship with the narrator's mother and has become the proprietor of a large chunk of property. Since Lame Bull is older, the narrator sees the potential that still exists within himself to be a success, even though he is already in his thirties, so there is still hope for his future.

However, tragedies such as his father's death cause havoc in the narrator's life, and he tends to lead a self-destructive existence. He spends a great majority of his time searching for his girlfriend even though she left him and stole from him. He wants to make her suffer but then do right by her. He says, "I too felt that she should suffer a little. Afterwards, I could buy her a drink" (Welch 81). He still is not focused on making his life better, and he has a very disjointed view of reality. He does not seem to connect his own personal problems with the troubles in his relationship. He also does not understand that he either needs to let her go because they are in an unhealthy relationship, or he needs to change his ways in order to try to make it work.

The narrator has no real direction in life without the guidance of his father and brother. He seems to be searching for something to fill this void, but the randomness of his life never eases his pain. Kenneth Lincoln notes in his article "*Winter Naming: James*

Welch” that “Welch’s work is not heroic, legendary, or mythic: he writes of the true West, working cowboys and real Indians, hard-scrabble survival and off-rez scrabble.” This hard, tortured existence follows the narrator throughout his journey, and he just exists instead of living actively and creating his own identity. He ends up within empty relationships because he is trying to find hope within someone else that he can infuse into his own life. When he sees Agnes he remembers their past. The narrator says, “In her black eyes, I could see the reason I had brought her home that time before. They held the promise of warm things, of a spirit that went beyond her miserable life of drinking and screwing and men like me” (Welch 90). He sees that hope and wants it in his own life in order to break out of the chaos and emptiness that has taken control. He is trying to fix himself through outside forces instead of focusing on the essence of the problems that reside within him.

The narrator loses himself within the tragedy around him; he loses himself within the bars that surround the reservation and becomes part of the problem that Alexie addresses within Arnold’s world. The narrator has fallen into a very convoluted existence of despair. Eventually, he gets tired of the despair, poverty, racism, and alcoholism and confronts himself:

I had had enough of Havre, enough of the town, of walking home, hung over, beaten up, or both. I had had enough of the people, the bartenders, the bars, the cars, the hotels, but mostly, I had had enough of myself. I wanted to lose myself, to ditch these clothes, to outrun this burning sun, to stand beneath the clouds and have my shadow erased, myself along with it. (Welch 100)

He realizes he has fallen into the traps and pitfalls that have claimed many of the people around him. But he becomes conscious of what he is doing and confronts himself in order to get in touch with reality and stop wasting his life. William Thackeray writes of the narrator that “[t]he result of his failure is ‘a distance that had grown through the years’ between himself and those around him and, most especially, a distance from his own spiritual essence” (63). The distance continues to build until the narrator becomes conscious to the pain in his life, and the waking consciousness becomes evident while the narrator tries to rescue a cow during a storm.

This scene places him at the hands of nature, and he is able to relate to the land more and focus on that connection that is at the historical base of Native American existence. “[H]e must depend on his own insights and experiences to make his life whole” (Thackeray 66). And he comes to realize that many people will never face themselves and realize what they have become; they will remain unconscious to who they are. “Some people, I thought, will never know how pleasant it is to be distant in a clean rain, the driving rain of a summer storm” (Welch 135). The rain is washing away all of his pain and his past existence, and he experiences this rebirth that allows him to see clearly. Sean Teuton notes that “[a]t thirty-two, the narrator closes this distance and comes home personally, culturally, and geographically.” He can put the true essence of his life back on the front burner because he realizes what is important; he now has a new opportunity in life to change his ways. Welch’s protagonist is tied to this rebirth through reconnecting with his heritage. “Once the narrator has made significant progress toward that rediscovery of a coherent, culturally determined identity, he will be able to unify

past, present, and future and begin finally to project a future at least slightly, if not radically, different from the present” (Teuton). The narrator’s heritage is a prominent piece in his identity and the link to a meaningful and connected existence. It may take him time, but step by step the narrator’s reawakening to consciousness will allow him to create a life that surpasses his past and the stereotypes that prevail around him. Then he will be able to freely exist within his homeland and heritage.

As in *Winter in the Blood*, “[t]o have something ‘in the blood’ means that you were born with it, maybe a good or a bad thing” (Lincoln). The men within the selected texts all experience poverty and alcoholism along with many other disadvantages. The characters were born into the problems of their families and surroundings, but those that overcome the disadvantages and stereotypes are able to reap the benefits of a conscious life and have the satisfaction that they overcame their obstacles. Van Camp’s and Welch’s protagonists are able to create meaningful existences for themselves while not abandoning their cultural ties. Van Camp and particularly Welch create characters that cannot be whole without a conscious tie to their heritage. Larry and Welch’s narrator are both looking to trade in their shallow existences for a real-life filled with meaningful connections to their heritages and personal identities. Once they overcome their obstacles, they will be able to bridge the multiple layers of their existences in order to create an individual identity that sets them up for success instead of failure.

CONCLUSION

The young adult male characters within the selected texts by Sherman Alexie, Richard Van Camp, and James Welch deal with varying forms of rejection from the people who surround them. They must reconcile their individual identities with the reservation world and the Western-influenced outside world in order to create meaningful connections in life that are true to their individual beings. While Alexie creates a path to success that veers away from the reservation and tribal heritage, Van Camp and Welch create characters that are not whole until they have reconnected with their heritage and created ties to their ancestry. However, a balance between their surroundings and individual identities ties the authors' characters together and enables them to break out of their shells and to live lives that are full of real connections and experiences.

However, the male protagonists face many obstacles on their paths to self-fulfillment. They experience poverty, poor education systems, and the false assumptions and realities associated with stereotypes. Poverty and poor education place the characters at a severe disadvantage to creating meaningful and successful existences both within and outside of their tribal communities, and stereotypes are a double edged sword that threaten to quash the characters. They have to face and dispel stereotypical assumptions about Native Americans that mark them as being lazy, stupid alcoholics who are not worth anything in life. Even though the selected protagonists often do their best to dispel the stereotypes, many of the Native American characters surrounding them do their best to live up to the stereotypes and provide the sliver of truth needed for the stereotypes to

be grounded in reality. This means the characters must also fight the actions of their own people in order to gain acceptance and an honest identity.

The path to honest and open existences also encompasses the practice of two-spirit identities. Alexie creates two-spirit characters who struggle with their independent and cultural identities where success in life does not always come with a cultural reconnection. Characters such as the narrator within “The Toughest Indian in the World” battle with themselves and the world around them in order to create existences that diverge from Western, traditional gender norms and sex practices. Expressing a fluid, nonconforming two-spirit identity is not wholly complete without a strong connection to tribal heritage, and this is something that is more strained within Alexie’s narratives. He often forces his characters to abandon their tribes and heritage for the outside world in order to achieve success. But with the narrator, Alexie leaves open the possibility for a cultural reconnection, and he creates other characters who rely on their families for support.

In contrast, Welch and Van Camp tie the success of their characters to cultural reconnections. The characters are required to create a cultural connection in order to turn their lives around. These men veered off course partly because they distanced themselves from their heritage. While Alexie’s characters have strained ties with their heritage, Welch’s and Van Camp’s young men strive to reconnect and gain control of their lives. They will not be able to create true identities and succeed without this connection. Does Alexie mean to discredit the importance of cultural ties, or is he merely stating that his characters need to break out of the restraints imposed by the culture in order to be

successful? This question is up for debate and is often a source of criticism in regards to Alexie. However, Alexie may just be allowing his characters to remove the negativity from their lives as characters such as Arnold leave the reservation but still maintain strong family ties. Arnold's family supports him even though the tribe rejects him.

The characters that Alexie, Welch, and Van Camp created strive for acceptance and a place within their individual societies and the world at large. They are in the convoluted process of creating and expressing identities for themselves that are true to who they are. They have to bridge their heritage with contemporary practices and link reservation life with the outside world. They are all putting the pieces of their lives together to create an identity that fits, but often the components of their identities do not easily mesh with each other. This creates obstacles that have to be overcome in order for the characters to achieve meaningful existences that allow them to actively live life instead of just following a prescribed path. The characters move into uncharted territory and travel off the beaten path.

All of the selected young adult characters deal with damaged families, death, poverty, and poor education systems that threaten to bury them beneath an impenetrable layer of despair. The men must fight to overcome their damaged pasts and find renewal in relation to their individual selves in order to survive and not lose themselves within the chaos that surrounds them. The male protagonists have enough fight left in them to turn their lives around and overcome their obstacles. They are the ones that can connect the Native American ways of life with the outside world and create a semblance of balance, though at varying levels, in order to allow their people some forward progression out of

the immense layer of pain. These men are the present-day tribal warriors on the front line against the foe of despair.

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