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The Postmodern Indian: Representation and the Films of Sherman Alexie

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The Postmodern Indian: Representation
and the Films of Sherman Alexie

by

Tara P. McCrink-Burcham

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Letters
and the School of Mass Communication and Journalism
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

For hundreds of years, Native Americans have been characters in American media. For most of those years, whites determined the way in which Native Americans were represented. First in print, radio, silent movies and later talkies and television, representations of Native Americans have included being uneducated sidekicks, savages, noble savages seeking to steal white women, drunken idiots, or hilarious jesters all for the entertainment of viewers. This troublesome history of negative depictions of Native Americans is the reason this research is directed at the films by Native American writer and filmmaker Sherman Alexie. This research is a qualitative analysis of two of Alexie's films striving to analyze his work as a Native American filmmaker in relation to themes and representations found in films made by non-Natives depicting Native American characters and culture.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Differences, stereotypes, and misunderstandings between races and cultures have been at the core of numerous dramatic, comedic, and emotional media material. Based on what they see, audiences experience a range of emotions: laughing with the characters, laughing at the characters, feeling sorry for them, crying with them, and even questioning whether they should be offended by what they have seen. From comedy to drama, representations of minorities in television and film allow viewers to see different races, creeds, and colors of people all while experiencing these cultures. Viewers are able to escape their own lives while examining exotic cultures and life experiences. This escapism has been one of the many reasons people flock to television and films.

Consumers of television and films rarely critically analyze what they are viewing. Historians and researchers have widely debated what effect these experiences have on viewers. Effects can include viewers gaining a new understanding of the culture, feeling contempt for the characters, or even laughing at the character or their circumstances. This is where we find minority characters often the target of many jokes. By making decisions on the representation of minority characters and their cultures, writers, directors, and producers have the power to do many things: reinforce racist stereotypes or challenge viewers to think about cultural differences.

For decades, Native American characters have been included in entertainment media and watching these stereotypical representations has educated generations about Native Americans heritage, history, and culture. Viewers distractedly watch these television series and films unknowingly forming ideas about these cultures. One has to wonder if what they are seeing is a realistic example of minority life. Probably not. These

viewers don't ask questions, but maybe they should. Think about it, in 2013 was Johnny Depp really the *only* actor available/capable/the right fit to represent the Native American character Tonto in *The Lone Ranger*? It would be safe to assume those in the Native American community, and many others, would likely answer resoundingly no. But what can be done? Something, that is for sure. After having to live with hundreds of years of Native American's stories being told and represented from the viewpoint of others, their culture being appropriated, and actors wearing dark makeup playing Native American characters, Native Americans decided to do something about their representations in media.

Nationally recognized Native American poet and storyteller Sherman Alexie was one of those people. He entered the world of filmmaking hoping to make a difference. In 1998, he debuted the entertaining, interesting, and diverse dramatic comedy, *Smoke Signals*. In addition to *Smoke Signals*, Alexie's resumé boasts being involved in numerous films in roles as writer, producer, director and collaborator. Alexie has acknowledged that Native American representations have been ridiculously stereotypical. As such, his poems, books, and films include smart, critical and humorous postmodern commentary on the typical stereotypical media representations of his culture. In 1998, Timothy Egan profiled Alexie at a literary event. Egan noted how patrons anxiously awaited Alexie expecting something different than what happens next:

The crowd at the old theater in Seattle is waiting for an American Indian, and they get one when 6-foot-2 Sherman Alexie strolls onstage, playing one of his fictional characters, "Lester Falls Apart." Lester is stumblebum drunk, eyelids at half-mast,

looking for some railroad tracks to lie down on. A vodka-guzzling native with a self-esteem problem, now there's a role model. (Egan, 1998, para. 1)

Why would Alexie do this? Why would he portray a drunken Indian character, or trickster, on stage when he appears as *Lester Falls Apart*? Alexie, along with researchers, understands humor can also be used to challenge stereotypes providing “a means to overturn cultural ignorance by requiring readers to engage with an American Indian culture” (Baxter, 2012, p. 36). Some challenge Alexie’s playing a drunk Indian as reinforcing ages-old stereotypes. Detractors see him as denigrating Native Americans and him being part of the problem (Robbins, 2011). Robbins (2011) explained how Alexie was not listed on the website of the Spokane Indian Reservation, “The librarian at the Spokane tribal campus of the Salish-Kootenai College reported that ‘he’s very controversial here... What people on the reservation feel is that he’s making fun of them’” (p. 208). Egan (1998) notes Alexie walks a “fine line” between educating people about Native Americans and commercializing their struggles for the entertainment of whites saying, “Alexie is making fun of them, of what they expect from him” (para. 3).

This is why Sherman Alexie is considered a postmodern creator of Native American literature and media. Or is he? Alexie is constantly struggling with where he fits in, in his personal and professional life. In 2005, Ase Nygren interviewed Alexie asking him, “What do you think the term ‘postmodern’ promises, or does not promise? Can we understand your works of fiction better by aligning them with postmodern ideas?” (Nygren, 2005, p. 161). Alexie, always changing his perspective, answered Nygren saying:

I don't think the term 'postmodern' says anything more about my work than the term 'Native American' does. It's just a label. My idea of postmodern will always be the language poets or Andy Warhol – that sort of more intellectual and less emotional work. That's how I look upon postmodernism, as more of an intellectual enterprise. And that's not me. (as cited in Nygren, 2005, p. 161)

Nygren also asked Alexie about narrative as play being a postmodern idea, Alexie responded, “Well I guess I am a postmodern writer then. (Laughs)...The thing is: I love telling stories. I'm not in agony when I'm telling stories. I'm not serious. Most of the time I'm pretty excited!” (as cited in Nygren, 2006, p. 163). Van Styvendale (2008) calls Alexie “a postmodern satirist whose work challenges authenticity and highlights social issues” (p. 212). But she notes that other authors have criticized him for highlighting despair and victimization of Native people (Van Styvendale, 2008).

The subject of this research is two films by Alexie. Like all of Alexie's poems, books, songs, and presentations, they are interconnected to his life. As writer, co-producer, and songwriter for *Smoke Signals* and writer and director of *The Business of Fancydancing*, Alexie's personal style was a large part of the final product in both films. This individualized affect is part of the auteur theory. Auteursm is “the concept of the auteur is an aesthetic category that delimits filmmakers of a certain quality” with a “primary parameter” and that “an auteur must be the author whose style is recognizable from film to film” (Strandvad, 2012, p. 118). Larson (2015) discussed how American film critic Andrew Sarris, in *Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962* argued “auteurs bring creative vision and personal expression to their films” (p. 8).

Alexie not only brought his individualized vision to these two films, but also brought his heritage and the Native American media landscape to these films. These works are important to the movement of minority filmmakers becoming auteurs and taking charge of their heritage. Through these films and future projects, Alexie is willing to aggressively challenge appropriation and denigration of his heritage by non-Native American filmmakers. Throughout his life, Alexie's personal identity has evolved along with his literary identity.

Native Americans historically wear long hair, and Alexie wore a ponytail for years. Aware of this external stereotype, Alexie cut his hair short when his father died. Alexie said of his late father, "I'll keep it short until the mourning is over. Who knows when that will be? Maybe never" (Moyers, 2013, para.121). In 2010, his alma mater, Washington State University (WSU), published a story about Alexie, noting his physical changes: "Alexie looks nothing like he used to. His long hair is cropped short and he carries an air of *Brooks Brothers* about him in his black-rimmed glasses and dark tailored suit and tie. He even has a pocket handkerchief" (Sudderman, 2010, para. 14).

Sherman Alexie and his detractors do agree on one thing – he has mellowed with age. Early in his career, Alexie wrote an extremely violent book, *Indian Killer*. This book is "centered around two especially horrific murders of white men, the kidnapping of a young white boy, and retaliatory assaults against Native Americans by white men" (Giles, 2006, p. 129). Giles (2006) wrote about Alexie's *Indian Killer* examining the author's challenges to historical stereotypes and hegemonic power. In doing so, Giles used a number of descriptions that perfectly reinforce the idea that Alexie's works are designed to fight society's expectations. Giles (2006) even goes as far to recall how

Alexie “manages some stinging satire of historic white philanthropy toward Native Americans” (p. 131). Giles (2006) also found Alexie “has a good deal of satiric fun with the white academy’s systematic appropriation and distortion of Native American cultures” (p. 138). Giles (2006) also notes how in the book Alexie undercuts a supernatural scene with “comic overtones” (p. 138), how later Alexie has some obvious fun “at the expense of a number of white writers,” and how he saves his “sharpest satire” (p. 140) for a specific event in the book. These comments by Giles further reinforce how Alexie’s career in film and print are working to subvert outsiders stereotyped ideas of Native Americans. Alexie, in an interview with *The Guardian*, commented on his own growth saying his views on what he wrote in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* have changed. Alexie wrote, “Indians reside in the city but never live there.” But now, he does not believe that (D. Campbell, 2003, para. 20). Alexie admits his ideas have changed saying, “You believe things at the time you write them. I believed that then!” (D. Campbell, 2003, para. 20). Alexie admitted to *The Guardian*, that:

I was much more fundamental then. What changed me was September 11: I am now desperately trying to let go of the idea of being right, the idea of making decisions based on imaginary tribes. The terrorists were flying planes into the buildings because they thought they were right and they had special knowledge, and we continue to react. And we will be going to war in Iraq soon because we think we have special knowledge - and we don’t. We are making these decisions not based on any moral or ethical choice, but simply on the basis of power and money and ancient traditions that are full of shit, so I am increasingly suspicious

of the word 'tradition', whether in political or literary terms (D. Campbell, 2003, para. 21).

Alexie understands of the power of terminology and word selection. He joins numerous others who have communicated diverse messages and themes to the world about Native American culture. All of these artists and authors use differing terms when speaking about Native Americans, their culture, and those outside of the culture. This is where the struggle to "define" Native Americans can be found.

There are many ways media can control how viewers gain understanding about characters and actors. This often involves the use of overt or covert labeling of the characters. Often, media does not recognize the power these labels have when referring to minorities, so they continue to use derogatory terms. To this day, Native Americans are dealing with the savage stereotype. Just turn on the TV any Saturday or Sunday during football season. From NFL mascots to college mascots, representations of Native Americans continue to draw "on portrayals of an evil, angry, generic Indian pulled from literary and photographic sources of earlier times" (Merskin, 2016, p. 227).

Some Native Americans refuse to stand by and let this happen and use not only media, but also the legal system to fight these stereotyped representations. Amanda Blackhorse, Navajo, is just one of the many Native Americans fed up with negative terms used to describe Native people. Offended by the team name of the Washington Redskins football team, she was one of a group of six Native Americans that sued to enforce federal trademark law, which does not permit registration of trademarks disparaging to individuals or groups. The six plaintiffs won their court case that ended up stripping the Washington Redskins of six of their seven trademarks (Boren, 2014). Although the

Redskins organization refused to change their name, they lost six of their trademarks. Many people, even non-Natives, would agree Redskin is offensive. However, Alexie and those in the Native American community also agree there are many acceptable terms used to describe Native Americans, but do not agree on one “right” term.

Whitewashing is one of the ways that Native Americans and other minorities are obscured from mainstream media. This representation of Native American characters, and other minorities, by the process of whitewashing (white or other actors portraying Native Americans) was prevalent throughout the history of popular culture; but it is not the only problem. Jay Silverheels, a full-blooded Mohawk, played Tonto, the Native American character in the 1940s and 1950s television series *The Lone Ranger*. Tonto was relegated to being the sidekick, using visual cues such as clothing to represent his Indianness, only speaking broken English. He was flanked by, of course, the white hero on a white horse (Agler, 2004). Whitewashing continued with the use of redface, white actors using makeup to mimic Native American skin tones. As Merskin (2016) writes, “Charlton Heston, Victor Mature, Chuck Connors, Burt Reynolds, and others donned heavy make-up, wrapped a headband around their foreheads (Indian’s don’t wear headbands), and pretended to be Indians (redface)” (p. 225).

These stereotypical representations continued and can still be seen today. In the 1970s, racism and racial strife was at the heart of the show *All in the Family*, which featured cantankerous patriarch Archie Bunker constantly degrading minority characters. Years later, exaggerated stereotypes and ethnic humor were the key to the funny, dynamic and hugely successful movies featuring the Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker partnership in the *Rush Hour* franchise and again in 2013’s *The Lone Ranger* movie. For

much of the history of filmmaking, these films and television programs featuring minority characters were created by nonminority filmmakers. White writers, producers, directors and actors delivered what they considered Native American culture into homes. This led to generations of people “learning” about Native American and minority culture through film and television. But what, exactly, were they learning? Many generations of Americans grew up watching television shows depicting minorities such as 1940s and 1950s in *The Lone Ranger*, 1950s to the 1970s western *Bonanza*, 1970s television show *Kung Fu*, 1970s and 1980s *Little House on the Prairie*, and 1990s *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman*, just to mention a few.

Merskin (2016) discussed negative representation of Native Americans in numerous media instances. These included news coverage of the 1973 standoff of Native Americans and U.S. officials at Wounded Knee, and activism recognized and supported by an Oscar-winning actor: Merskin (2016) explains more about how the Oscar winner became involved:

Oddly, an inaccurate and somewhat absurd movie (*Billy Jack*) along with an act of civil disobedience at that year’s Academy Awards helped restore hope and renew faith among the tribe. At the Oscar’s, when Marlon Brando was announced as the winner of the Best Actor Award for *The Godfather*, Shasheen Littlefeather (Apache, Yaqui, Pueblo), dressed in full tribal regalia, spoke in his place, saying he declined the award, “because of the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry... And also with happenings at Wounded Knee.” (p. 226)

With so many different outlets seeking our attention, today’s media is constantly trying to stay relevant in society, sometimes reusing old material and calling it new. Stale

remake after remake, such as *The Lone Ranger* movie in 2013, don't offer new representations, just the same old stereotypes. Slätis (1998) explains this by writing, "Mass media—in an attempt to de-ideologize its content—assimilate new political and social practices into existing formulas, and thus attempts to transform characters from ideologically loaded symbols into new versions of representations" (p. 74). Repackaged as new and evolved representations of minorities, movies continued with the recurring stereotypes of Native Americans by whitewashed actors. Two of the most famous of these movies that included stereotyped Native American portrayals are *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and the aforementioned 2013 remake of *The Lone Ranger*.

This 2013 film version of the classic radio, television, and movie series, *The Lone Ranger*, angered many because it featured Johnny Depp (really?) playing Native American sidekick Tonto. Marley Brown, in *Tonto Racist: 'Lone Ranger' Johnny Depp Character Understandably Offends Native Americans*, discussed how Disney never bothered to consider Native people's opinions before choosing Depp:

Perhaps they have sought the input of Apache, Hopi, or Ojibwe tribal members. However, the decision to cast Johnny Depp as Tonto, paint his face, and place a large vulture on his headdress suggests that they have not. I am willing to bet this is in part because they do not expect many native people to see the film, much less to complain about the enduring legacy of its stereotypes. (Brown, 2013, para. 6)

There are numerous possibilities for why whitewashing and the use of stereotypical representations continue to exist in media. Merskin (2001) says that one possible reason for this is that "without the population numbers or legal resources, it is

nearly impossible for the voices of Natives to be heard, unlike other groups who have made some representational inroads” (p. 167). Not only have Native Americans been whitewashed and stereotyped, but there has been a lack of representation of the diversity found within Native American tribes. Merskin (1998) writes, “As a method of symbolic annihilation, all Native Americans have been categorized by the media as ‘Indians’ and considered on the basis of over generalized, physical, emotional, and intellectual characteristics” (p. 335).

This dissertation examined two of Alexie’s movies: *Smoke Signals* (1998), a story about two main Native American characters and their life on the reservation and beyond, and *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002) a story about a gay Native American character and his struggles with identity, both Native American and homosexual. These Sherman Alexie films span the beginning of Alexie’s film career (*Smoke Signals*) where he collaborated with another filmmaker and director to *Fancydancing*, a film he wrote the screenplay for and directed himself. Both give us insight into the way Alexie uses stereotypes and counter-stereotypes, not only to challenge our historical idea of representations of Native Americans, but also to open our eyes to the depth and breadth of what these images and depictions mean and convey to others.

These films confront traditional representations of Native American characters. Challenging traditionally held stereotypes, using physical characteristics and plot actions, drawing upon historical themes in Native American films such as alcohol abuse and family breakdown, humor, and material surroundings, Alexie’s films can offer insight into the complex lives of Native Americans and the challenges they face. This dissertation addresses representation of these characters by a Native American filmmaker

and how these themes can be presented in a way that changes the way their culture has been and is continuing to be conveyed and represented.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation examined two films by poet, author, and filmmaker Sherman Alexie examining his efforts using covert and overt ways of challenging stereotypical Native American storylines, as well as his postmodern approach of representation of Native American characters. The foundation of this analysis is that of media research of minorities, specifically Native Americans, examining intended versus unintended meanings in these films and Alexie's challenges to entrenched ideologies in depicting Native American characters and their lives.

Utilizing critical and cultural communication studies of race and minorities such as Stuart Hall's preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings, as well as representation of minorities in media to analyze, and postmodern critical analysis, these films were evaluated as to how they portray Native Americans. Using these methods, evaluation of these works demonstrated how Alexie used characterizations of Native American's in a counter-stereotypical manner, using a postmodern lens, while also utilizing humor to push the limits of traditional portrayals of Native Americans found in non-Native produced films.

Hall is a renowned researcher in media and imagery interpretation and challenges that media creators encode media messages with intended messages for viewers. Viewers then decode messages sometimes finding different meanings. This decoded message may be different from the preferred meaning of the message creators. Hall finds multiple ways to derive meanings of messages, preferred (preferred by the message creator), negotiated (viewers using their own mind, sometimes receiving the intended message and sometimes

coming to an alternate decision), and oppositional (viewer challenging the intended message) (Hall, 1982).

Postmodernism

In 1979, Jean-François Lyotard brought to light to a new cultural movement that was challenging the status quo using multiple methods from art to technology, postmodernism. Rivkin and Ryan (2004) write, “Postmodernism is skeptical regarding reason, sees technology as an instrument as much of destruction as of progress, and rejects the premises of industrial society” (p. 355). Lyotard (1984) says that postmodernism challenges “metanarratives,” themes and “stories about the world that strive to sum it all up in one account” (p 355). Frederic Jameson, author of the book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, said in a lecture at the Whitney Museum, that postmodernism is the changing of “key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (Jameson, 1982, para. 3).

When examining representations of Native Americans, there are many ways to examine how they are portrayed. Daniel Palmer, senior lecturer in the Art History and Theory Program at Monash University, described postmodernism as a process where “concepts such as ‘reality,’ ‘truth,’ and ‘humanity’ are invariably put under scrutiny by thinkers and ‘texts’ associated with postmodernism” (Palmer, 2014, para. 1).

If you ask anyone, you may get varying definitions of postmodernism. Palmer finds it “describes not only a period, by also a set of ideas, and can only be understood in relation to another equally complex term: modernism” (2014, para. 1). According to Palmer, modernism was “a diverse art and cultural movement in the late 19th and early 20th

centuries whose common thread was a break with tradition” (2014, para. 2). Palmer writes, “Postmodernism is best understood as a questioning of the ideas and values associated with a form of modernism that believes in progress and innovation” (2014, para. 7). He further says a “common theme addressed within postmodernism relates to cultural identity” (Palmer, 2014, para. 23).

Stuart Hall argues that “postmodernism attempts to close off the past by saying that history is finished, therefore you needn’t go back to it. There is only the present, and all you can do is be with it, immersed in it” (as cited in Grossberg, 1986, p. 50).

Numerous researchers have examined postmodernism in media and film. Gudmundson (2005) says that while “Jean-François Lyotard argues that the ‘postmodern condition’ can be defined as a skepticism towards any ‘grand narratives’ that extend to history, philosophy and theory,” he also “suggests that postmodernism questions the reliability of knowledge” (p. 2). Gudmundson sees Lyotard’s definition “helpful for shedding light on Alexie’s work because Alexie’s writing questions grand narratives and authoritative voices” (2005, p. 2).

Media Representations of Native Americans

Scholarly literature regarding media coverage of Native Americans includes analysis of minority portrayals in the media while attempting to understand the complexities of the characterizations. Academic disciplines including history, political science, anthropology, communication, and sociology examine issues such as portrayal and characterizations of minorities. Scholars have investigated news coverage of Native Americans, and a review of scholarly literature concerning media and Native Americans reveals consistent themes. Although this analysis is of film characterizations, research of

characterizations of minorities in news is relevant to characterizations in other media. Researchers suggest a lack of media representation of minorities is part of the media's ongoing ignoring of minorities in media. Burgess (2001) suggested Indian's being dismissed by media completely is part of three larger themes: Indian as historical museum piece and tourist attraction, Indian as other, and Indian being ignored completely. This also includes being characterized as the savage Indian (Bataille, 2001).

In traditional media, Native Americans have been categorized as outside of society. Berkhofer (1978) added that whites "define Indianness as the antithesis" of civilization, and that negative and positive images of Indians are images contrasting those of American society (p. 29). According to Berkhofer, "Historically, media adopted three dominant frames of American Indians: the generic Indian, the Indian as 'other,' and the good/bad Indian" (1978, p. 30). The frame of generic Indian generalizes the traits of all American Indians and erases differences in language, physical features, rituals, practices, and values among the various tribes and peoples (Bataille & Silet, 1980, p. xxiii). The "homogenized" Indian "renders inchoate Native American identities and cultures" and reduces American Indians to icons (Bataille & Silet, 1980, p. xxiii). The good/bad Indian is a representation of both good and evil (Hanson & Rouse, 1987).

Beyond Indian as other and savage, films often portrayed Indians as drunken and uncivilized. Berkhofer (1978) says that civilization and Indianness were viewed by whites as "inherently incompatible" (p. 20). Berkhofer says another major white image of the Indian is of a "degraded, often drunken" Indian "degenerate" and "poverty-stricken" (1978, p. 30). This led to the historically inaccurate, but often-repeated statement, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (Berkhofer, 1978, p. 30). Where do these negative

depictions of Native Americans find their roots? One only need look to historical events and clashes between whites and Native Americans to find their beginnings.

Historical and Stereotypical Representations of Native Americans

The negative depiction of Indians by whites runs the span of the creation of the United States of America. From the time Columbus landed, the British and some others regarded Indians as animals, even less than human. Later, when the United States Government was created, poor treatment of Indians continued with the government using military force to control, move, and even legitimize the killing of Indians (Debo, 1970, p. 183).

This poor treatment of Native Americans by whites was the beginning of a powerful culture degrading and stereotyping them. Madon, Gyll, Hilbert, Kyriakatos, and Vogel (2006) examined stereotyping. They found “stereotypes are generalized beliefs about social groups” and “can bias impressions of target individuals, a process referred to as stereotyping” (Madon et al., 2006, p. 178). Stereotyping often occurs “because of cognitive capacity limitations” (Madon et al., 2006, p. 178). Further, Madon et al. write:

When forming impressions of others, perceivers frequently are exposed to a complex array of social information, but have only limited cognitive resources with which to process this information. One way that perceivers reduce the complexity of incoming social information is by using stereotypes to judge targets (Fiske & Neuberg, 1991). Stereotypes can provide ready-made impressions that can free perceivers from having to carefully process a target’s personal or individuating information. Thus, stereotyping can help perceivers to form impressions with ease and efficiency. (2006, p. 178)

Stereotyping was an important effect of the historical media's attitudes about Native Americans. Coward observes:

Indians were embraced or despised – often embraced and despised – as cultural, political, and economic conditions changed. Thus Indian identity in the American psyche was fundamentally ambiguous, so much so that it is more accurate to think not of a single Indian identity but of several related and connected identities, all created within the bounds of Euro-American culture and all readily available for use by that culture. (1999, p. 9)

From 1876 to 1926 many white Americans lived their daily lives by the saying the only “good Indian was a dead Indian – whether through warfare or assimilation” (Berkhofer, 1978, p. 30). Classifying Indians as other and hostiles, allowed whites to distance themselves from them, making it easier to continue their efforts to destroy them. Perry (2002) reinforced this, writing “the long-lived images of Native Americans as ‘savages,’ ‘backwards,’ ‘uncivilized’ and ‘godless’ have served as convenient justifications for exterminating traditional Native American ways and for forcing the Natives to assimilate into the Western, Christian ethos” (p. 235). Fierce clashes between Indians and the U.S. Government escalated to deadly battles. Indians were depicted as savages and whites continued to loathe them. In January 1876, the United States Government declared Indians not living on reservations hostile and mobilized military force to relocate Indians to permanent reservations (Welch, 2007). In 1876, Lt. Col. George A. Custer led 262 men in the 7th U.S. Cavalry to fight the Indians. Defeated by Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Lakota warriors, Custer and all his men are killed (Welch, 2007).

Merskin (2004) says that stereotypes can be defined as “over-generalized, reductionist beliefs, [that] are collections of traits or characteristics that present members of a group as being all the same” (p. 160). Stereotypes allow those who have cultural power over others to maintain this hegemonic authority. It is important to understand that these status quo authorities are able to add value to themselves by treating an entire group as hostile - because it helps them maintain hegemony for themselves (the dominant class). By treating all Indians in derogatory ways, it allowed many whites to protect their cultural powers and continue their way of life. As long as everyone believes Indians are dangerous and all whites band together, they are able to exert little effort to maintain their ruling status. Oboler (1998) says stereotyping “puts people in boxes and creates images that result in false presumptions accepted as inconvertible truths” (p. 27). Merskin (2014), agrees, saying the “maintenance of stereotypical beliefs also satisfies the human need for psychological equilibrium and order, finding support and reinforcement in ideology that distinguishes an *Us* from a symbolic *Them*” (p. 190).

Allport, in the 1954 book *The Nature of Prejudice*, which celebrated a 25th anniversary edition in 1979, says prejudice and stereotyping include “thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant” (1979, p. 6). But that is not where prejudice ends.

Allport says two types of prejudice exist, going beyond just negative opinions:

This crisp phrasing contains two essential ingredients of all definitions – reference to unfounded judgment and to a feeling-tone. It is, however, too brief for complete clarity. In the first place, it refers only to *negative* prejudice. People may be prejudiced in favor of others; they may think *well* of them without sufficient warrant. The wording offered by the New English Dictionary recognizes positive

as well as negative prejudice: *A feeling, favorable or unfavorable, toward a person or thing, prior to, or not based on, actual experience.* While it is important to bear in mind that biases may be *pro* as well as *con*, it is none the less true that *ethnic* prejudice is mostly negative. (1979, p. 6)

Why does this history of whites loathing Indians and white vs. Indian warfare matter to this research? Because Custer's loss was the catalyst for hundreds of years of images, radio shows, television shows, and later films depicting Native Americans as savages out to destroy whites. When you hear the phrase 9/11, your mind remembers the terrible terrorist attack on the United States. During Custer's era, when whites thought about Native Americans, they remembered the story which reinforced their racist ideals - Custer and his men were ruthlessly slaughtered by Indians in what would be his final battle. Merskin noted how these portrayals reinforcing Indians as murderers and savages became a permanent part of American culture: "This genocide secured the place of Indians in the white European imagination as mythological, subsumed, tragic, and metaphorical in a romanticized view of the past" (2016, p. 224).

Advertisements following Custer's loss depicted gruesome scenes of Indians slaughtering white soldiers and an Indian stabbing Custer, even though this was not what happened. Brutal and savage imagery of killer Indians was so pervasive that Anheuser Busch distributed lithographs depicting Indians as the aggressors. In Anheuser Busch's lithography, only one white man is seen stabbing at an Indian where one can easily count six Indians killing white men (Custer Lithograph, 2008). Indians could not win in a white world, even when they were not the aggressor. Even though Native Americans were actually slaughtered by Custer and his men, media imagery of the time still depicted them

as brutal savages. This depiction perpetuated stereotypes that would last hundreds of years, further separating Indians from white culture and escalating hatred for Indians by whites.

Minorities in Media

Often in television and film, viewers see minority characters portrayed by non-Native actors or actresses, a process called whitewashing (Duca, 2014). Whitewashing often leads to minority actors being cast in stereotypical roles, serving as visual ornamentation for the film (Fleras, 2011). MacNeill (2009) determined this use of whitewashing is a way to frame the minority character in a way that allows them to be more easily accepted by the masses.

Media representations of Native American characters have been at the center of this television and film experience. Early television viewers witnessed whitewashing and stereotyping in television and film featuring minority characters. When viewers watched Audrey Hepburn portray a Native American (Kiowa) in the 1960 film *The Unforgiven*, they were viewing whitewashing (Duca, 2014). As if her being cast as a Native American character was not enough, to further denigrate Native Americans and lessen the value of their culture, the storyline includes Hepburn's character being adopted and raised by a white family without any Native cultural influences (Duca, 2014). Weston (1996) analyzed representation of Native Americans by whites in *Native Americans in the News: Images of Indians in the Twentieth Century Press*. Weston chronicled the role of Native Americans spanning across 70 years in news media noting, "Indians have been patronized, romanticized, stereotyped, and ignored by most of mainstream America" (1996, p. 163).

Media representations of Native Americans include a history of being laughed at, targeted as evildoers and outsiders, dismissed as sidekicks, or replaced entirely by systematic whitewashing. Merskin (2016) describes how “Cowboy and I(i)ndian movies such as *Stagecoach*, by director John Ford, typified the static story structure, innocent white people being besieged by indians (who stand in the way of progress and are brutal, ruthless, and a threat to white women)” (p. 225). This lack of representation of Native American actors, depiction of them as evildoers and sidekicks, led to a movement. A movement that included Native American directors, actors, and producers. Stories and movies from their perspective and made by them started to come into the cultural landscape (Merskin, 2016, p. 225).

This began a future of minorities taking control of their destiny and controlling images representing their culture. Many Native Americans, such as Tim Giago of *Indian Country Today*, were creating their own media. This groundbreaking move from being depicted as other, by others, to depicting themselves in their own way led to the future of Native American filmmakers such as Sherman Alexie.

Minority Exploitation by Filmmakers

Native Americans are not alone in their negative representations in media. Both print and visual media have a rich history of racism and exploitation of various groups. Cultural minorities have been exploited by filmmakers to include casting one minority to play another, causing further depiction of minorities as “other.” Roberto Rodriguez in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* described how Latinos were treated as the outsider, or other, even before silent movies, by casting Mexicans as negative stereotypical characters in novels:

These images were adopted during the silent era, particularly in Western movies. Those roles normally went to dark-skinned Mexicans or other Latinos. The negative stereotypes were primarily that of “greasers,” bandits and cut-throat, knife-wielding criminals and loose señoritas. Dark-skinned Mexicans were limited to those roles. (2007, p. 6)

Words, as well as images, have the capacity both to create and support the ideology of those who wield power. This lack of power over how they are depicted creates a struggle for minorities to define themselves and how they are labeled/presented by the powerful majority. This idea of someone else deciding what to call you is not only relevant to Native Americans. Smith (1992) examined the changing landscape of terms to describe African Americans and how historic terms, used in the times of slavery or segregation, are rightly considered derogatory and unacceptable to use in today's society (p. 499). Smith (1992) also noted how naming and “labels play an important role in defining groups and individuals who belong to the groups” (p. 496, para. 1). Smith continues:

This has been especially true for racial and ethnic groups in general and for Blacks in particular. Over the past century the standard term for Blacks has shifted from “Colored” to “Negro” to “Black” and now perhaps to “African American.” The changes can be seen as attempts by Blacks to redefine themselves and to gain respect and standing in a society that has held them to be subordinate and inferior. (1992, p. 496)

In *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, Lopez (1997) discussed how laws relate to discriminatory terms used to describe minorities:

Legal rules operate as an idea-system to construct races in a second way. Though race as a social concept has some autonomy, it is always bounded in its meaning by the local setting. Laws help racial categories to transcend sociohistorical contexts in which they develop. For example, the original prerequisite statute was written in 1790, when popular conceptions of race on the eastern seaboard of North America encompassed only whites, Native Americans, and Blacks. (p. 88)

Not only have Native Americans been negatively labeled by those in power, but they have also been left out completely Hollywood productions. There have been very few Native American actors, but there have been even fewer Native American characters in television and films. So few, in fact, that Debra Merskin in the chapter *Denials of Humanity* in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Race* (2016) describes how this invisibility has limited research into Native American characters:

This invisibility is only part of the problem. Stereotyping persists. Grandbois and Sanders (2012), citing other researchers (Miheuah, 1996; Tan et al., 1997; Vickers, 1998), contend that even in today's world, "Native Americans are one of the most stereotyped minority groups." (p. 390)

Beyond representation by actors and character development, music selection can also be used to stereotype minorities. Sherman Alexie commented on depictions of Native Americans in films when he wrote a commentary titled "*I Hated Tonto (Still Do)*" for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1998: "In the movies, Indians are always accompanied by ominous music. And I've seen so many Indian movies that I feel like I'm constantly accompanied by ominous music. I always feel that something bad is about to happen" (Alexie, 1998, para. 7). A historical storyline of hatred and mistrust for Native Americans

was carried through print media, radio, silent films and later talkies. 1920s Indians were portrayed as good or bad, exotic, and even lazy (Weston, 1996, p. 26). The 1930s followed with society focused more on the good Indian, with most whites being familiar with the story of Pima Indian, Ira Hayes, being one of the men raising the U.S. flag over Iwo Jima following WWII (Weston, 1996, p. 89).

Emerging Media Representations of Native Americans

As the feel-good 70s happened, Native Americans participated in the civil rights movement, finding their voice in the Red Power movement. This time was critical because race riots had occurred and media depictions of minorities were changing (Weston, 1996, p. 7). Following these riots, on July 28, 1967, the President of the United States established the Kerner Commission to discover: What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again? (The U.S. Survey, 2017). Two years later, in 1969, Native American acts of civil disobedience occurred, with members of the American Indian Movement taking over Alcatraz (Andrews, 2014) and Wounded Knee (Landry, 2014).

Media had treated minorities as insignificant. This continued with the marginalization of Native Americans in the 1990s when news media covered a legal dispute over fishing rights. C. Campbell (1995) examined news coverage of the battle between Minnesota's sports fisherman (whites) and native tribes. C. Campbell described how the non-Native side is depicted as sports fisherman and tourists, while Native Americans are depicted as troublemakers suing the state (1995, p. 51). C. Campbell found the news coverage reinforced the stereotypical ideas of Native Americans and

further shows a “persistent marginalization of Native American perspective” feeding into negative stereotypes (1995, p. 56).

Native American representations in films followed a similar course. Cox (2010) showed how these non-Indian filmmakers “controlled the construction of Native identity and culture for the first century of filmmaking in the United States” (p. 74). These filmmakers used caricatures to depict Native Americans. Cox writes, “To construct cinematic Indians, non-Native filmmakers relied on visible ethnic markers, such as artificially browned skin, feathers, paint, and buckskin, that reduced Native identities and cultures to a code of signs easily translatable by a non-Native audience” (2010, p. 74).

Myths of Minorities in Media

Many myths surround the portrayal of minorities such as Native Americans and Latinos in media. These include the myth of marginality, the myth of difference, and the myth of assimilation. The myth of marginality is that minorities are not a part of mainstream society; rather they operate in the periphery of mainstream society (C. Campbell, 1995, page 57). This myth of minorities also considers minorities as invisible in news coverage including the newscasters. C. Campbell writes, “Even though the news is not entirely white, the infrequent presence of journalists of color and of minority news sources dictates an otherness that is compounded when the coverage does exist perpetuates traditional racist notions about minority life” (1995, page 57).

The myth of difference involves the news media defining minorities as different than whites. Although much of the research involves African Americans, minority portrayals in media are often similar. C. Campbell discusses the news media giving “weight to traditional racist mythology that defines African Americans as threatening, as

unintelligent, and immature” (page 75). Further, he writes, “The imperfections that may be inherent in the production of local television news do not only result in journalism of questionable nature but can also contribute to a distorted understanding of life outside the majority culture” (C. Campbell, 1995, page 79).

Although C. Campbell was discussing news coverage and African Americans, he mentions audience members’ deeply rooted biases: “However well intentioned they might be, journalists (and audience members) are likely: unaware of the biases and stereotypical thinking that... are deeply rooted in the cultural forces and cognitive processes’ of nonminority life” (1995, page 82). C. Campbell found that hegemonic representations exist in media and that, “White Americans can smugly argue that racial prejudice and discrimination are things of the past and point to prominent and successful African Americans as proof” (1995, page 88).

Researchers have examined representations of Native Americans and their own choices in media. One researcher asked Native Americans how they suggest changes in these representations can occur. Merskin (1998) found as a result of her research that “an important mechanism for change mentioned by the respondents was for Natives to become involved in the production of media content. This method has had some success for African Americans and increasingly for Latinos” (p. 341). Examining how America still continues to struggle with racism, Alsultany discussed stereotypical portrayals of Muslims after 9/11: “The notion that the United States has overcome racism, while tantalizing, is deceptive” and even that in media “a diversity of representations, even an abundance of sympathetic characters, does not itself demonstrate the end of racism, nor does it solve the problem of racial stereotyping” (2012, p. 13).

Ethnic Humor

Throughout film history, humor has often been used by filmmakers to portray minorities in a degrading way, negatively affecting group identity (Leveen, 1996). Researchers have addressed the topic, ranging from attempting to define ethnic humor (Lowe, 1986) to discussion of how ethnic humor can actually be used to bridge social gaps in a positive manner (Leveen, 1996). Boskin and Dorinson (1985) looked at how subversion of ethnicity was used in favor of assimilation through humor. Lowe, in a review of existing literature on both ethnicity and humor, concluded the use of ethnic humor plays a large role in both group identity and solidarity, affecting acceptance by society at large:

Although minorities have often entered into full citizenship by long and arduous struggle, this procedure has sometimes both been shortened and sweetened when they have made up their minds to enter laughing—using the more delightful aspects of ethnic-generated humor to win friends, acceptance and material success. (1986, p. 439)

Lowe (1986) takes an optimistic view of ethnic humor and how it shapes the perception of not only the minority itself, but also the established hegemony, as does Leveen (1996) in her examination of specific ethnic jokes with targets ranging from blacks to Jews to Native Americans among others. According to Leveen's study, ethnic identity has traditionally been a problem in American society because the American consciousness, by definition, is created from a smorgasbord of ethnic identities (1996).

Humor can actually be used as a tool to make fun of a stereotype. Leveen (1996) says:

While jokes about the alleged objectionable behavior of minorities may be seen as evidence of their inferiority, ethnic jokes may also challenge assumptions about ethnic inferiority... humor allows a very important acknowledgment of certain realities, limits, and incongruities, serving not as a dismissal but as a valuable coping mechanism. Further, jokes-particularly ethnic jokes-often prove the fallibility of categorizing, generalizing, and stereotyping. (p. 40)

Ethnic humor is not always used to subvert stereotypes. A 1986 study by Boskin and Dorinson defines ethnic humor as a “continuing resistance of advantaged groups to unrestrained immigration and to emancipation’s black subcitizens barred from opportunities for participation and productivity” (p. 81). The study concludes that aggressive humor serves the functions of both control and conflict, reinforcing the “in-group,” represented by the dominant ethnicity, and weakening the “out-group,” represented by the ethnicity that is the butt of the joke (Boskin & Dorinson, 1986, p. 83). Both functions, Boskin and Dorinson argue, perpetuate stereotypes in each individual’s consciousness and “collective folklore,” making them “extremely difficult to dislodge” (1986, p. 83).

Lockyer and Pickering (2008) offer a similar evaluation of the significance of humor itself, whether ethnic or not. In a survey of available literature about analyzing humor as a separate discourse from any other genre within media, Lockyer and Pickering found that perceiving humor as a form of entertainment is not a reason alone to isolate it from other genres of media and that even though humor provides an escape from reality, it is also an avenue to bring sensitive social issues into a public forum (2008, p. 818).

Their view of humor and its importance is consistent with the views held by other researchers within the field.

A 2006 study by Park, Gabbadon, and Chemin identified racial stereotypes perpetuated in action movie *Rush Hour 2* starring Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker. The study utilized a qualitative research method by combining both textual analysis of the film and the responses of a focus group in order to gauge the offensiveness of identified racial stereotypes on audience members. The identified stereotypes agreed with the variables in a study by Fischhoff, Franco, Gram, Hernandez, and Parker (1999), with some of the most prominent being non-English speaking minorities, blacks with “street credibility,” and childish personalities as well as racial slurs perpetuated by one ethnic group upon another (Park et al., 2006, p. 168). The study also found that the majority of focus group participants were not offended by the film’s blatant use of racial stereotypes, leading researchers to conclude that different racial groups enjoy racial humor in comedy and are more inclined to see racial stereotypes as unrepresentative of the minority group portrayed in the film, although audience members of different races engage those stereotypes in a variety of ways (Park et al., 2006, p. 173).

Regardless of how researchers viewed the issue of how minority humor affected audience members, including the minorities portrayed, the majority agreed that humor utilizes minority stereotypes in order to get the punch line across. Although humor can be used to reinforce stereotypes, some view it as a way to bridge the gap between the races. Vine Deloria Jr., in *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, writes, “The Indian people are exactly the opposite of the popular stereotype. I sometimes wonder how

anything is accomplished by Indians because of the apparent overemphasis on humor within the Indian world” (1969, p. 146-147).

Bridging a gap between the races is exactly what African American comedian Dave Chappelle and Jewish writer Neal Brennan did. The pair co-created *Chappelle's Show*, a hilarious boundary-pushing comedy skit show. Brennan summed up the premise of the use of ethnic and racial humor and how it can be used to actually poke fun at the ideology of stereotypes by saying “a lot of what we did was make fun of white people’s perception of black people” (Gross, 2017). Like Brennan and Chappelle, Alexie uses a myriad of Native American stereotypes and even ethnic humor as a sarcastic spin off of the historical negative trickster stereotype, and as part of both his personal and professional narrative. This is seen when he portrays the bumbling Native American character Lester Falls Apart to literary audiences coming to hear him speak. With characters like Lester Falls Apart and other controversial takes on Native American history, Alexie creates media material often poking fun at what people expect from him.

The Trickster Historical Stereotype and a Modern Commentary

This emphasis on humor by whites when referring to Native Americans became the stereotype known as the trickster. While it can be used negatively, the trickster had a historical place in Native American culture. Baxter (2012) wrote that when humor is applied to the trickster character it can be used to do two things, “reinforce cultural values and collective identity” as well as “challenge static identities that depict American Indian identity within stories of dominance” (p. 37). Alexie’s works include poetry, books, and films, all working to subvert popular cultural stereotypes. Within his works, he often uses humor and the classic Native American trickster persona. Gudmundson writes, “Alexie’s

trickster voice slyly invokes a social commentary about contemporary Native American life while negotiating with both a Native and non-Native audience” (2005, p. 17).

Vizenor argues, “Postmodernism liberates imagination and widens the audiences for tribal literatures” (as cited in Gudmundson, 2005, p. 17).

The trickster is known as a teacher and a “key player in Indian Humor” (Lowe, 1994 p. 194). The trickster can cut across many landscapes, and be all different things, including both male and female (Babcock & Cox, 100). Some people see the trickster as a harmless stereotype. But others find the trickster and other offensive clichés to be some of the most degrading stereotypes. Fischhoff, Franco, Gram, Hernandez and Parker published a study in 1999 analyzing offensive clichés in film. Surveying a 1,600-person convenience sample (divided into younger and older respondents), they found several of the top offensive clichés were minority-related portrayals; these included being poverty - or welfare-prone, English-language impaired, employment and athletic stereotypes and promiscuous sexual habits (Fischhoff et al., 1999). The study concluded that while the subject of offense changed with each ethnic group represented, all ethnic groups were offended by Hollywood portrayals of their ethnicity (Fischhoff et al., 1999, p. 22). These representations give viewers no options, just the stereotype presented, such as the Noble Savage, Enlightened Savage, or Bloodthirsty Savage (Merskin, 2016). By only receiving one message present in the media, the stereotyped and offensive representations go unchallenged (Merskin, 2016). Specifically, Merskin (2016) notes, “the problem is that these representations are not contradicted by other information, or alternative views in mainstream media” (p. 227).

Theories of Authorship and Auterism

Anyone who has taken a literature class has read written works considered masterpieces. What happens when this masterful expertise is combined with an artistic approach, talent, and craftsmanship into the media of filmmaking? You get someone who might be considered an auteur.

In today's world, auteurs abound in filmmaking. Their films are distinct, individualized works of art easily recognizable by their style and approach to their final product. Grant (2008) said these accomplished filmmakers include a few historical and timely names like John Ford (*The Grapes of Wrath*), Alfred Hitchcock (*The Birds*), Howard Hawks (*His Girl Friday*), Frank Capra (*It's A Wonderful Life*), Kathryn Bigelow (*The Hurt Locker*), and Spike Lee (*Do the Right Thing*).

Larson (2015) discussed how "great playwrights from the European Renaissance such as Shakespeare and Moliere" were one of the first to be evaluated and critiqued by literary critics (p. 8). According to Larson (2015), Shakespeare and these others became much more than mere writers, they began to be seen as artists, thus sparking criticism and analysis of their works. Negus and Pickering (2004) noted that the Romantic period "accommodated both the notion of being spoken through, used as a mouthpiece of the muse, and an emphasis on individual imagination and feeling, for it was through such faculties that authentic self-expression was felt to flow" (p. 3). Following in the path of literature and stage presentations, cinematic entertainment blossomed, creating yet another field of critics. Later, media and film criticism became academic fields of study. Writers and directors of films became more than just technicians. They became unique

artists often creating a personal brand associated with their works. In other words, auteurs.

Braudy and Cohen are considered important figures in the field of film theory and criticism. They say that, “because films embody, communicate, enforce, and suggest meanings, film theorists often suggested that film constitutes a language” (Braudy & Cohen, 2009, p. 1). Auteurs are distinguishable. Renee (2015) says that from Hitchcock to Scorsese to Kubrick, Lynch, and Tarantino “our most popular and treasured directors tend to have a signature style, that special touch that is all their own, that lets the audience know, right away, whose hands sculpted the films they’re watching” (para. 1).

In 1954, director and film critic François Truffaut wrote an essay entitled *A Certain Tendency in French Cinema*. Truffaut “claimed that film is a great medium for expressing the personal ideas of the director” even suggesting “the director should therefore be regarded as an auteur” (Ryan, 2015, para 1.) Truffaut is even once known to have said, “There are no good and bad movies, only good and bad directors” (Ryan, 2015, para 1).

Auteur Theory was originally formulated as “Truffaut sought to raise the status of films, made by directors with distinct visual styles, to the realm of art” (Strandvad, 2012, p. 119). Auteurism “elevated the status of critical interpretation and encouraged viewers to embrace François Truffaut’s assertion that there are not good and bad movies, only good and bad directors” (Sterritt, D. 2015, p. 104). In the 1950s and 60s, auteurism was only a movement, but later became a theory (Strandvad, 2012, p. 11). Strandvad notes that Truffaut “argued against a tradition that saw filmmaking as adaptation of literary works, a position he found was downplaying the visual side of films” (2012, p. 199). So,

Truffaut coined the term “cinéma d’auteurs” that “valued cinematic expression as an art form in its own right. This appraisal of the director’s job implied that the director came to be seen as the central creative agent in filmmaking” (Strandvad, 2012, p. 119).

Larson (2015) says Sarris’ theory of “distinguished filmmaking” includes a director demonstrating “technical competence” and “stylistic consistency or a distinguishable personality” (p. 8, p. 9). Larson (2015) sees Sarris’ take on Auteur Theory being three concentric circles: “the outer circle as technique, the middle circle personal style, and the inner circle,” seen as a “ ‘directorial attitude’ toward material that helps define a filmmaker’s worldview” (Larson, 2015, p. 9).

According to Strandvad (2012), Sarris elaborated on the inspiration from *Cahiers du Cinéma* and created an “evaluative theory of auteurism” based on three criteria: “the director should be technically competent, the personality of the director should be distinguishable, and the director’s style should be unfettered by industry structures” (p. 119-120). Sarris, in applying these three criteria, “constructed a hierarchical system to categorize American auteurs” (Strandvad, 2012, p. 120). When discussing auteurism, Strandvad (2012) completed case studies of film projects of young Danish directors. In her categorization of an auteur, she categorized auteurs as “the author whose style is recognizable from film to film” (p. 118).

Strandvad (2012) also discussed other researcher’s determination of auteurship including Bordwell and Thompson who determined the notion of director-as-author “remains probably the most widely shared assumption in film studies today” (Bordwell & Thompson, 1993, p. 38; cited in Gaut, 1997, p. 149). Strandvad concluded that this “may not only be the case in film theory but also in practice (2012, p. 119).

As Negus and Pickering (2004) noted:

Film has been viewed as a cultural form that has facilitated inherently collective or collaborative processes of creation. It's because of this that contemporary studios – whether DreamWorks, Disney, or Universal – promote themselves as providing a creative environment when seeking to attract director, actors, or investors. The claim that film production ushered a new type of collective creativity has been challenged by those who view the work of making films as a struggle of lone directing auteurs against the collective inertia of the studio and distribution system. (p. 56)

Cowan says directors are often applauded for the uniqueness of a film, writing, “Popular film commentators almost always credit the director with the look, or visual style, of a film” (2012, p. 75). Even though these directors may be seen by some as auteurs, there is still often a simplistic view of films outside of film studies. As Lapsley and Westlake observed:

Despite the sustained theoretically decisive critique of auteurism, mainstream discussion of cinema is still dominated by the quest for the author, its main critical concerns being to distinguish authors from the anonymous mass of directors, to establish their identity by reference to their most characteristic work and distinguishing style or thematic focus, and to pass judgment as to their respective merits. (1991, p. 127)

Lapsley and Westlake (1991) advance the idea of director as auteur when discussing the targeted and star quality of directors in film promotion:

A persistent authorial discourse runs through from publicity (“the new Francis Ford Coppola”) to critical reception in print and on television (“an interesting addition to the Coppola oeuvre”), even to academic discussion (“Coppola’s debt to Heidegger”), where it is nominally barred. The question as to why authorship is so persistent is, given the character of authorial debate (the endless questions, the never finalized answers), perhaps best approached through psychoanalysis. (p. 127)

Lapsley and Westlake (2006) discussed how Michel Foucault provided the “political underpinning of film theory” and that Foucault thought there “are as many conceptions of society as there are perspectives on it” (p. 18-19). Paul Sellors, in his book *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths*, says “authorship is a problem in film studies that simply will not go away” (2007, p. 263). Teo (2013) sees authorship as a wider spectrum and that the authorship of cinema is far from settled (p. 257):

The theory of director as author (or, strictly speaking, the director as sole author) of a film has endured not so much as a myth but as a problem inasmuch as some form of resolution is sought by critics to settle the status of the director.

Authorship studies have therefore continued to ponder the issue of authorship, but not so much authorship, per se of this view. Because of the collaborative nature of the act of creation in the medium, there are persistent questions as to who is the author, whether there is a single author, and whether films are authored collectively. (p. 257, para. 1)

CHAPTER III - RESEARCH METHOD

The foundation of this analysis draws from the use of critical cultural communication studies such as Stuart Hall's preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings, representation of minorities in media, and the changing field of postmodern media. Use of these methods allows the researcher to use textual analysis to demonstrate the characterizations found in these films and how they might be challenging the norms and historical portrayal of minorities in films.

Textual Analysis

This research is focused on textual analysis and meanings found by the choices the filmmakers made. Rather than seeking to analyze numbers and statistics, this research is examining meanings and representations, both intended and unintended, by the filmmakers. This study examines how viewers derive multiple and various meanings of the messages presented by the filmmakers and how the viewer may negotiate the meanings presented. These films constitute the span of Alexie's film career, covering different decades in which the films were made and varying times in Alexie's changing career. Additionally, these storylines in these films center around Native American characters. This research is looking for trends and depictions of Native Americans by those affiliated with the culture rather than whites or others producing Native American films. The research examines a mainstream blockbuster *Smoke Signals* and a movie considered a box office flop, *The Business of Fancydancing*.

This research aims to demonstrate the ways Native Americans and even whites are characterized in these films revealing themes and emphases found throughout. This dissertation analyzed the characterizations and environments of movies by Native

American author, poet, and filmmaker Sherman Alexie: *Smoke Signals* and *The Business of Fancydancing*.

This dissertation argues that through his work in these films, Alexie has worked to fight against stereotypical characterizations of Native Americans often found in films, while trying to deepen the understanding of their culture and the complexities found by its people. These films are being studied by a single researcher completing a textual analysis, based on interpreting multiple meanings of dialogue, imagery, actors, and use of humor, to mention just a few elements. This research builds on previous textual analyses relying on qualitative methods (Cole, 2008; Flournoy, 2003; French, 2015).

The following research questions will be addressed through critical and cultural analysis:

RQ1: How do the characterizations and representation of characters perpetuate myths and stereotypes of minority characters as well as whites (including social circles and family dynamics)? How do these representations challenge these myths?

RQ2: How do Alexie's films have a postmodern approach that critiques long-held stereotypes? What, if any, postmodern criticism can be seen in the films?

RQ3: How is humor used to convey messages about the characters? How, if at all, is ethnic humor used to challenge stereotypes and myths of minorities?

RQ4: What are the implications of Native American filmmakers portraying these characters in a new light? What impact might it have on how Native American characters are viewed by non-Native audiences? What are the implications for future minority directed films?

Process of Analysis

Each film was viewed numerous times. This included focused viewing of the films, playing the films in the background while other tasks were being completed, and listening to the film dialogue while not viewing the films. Qualitative studies of media allow for a deeper examination of media imagery, character development, familial relationships, musical choices, and ethnic humor, just to mention a few.

Semiotics is helpful to qualitative studies because it allows the researcher to see beyond surface presentations. By analyzing the preferred meaning, negotiated meaning, and oppositional readings of the dialogue, I was able to examine more deeply the postmodern approaches in these films. By making social commentary using dialogue and humor, Alexie creates contradictory meanings going beyond surface imagery.

Character analysis was completed. Examining major characters as well as minor characters. This included hairstyle, clothing, overall appearance, and changes that occurred during the film to these characters. Dialogue analysis was completed examining words and phrasing used and examining the interpersonal interactions between characters. This dialogue analysis included respect or disrespect, expressions of anger and rage, and references to traditional Native American items such as fry bread. Use of environments, dark and bright scenes, as well as outdoor and indoor scene selection, and use of different modes of transportation were evaluated for preferred, negotiated, and oppositional meanings. Music selection, noting when music was played and not played, including ominous music or light-hearted music, was analyzed using qualitative methods to examine meanings and messages conveyed by the music choices. Expressions of humor, ethnic humor as well as sarcastic humor, were specifically noted as well as use of humor as a weapon towards others. Family conflict and the themes of alcoholism were

also particularly examined. Character's personal isolation as a theme was examined as well as family struggles, breakdown, and conflict.

Narrative Analysis and Narrative Theory

The nature of narrative has been examined for over 50 years (Hazel, 2007). Hazel writes, "This may well be a function of our information society, where communication and the means of communication have become increasingly important to societies, organizations, and individuals alike" (2007, p. 1). Narrative Theory examines structures in the narrative and "narrative theorists, in short, study how stories help people make sense of the world, while also studying how people make sense of stories" (Project Narrative, 2017, para. 2.). Narrative Theory goes through different stages and starts:

From the assumption that narrative is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with fundamental elements of our experience, such as time, process, and change, and it proceeds from this assumption to study the distinctive nature of narrative and its various structures, elements, uses, and effects. (Project Narrative, 2017, para. 1)

Narrative Theory examines what is "distinctive about narrative (how it is different from other kinds of discourse, such as lyric poems, arguments, lists, descriptions, statistical analyses, and so on), and how accounts of what happened to particular people in particular circumstances with particular consequences can be at once so common and so powerful" (Project Narrative, 2017, para. 2). Narrative theorists "draw not only on literary studies, but also on ideas from such fields as rhetoric, (socio)linguistics, philosophical ethics, cognitive science (including cognitive and social psychology), folklore, and gender theory to explore how narratives work both as kinds of texts and as

strategies for navigating experience” (Project Narrative, 2017, para. 2). There are many elements to narratives:

Narratives of all kinds are relevant to the field: literary fictions and nonfictions, film narratives, comics and graphic novels, hypertexts and other computer-mediated narratives, oral narratives occurring during the give and take of everyday conversation, as well as narratives told in courtrooms, doctors’ offices, business conference rooms—indeed, anywhere. (Project Narrative, 2017, para. 3)

Hazel, in *Narrative: An Introduction* (2007), expresses how “cross-cultural studies (e.g. Chafe 1980; Levi-Strauss, 1963) suggest that narrative is a basic and constant form of human expression regardless of ethnic origin, primary language, and enculturation” (p. 1). Barthes described narratives as “numberless” (2004, p. 65) and that:

Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s Saint Ursula), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. (1988, p. 65, para. 1)

Barthes adds there is an “almost infinite diversity of forms” where “narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society” (2004, p. 65). He adds:

All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring

nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes, 2004, p.65)

This concept that narrative is part of life itself is why Hazel (2007) says the subjectivity and narrator's point of view shapes "every element of the narrative" (p. 1) and that "the psychological weighting of time is itself reciprocally related to the processes" of event selection and event sequencing (p. 2). Event selection is that "no matter what actually went on 'in reality' only those events necessary to the narrative should be included" and event sequencing is that "events need not be narrated in the order they happened but can be recombined in an infinite number of ways (many of which may be medium specific)" (Hazel, 2007, p. 2).

In discussing director Quentin Tarantino and how he "played with narrative chronology" (Kolker, 2015, p. 103) in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Kolker says:

Chronology is an important aspect of the classical style, and it has not advanced very far from Aristotle's classic notion that dramatic narrative construction should consist of a beginning, middle and end. (The French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard once commented that Aristotle was quite right: narrative should have a beginning, middle, and end, but not necessarily in that order). (2015, p. 103)

Hazel (2007) found the narrator has immense influence on how meaning is created:

The selection of events, the relative importance attached to each, and the way in which subjective time is managed are all entirely dependent upon the point of view of the narrator. A narrative is a re-presentation of reality from a particular

perspective. It is a whole, an internally consistent, self-contained unit of expression; reality reconfigured in order to create meaning. (p. 2)

Smoke Signals – From Reservation to Sundance

After all his success in poetry, short stories and books, in 1998 Alexie decides to make a move into filmmaking. Mirroring his life story, Alexie experiences highs and lows as a result of this momentous decision. Who doesn't want their first movie to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival? This is where we find ourselves with Sherman Alexie and the 1998 film, *Smoke Signals*. Directed by and starring real Native American actors.

Alexie's movie debut is the critically acclaimed film *Smoke Signals*, which he both wrote and produced. Alexie takes pride in producing *Smoke Signals*. It was based on a short story collection penned by Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (Egan, 1998). Directed by Chris Eyre, a Cheyenne and Arapaho, *Smoke Signals* was the first feature film written, directed, produced, and acted by Native Americans (Dowell, 2006). The film stars two main characters, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Thomas narrates the film while he and Victor make the trip from the reservation to Phoenix. Not a vacation, the two are on the quest to get Victor's absentee father's ashes after his father died suddenly (Dowell, 2006). The film is "an exploration of the relationship between fathers and sons, this film poignantly and comically explores the dynamics of family within contemporary Native American reservation life" (Dowell, 2006, p. 378).

Smoke Signals appealed to mainstream (white) audiences and became a box office success. But, it did not do this on its own. *Smoke Signals* benefitted from a one-of-a-kind

blockbuster that took America by storm, *Dances with Wolves*. 1991 found *Dances with Wolves*, directed by and starring non-Native Kevin Costner, a huge financial success and winner of seven academy awards (Weatherford, 2010). Just like other historical depictions of Native Americans, this film brought problems to the surface again of non-Natives telling the story of Native Americans.

Never one to give up a good bandwagon run, Hollywood wanted to cash in on the success of *Dances with Wolves*, so 1992 and 1993 brought even more movies by white people about native people. These included *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Thunderheart*, and *Geronimo: An American Legend*, leading into 1995's *Last of the Dogmen* and Disney's glorious depiction of *Pocahontas* (Kilpatrick, 1999).

As in previous generations, Americans were "learning" about Native American culture by watching movies, more specifically, movies made by white people. Kilpatrick (1999) says that people have moved from reading to watching films and these films became new way non-Natives learned about Native Americans. People used films the same way people in the 1800s learned about drunken savages from newspapers and magazines (Kilpatrick, 1999, p. 23).

Why was *Smoke Signals* so notably different from these movies? Because it was more than surface depictions. Alexie and those involved in making the film decided they wanted to use this film to teach viewers, as a result, telling them a different story. Mihelich (2001) noted *Smoke Signals* involved Native American characters in a Native American context, the reservation. The film does not include Hollywood imagery, just the realities of the reservation: run down homes, cars on blocks, and fatherless families (Mihelich, 2001). Mihelich (2001) says Alexie introduces viewers to a normal snapshot

of reservation life, which include family disagreements, alcohol abuse, and even traditional foods such as fry bread.

The film also features the most transferable of story lines, young people trying to find their way, not sure what they want to be when they grow up, all the while dealing with family problems. Through *Smoke Signals*, Alexie creates characters, which happen to be Native American, who exhibit their culture while undergoing the same struggles as everyone else, regardless of their cultural heritage.

The Business of Fancysdancing – Alexie’s Big Flop

“Rage at blatant prejudice” is another theme found in *The Business of Fancysdancing* (2002), a film Alexie wrote and directed, and which flopped by box office standards (Jaggi, 2008, para. 14). The film had revenue of \$174, 682 (Indian Box Office, 2016). Straying outside the norm, the film stars a gay Indian hero, Seymour Polatkin. Seymour is a super-famous Seattle poet slammed by Indian press but honored by Seattle literary circles. Criticism is leveled at Seymour for “feeding off reservation stories” (Jaggi, 2008, para. 14). Except for Seymour’s character’s sexual orientation, says Alexie, “he’s a slightly exaggerated autobiographical version of me - with more regrets” (Jaggi, 2008, para. 14).

Elvis Mitchell, in a review in *The New York Times*, called Alexie’s directorial debut a film about hard to face topics that features “self-destructiveness” (2002, para. 2). Mitchell writes, “The film’s narrative is told mostly from the perspective of Seymour Polatkin (Evan Adams), a gay writer and poet and a member of the Spokane tribe. It starts with a high school flashback of Seymour and his friends Aristotle (Gene Tagaban) and Mouse (Swil Kanim), an ill-fated violinist who never shirked telling the truth no

matter how painful. When he dies, he leaves as much misery in his wake as he did while he was alive” (2002, para. 3).

This film introduces the themes of homosexuality, referred to as two-spirited, as well as the struggles of being a Native American in the film (Mitchell, 2002). By combining these two struggles (Seymour being seen as a traitor to his Native American culture while also struggling with his sexual orientation), Alexie creates a “nexus of other themes in a way that renders an understanding of sexual conflict as indispensable to understanding the racial tensions in the film” (Youngberg, 2008, p. 58).

Mitchell finds the film similar to most of Alexie’s literary works calling the film “quasi-autobiographical” (2002, para. 10). According to Mitchell, it is a “tale about the burden of constantly being asked who you are and where you come from -- a question that artists of color constantly hear, either from others or themselves. Mr. Alexie is smart enough to know it’s never satisfactorily answered” (2002, para. 10).

Definitions and terms used

For much of history and even in today’s society, the use of the term Indian versus Native American has been debated. A Navajo, Amanda Blackhorse (2015) surveyed prominent Native American voices about which term should be used to describe them. Blackhorse says the terms ranged from Native to Indian to indigenous and American Indian:

Wherever I go, from the reservation to the city, through the halls of academia, from younger to older, to the grassroots, and in social media, I hear numerous discussions and debates around how people choose to identify with certain

references, e.g., which word is the most appropriate: Native American? Native? Indian? American Indian? Indigenous? (Blackhorse, 2015, para. 2)

She says, election of a term, as long as it is not pejorative, is okay and that the ability to choose is empowering:

This discussion does not argue that the term 'Indian' is better, or that 'indigenous' is, or to invalidate being an American or not to be; it is about choice; what we choose as well as how and why we used these names. One thing is certain, we can all agree to reject pejorative references to Native people, e.g. "redskins," "squaw," "savages," etc. This discussion is complex, and I have discovered there is no singular nor simple answer (Blackhorse, 2015, para. 4).

For the purposes of this research, numerous terms were encountered and as a result, will be utilized. Historical literature used the term Indian and some tribal publications maintain the use of the word, while Native American is also widely used. For the purpose of this analysis, Indian, Native American, and American Indian people will be referred to in these varying terms by authors referenced. Throughout these films the term "white" is used by characters to refer to those outside of their Native American culture. Although the use of the term white does not perfectly define the group of those that are being described, for instance during Custer's time there were many whites that did not discriminate against Indians, for this dissertation, the term white will be used. Although it is not a perfect term, it will be used due to the fact that these films utilize this term as well as historical literature, current day Native American writers, and even current day researchers.

For efficiency purposes and to avoid unnecessary repetition, *The Business of Fancydancing* will sometimes be referred to as *Fancydancing*.

CHAPTER IV – SHERMAN ALEXIE: A DAMAGED REALIST

From author to filmmaker to business mogul including launching minority-owned production companies, Alexie's life's work involves blazing a trail of communication and representation of the Native American experience. From short stories, novels, poetry, to screenplays, Alexie has led the way in challenging stereotypical representations of Native Americans, making him a sought after speaker across the United States. Alexie is one of many Native Americans that decided to become a force for change, owning their culture and Native American representations in media. He is widely known and awarded for his poetry and literary contributions about his Native American culture. A self-proclaimed Native American poet and fiction writer, Alexie's heritage is of two Native American tribes from the State of Washington, Spokane and Couer d'Alene (Alexie, 2016).

Alexie is considered by many to be a leading voice in the Native American movement. This not only includes books and films, but also includes Native American activism. He has been heralded as a writer with Rudnick, Smith, and Rubin expressing that he has "unflinching candor about the realities and conflicts of Indian life and identity and off the reservation" (2009, p. 350). Alexie is recognized by numerous organizations and has won many awards. While a student, he won the 1991 Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Fellowship (Sudderman, 2010). Alexie was recognized by *Granta* magazine as one of the 20 best American novelists under 40 and he was also named one of the *New Yorker's* 20 best writers of the 21st century (Jaggi, 2008).

He received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and had two of his poetry collections published, *The Business of Fancydancing* and *I Would Steal Horses*. Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* won the 2007 National Book

Award and was on *The New York Times* bestseller list for over 30 weeks (National Book Awards, 2007). Some call the book autobiographical in nature, about a Native American boy who leaves his Spokane Indian Reservation to enroll in an all-white school (Sudderman, 2010). In addition to these awards, Alexie received the 2008 Stranger Genius Award, 2009 Mason Award, a Pushcart Prize and numerous honorary degrees. He is a highly sought-after public speaker and has been a guest on nationally broadcast radio and TV programs (Moyers, 2013).

To understand Alexie's works as a writer and filmmaker, he would say you need to understand his personal story. He is not writing fiction; he is writing firsthand about his struggles and those Native Americans (and even non-Natives) experience in their lives.

Alexie's road in life has not been easy. He was born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, just outside Spokane. He started life very ill and wrote about it in *One Little Indian Boy*, describing the irony of a Catholic priest telling his parents he would not survive, even giving him last rites (Alexie, 1994). Setting the stage for his later experiences, Alexie fought and survived. Alexie says in his youth he used reading *Superman* comic books as an escape and had read the entire Wellpinit School Library by age 12 (Alexie, 2016).

Alexie says he never fit in on the reservation. So, he made the tough decision to attend Rearden High School, an all-white school. Alexie jokes about the fact that he was the only Indian at Rearden, except for their mascot. His plans were to use his basketball skills and Rearden education as his path to success (Alexie, 2016). But like the characters he writes about, to Alexie, something in his life always seemed amiss. After feeling like

an outsider on the reservation, he now felt like an outsider at Rearden, even though he was a star on the basketball team. A defining moment in his life happened when he missed a game-winning free throw. Newspaper headlines read, “Alexie Misses Free Throw, Indians Lose Again” (Egan, 1998). Even today, Alexie recalls this “big miss” and how it defined his youth and became a mainstay reference in his first-person storytelling (Alexie, 2016).

Alexie’s personal history follows a path that includes a key subject in the Native American experience, family alcohol abuse, as well as his own struggles with alcohol. Alexie says part of his college years were spent upholding the stereotype of Native Americans being drunks (Egan, 1998). Since basketball was not his way out, Alexie was searching for something else. He found his calling when he attended Washington State University (WSU), where he met a man that would change his life, English professor and accomplished poet, Alex Kuo. This began Alexie’s journey into the world of poetry and literature, later leading to his film career (Alexie, 2016).

In 1991, Alexie discovered his love of writing during a creative writing workshop, leading to his first major book, *The Business of Fancydancing* (Rudnick et al., 2009). Professor Kuo supported Alexie and helped him get a collection of poems published in 1992 by *Hanging Loose Press* in New York. This led to three more books of poetry and the book that would become the award-winning film, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (Rudnick et al., 2009). Alexie is recognized by many as unconventional. In 1998, Timothy Egan, talked with Alexie’s publisher, Morgan Entrekin. Entrekin said Alexie was a “fresh,” “unusual voice” (Egan, 1998, para. 28). Entrekin said Alexie was, “Very different from other Indian writers. He was a new

generation. As he said to me, ‘I’m not from the eagle-feather and corn-pollen school’” (Egan, 1998, para. 28).

Alexie has been considered by many in the entertainment business as an influencer, one to watch. Scott Rosenfelt, CEO of *Shadow Catcher*, the company that produced the movie *Smoke Signals*, saw Alexie as one that was willing to push boundaries (Jaggi, 2008). Alexie’s influences are not limited to his education; he proudly admits he has been influenced by traditional culture as well as popular culture. Alexie calls himself “the first practitioner of the Brady Bunch school of Native American literature... a twenty-first century Indian who believes in the twenty-first century” (Bernardin, 2010, p. 52). He proudly claims to be part of the TV generation, but also “schooled in literary classics” (Cresswell & Dixon, p. 155, 2002).

Literary Criticism

Literary criticisms of Alexie abound. Some of his early works, such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* included deep subjects such as sex and violence. It was widely criticized as critics cited “that the novel is anti-family, culturally insensitive and contains content that includes drugs, alcohol, smoking, gambling, violence, offensive language, sex education and depictions of bullying” (“Banned Books,” 2016, para. 3).

You know you have made it in the literary world when your book is banned. Even lawmakers contend Alexie’s works are controversial. In 2010, the state of Arizona aimed to take Alexie’s works out of schools. Arizona HB 2281 was passed banning books that “advocate ethnic solidarity instead of being individuals” or “are designed for a certain ethnicity” to be taught in schools (“AZ House Bill,” 2013, para. 1). Originally upheld in

2013 by Federal Judge Wallace Tashima, the case was appealed to a federal appeals court; then in 2015 it was remanded back to an Arizona federal district court for trial to decide the merits of this civil rights complaint (Arce v. Douglas, 2015). The law has been challenged (“Arce v. Douglas Team Heats Up,” 2016) and was eventually found to violate the fourteenth and first amendments (Robson, 2017). In 2014, Alexie’s National Book Award winner, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, was listed as one of the most frequently banned books, according to the American Library Association.

Alexie’s works are often sensationalized with minor storylines being taken out of context. A Fox News 2013 headline read, “Complaints reportedly force NYC school to remove book on masturbation from summer reading list” (“Complaints Reportedly Force NYC School,” 2013). But the headline did not tell the whole truth; rather the first paragraph notes that the book “touched on” the subject rather than being the main topic (“Complaints Reportedly Force NYC School,” 2013, para. 1). To this day, school systems across the country are experiencing battles to ban this book. May 2017 headlines include, “New London Spicer parents want book banned,” “A Part Time Indian Challenged in Minnesota School District,” “Parents ask Minn. School district to remove Sherman Alexie book from curriculum,” and “NCAC Urges Wisconsin Superintendent to Retain Award-Winning Novel in Curriculum; UPDATE: Victory! Superintendent Rules in Favor of Keeping the Book” (Collins, 2017; Belsky, 2017, Chana, 2017, Lange, 2017). One parent, Jessica Conlin, said, “While several themes in the book have value, she and her husband, Dave, object to its inclusion in the school curriculum because it contains ‘gratuitous and unnecessary’ profanity and reference to sexual acts” adding that the book is in conflict with the districts code of student conduct (Lange, 2017, para. 7).

In responding to a 2011 commentary on the darkness in Young Adult (YA) literature, including his YA books, Alexie blasted the criticism in his response, *Why the Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood*, writing:

Recently, I was the surprise commencement speaker at the promotion ceremony for a Seattle alternative high school. I spoke to sixty students, who'd come from sixteen different districts, and had survived depression, attempted suicide, gang warfare, sexual and physical abuse, absentee parents, poverty, racism, and learning disabilities in order to graduate. These students had read my young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and had been inspired by my autobiographical story of a poor reservation Indian boy and his desperate and humorous attempts to find a better life. (Alexie, 2011, para. 1-2)

Alexie talks about the “beautiful and painful ceremony” and how he receives handwritten letters from teens and pre-teens who have read his book saying it is the only novel they have ever read cover to cover (Alexie, 2011, para. 6). Alexie says young readers have “sent me autobiographical letters written in crayon, complete with drawings inspired by my book, that are just as dark, terrifying, and redemptive as anything I’ve ever read” (Alexie, 2011, para. 6).

Alexie disagrees with how some critics see young adult literature as the avenue that introduces children to violence:

When I think of the poverty-stricken, sexually and physically abused, self-loathing Native American teenager that I was, I can only wish, immodestly, that I'd been given the opportunity to read ‘The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian’ ... In those days, the cultural conservatives thought that KISS and Black

Sabbath were going to impede my moral development. They wanted to protect me from sex when I had already been raped. They wanted to protect me from evil though a future serial killer had already abused me. They wanted me to profess my love for God without considering that I was the child and grandchild of men and women who'd been sexually and physically abused by generations of clergy. (Alexie, 2011, para. 10-11)

Activist and Social Commentator

This literary activism, brutal honesty bearing parts of his soul, and willingness to literarily kick in the teeth others he disagrees with, is a staple reaction found in Alexie's life and career. But he does not just use words to fight injustice as he sees it, he also takes action. Alexie has been seen as many things: poet, controversial author, filmmaker, and activist. Having a lifelong love of books, Alexie started *Indies First* to promote small bookstores. Alexie called for "authors to show their support for independent booksellers by signing up to work at their favorite indie bookstore on Small Business Saturday, the Saturday after Thanksgiving" (Jarrad, 2016, para. 6). For the fourth year of *Indies First*, Alexie invited fellow authors, Seattle city council members, reporters, and musicians to "join him on a tour bus to travel to three indie bookstores in the Seattle area on November 26" (Jarrard, 2016, para 1).

One thing you need to know about Sherman Alexie is that he is not afraid. Not afraid to go after anyone, anywhere, anytime. Alexie has criticized many who write about Native American culture, including popular author Barbara Kingsolver, a non-Native who lives in the Southwest and writes best-selling fiction about a white mother who adopted a Native American child, for appropriating Native American culture (Gorton,

2009). Alexie's reach goes beyond the academic and the worlds of literature and media. Being of Native American heritage and having won numerous awards for Native American works, Alexie is often asked to make social commentary. From Indian casinos to reservation fishing rights, Sherman Alexie has resolve. He refuses to give in or give up.

Always ready to take on the system and an enthusiastic lover of books, Alexie even once chided advancements in technology (only to characteristically change his mind later). Alexie openly crusaded for the use of books, not electronic books, but real books, magazines and newspapers saying we are becoming a "digitally addicted" culture (Sudderman, 2010, para. 45). He says he was famous or infamous for his objection to electronic literature and eBooks (Dilworth, 2013). He even joined other authors in going up against the eBook-selling titan, Amazon. Alexie was one of many authors published by Hachette that were hurt and decided to push back publicly when Amazon.com slowed delivery of Hachette products due to a contract dispute (Cook, 2014).

Flip flopping on being against eBooks, then being for eBooks, is one of many experiences and stances in Alexie's life where he began at one end of the spectrum, fighting against technology, and ended up on the other end of the spectrum, supporting digital books. In *Sherman Alexie Comes Around on eBooks, Partners with Open Road*, Dilworth (2013) noted how Alexie decided to partner "with digital publisher Open Road Media to release his entire backlist of fiction in eBook form" (para 1). Dilworth says this change in Alexie's philosophical idealism of reading books was a surprise, since he has fought against the technology. In a video posted on Open Road, Alexie said the following about his complete turnaround in supporting the use of eBooks:

At the beginning my hate was sort of global—but now it’s modified a bit. I still have serious issues with the politics and economic philosophies involved in much of the electronic book world but I’m also vitally interested in reaching more of my readers and reaching a younger generation of readers who are more technologically savvy and tech addicted, and in order to reach them I have to do this. But I’m also very excited about the aesthetic and artistic possibilities. I have an iPad—I love my iPad. I love the idea of being a part of current culture.

(Dilworth, 2013, para. 3)

Alexie is not afraid to live his own life, and not afraid to be wrong or change his mind. He is even okay going against the grain of new age and hip interpretations of Native American traditions and history. Although some of his ideas may change, he remains adamant about how Native Americans are represented to outsiders and exactly who does the representing. Alexie got involved when he learned a Caucasian was passing around a memoir to publishers about growing up Navajo; so, he contacted the publishers. He wrote an essay for *Time* magazine and discussing how dangerous it is when readers learn from “posers” (Alexie, 2006).

At times Alexie has been said to look like a *Brooks Brothers* ad (Sudderman, 2010), at other times he seems a child watching sitcoms, and other times like a Native American steeped respect and tradition. But one thing stays the same; Alexie never stops changing and challenging the status quo, using humor and even stereotypes as social and societal commentary provoking discussions about clichéd expectations of Native American culture and characters.

Alexie as an Auteur

Alexie's foray into filmmaking includes writing the screenplay and serving as producer for *Smoke Signals* and writing the screenplay (and having a minor role) and directing *The Business of Fancydancing*. Strandvad in 2012, looked at the work of debutante filmmakers as auteurs. She called this a "paradoxical suggestion" that is an "alternative to traditional auteur studies" (Strandvad, 2012, p. 53). Further, she suggests the "notion of the auteur not only plays a role in film studies, but comes alive in filmmaking practices too" (Strandvad, 2012, p. 53).

Strandvad was also interested in the notion of collaboration. She completed two studies examining two projects observing meetings with directors, producers, development producers and scriptwriters, and that "the ideal of the director to deliver intention, origin, content, coherence, distinction, and quality of a film can be seen as a notion that may become activated during the process of collaboration, and, by this, may have consequences for the collaborative process" (Strandvad, 2012, p. 122). Through her analysis, Strandvad showed that two debut films can exemplify how the "notion of the auteur is transferred from film theory to filmmaking practices" (2012, p. 132). This notion of the collaborative auteur was specifically clear through her second project analysis where she found the director "cracks" and the "team undertakes the job of making the film while the director stands on the sidelines" (2012, p. 133). This, however, does not eliminate the notion of an auteur for the project, Strandvad says:

Consequently, this might imply that the auteur notion would be rejected and substituted. However, the absence of the director does not lead to the dissolution of the director's central position in the collaboration. Despite the fact that others

carry through the project and the authorship of the director is questioned accordingly, the auteur notion is upheld as the basic logic of the project.

(Strandvad, 2012, p. 133)

This collaborative spirit is how I see Sherman Alexie as achieving auteur status. He wrote and produced *Smoke Signals* while later writing, directing, and acting a minor role in *The Business of Fancydancing*. Both films show his style through character development, storyline, imagery, and use of flashbacks.

This concept of debutante filmmakers being excellent storytellers is echoed by a jurist for the 2016 Jio MAMI Mumbai Film Festival. The “festival provides a platform for many debutante and independent filmmakers to showcase their work” (“Independent, Debutante Filmmakers,” 2016, para. 1). Commenting on the potential of upcoming filmmakers, jury member of International Competition category Christine Vachon said, “Most of the films of my category were by debutante international filmmakers and I am quite impressed... The best part of watching a debutante’s work is the strong storytelling style. They mainly focus on the story, the story drives the film” (“Independent, Debutante Filmmakers,” 2016, para. 3).

CHAPTER V – SMOKE SIGNALS

The first film examined in this dissertation is the 1998 film for which Alexie wrote the screenplay and produced, *Smoke Signals*. This movie is filled with relational interactions between Native American characters and their struggles with identity, family, relationships, life on the reservation, and experiences with outsiders. Major themes in this film include friends, family, tribal experiences, strife and loss, alcoholism, and experiences within the Native American's world and the outside world of white people. Abandonment and isolation is prevalent on the reservation with the characters constantly experiencing disconnectedness to each other and to the world, both on the reservation and beyond.

Critical Acclaim

Smoke Signals is touted as the first film made by and starring all Native American actors. At Sundance Film Festival, it earned the film festival's 1998 Audience Award and the Filmmaker's Trophy in the Dramatic category (Nelson, 1998). Rob Nelson, a member of the National Society of Film Critics, said the film won these awards "without compromising its intimate portrait of life on the reservation through a son's gradual forgiveness of his alcoholic father" (Nelson, 1998, para. 8).

Being the first of its kind, the movie was widely reviewed and critiqued. In doing so, critics did not just examine the film; they too saw the connection between the film and Alexie as auteur, creator, and parent to the project. Peter Travers, acclaimed journalist and film critic wrote in *Rolling Stone* of the movie:

Smoke Signals doesn't pretend to solve the mystery between parents and children, or the clash between cultures that leaves Victor angry and Thomas so eager to

find stories that can heal wounds. No one listens to Thomas' stories. The same fate will not befall Alexie, who has crafted one of the best films of the year by finding himself in both Victor and Thomas and building something that will last. (Travers, 1998, para. 8)

The film is not just serious, however. Alexie and the others involved in the film utilized sarcastic, offensive, and even racial humor at times. Susan Doll is a reviewer with a Ph.D. in film studies from Northwestern. Doll (1998) says *Smoke Signals* “explores the nature of Native American stereotypes in popular cinema by both seriously challenging them and humorously poking fun at them” (para. 7).

Box Office Success

Smoke Signals was viewed in different ways by different people. Originally it was marketed as “Native cinema” (Hearne, 2010, para. 1). Alexie said in an interview with Joanna Hearne that at that time it was “the only film ever written and directed by Native Americans that received national and international distribution” and the only one that “ever went even remotely mainstream” (Hearne, 2010, para. 1).

The movie was a hit and even called a “box office success” because it only cost \$2 million to make while grossing \$6.8 million (Hearne, 2010, para. 1). The movie was also successful in giving Native Americans a chance to become media makers. Hearne (2010) described the effect the movie had on the Native American community, creating new opportunities. A fellow Native American, Beverly Singer (Tewa/Navajo), explained that the film opened doors for Native Americans to create media for broad audiences. “For too long, Native Americans have been viewed as activists and positioned as opponents of mainstream White filmmakers,” said Singer, reveling in how the success of

Smoke Signals “proved that American Indians can make a good commercial product” (as quoted in Hearne, 2010, para. 1).

Awards

Smoke Signals won and was nominated for multiple awards (IMDB, 2017). These include everything from recognition for the directors, actors, excellence in filmmaking, audience awards, and more. Exemplifying both popular and critical success, the film boasts the following awards and nominations for the film:

1998 – American Indian Film Festival: Best film

1998 – Christopher Award

1998 – First Americans in the Arts: Outstanding Achievement in Writing (Sherman Alexie), Outstanding Performance by an Actor in a Film (Evan Adams), Outstanding Achievement in Directing (Chris Eyre)

1998 – Gotham Awards: Nominations: Open Palm Award

1998 – National Board of Review: Special Recognition for Excellence in Filmmaking

1998 – San Diego World Film Festival: Best American Independent Feature; Best Screenplay (Sherman Alexie); Best Actor (Adam Beach); Best Director (Chris Eyre)

1998 – Sundance Film Festival: Filmmaker’s Trophy (Chris Eyre); Audience Award. Nominations: Grand Jury Prize

1998 – Taos Talking Picture Festival: Taos Land Grant Award (Chris Eyre)

1998 – Tokyo International Film Festival: Best Artistic Contribution (Chris Eyre) (tie)

1999 – Florida Film Critics Circle Awards: Best Newcomer (Chris Eyre/Sherman Alexie)

1999 – Independent Spirit Awards: Best Debut Performance (Evan Adams).

Nominations: Best Supporting Male nomination (Gary Farmer), Best First Screenplay nomination (Sherman Alexie)

1999 – Young Artist Awards: Nominations: Best Performance in a Feature Film-Supporting Young Actor (Cody Lightning)

AFI's 100 Years... 100 Laughs – Nominated (IMDB, 2017)

Film Overview and Semiotic Analysis

Even though the casual viewer might see *Smoke Signals* as a buddy, coming-of-age film, the film is compelling beyond these simplistic ideas. The film features two young men, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and their lives as they grow up on the reservation. Many things happen along the way, and Victor's father dies away from his family and the reservation in Phoenix. When Victor gets word of his father's death, he decides to go to Phoenix, but he does not have the money. Thomas, a friend Victor often belittles and disrespects, offers him the money as long as he can make the trip with Victor. Victor begrudgingly agrees and both young men make "a physical and emotional trip" that both will remember (Lawson, p. 57, para. 1).

Alexie's *Smoke Signals* is a complicated film. I examined this film using critical cultural analysis and Stuart Hall's preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings on themes found in the film and the characters. Eco (1976) proposes to "define as a sign *everything* that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*" (p. 16, para. 3) and says that Hall's

research includes semiotic analysis analyzing the use of signs, signifiers, signified, and the meaning communicated as a result (Eco, 1976).

It can be hard to come up with a simple explanation of semiotics (Chandler, 2017, p. 5). But the “shortest definition is that it is the *study of signs*” (Chandler, p. 5, para. 1). This leads to the idea that semiotics is only about visual signs (paintings, road signs, photographs), but it is not (Chandler, 2017, p. 5). Rather, semiotics also includes body language, words, and even sounds (Chandler, 2017, p. 5).

Semiotics has much to do with culture. For example, the thumbs up sign is positive in America (good job/okay), while it can be an insult in countries like Africa or Greece. This is the cultural effect of the use of signs; the study of the meanings derived from these signs and many others is semiotics. Eco (1976) says “semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign” (p. 7). Chandler (2017) says:

A sign is traditionally defined as “something which stands for something else” (in the medieval formula, *aliquid stat pro aliquo*). All meaningful phenomena (including words and images) are signs. To interpret something is to treat it as a sign. All experience is mediated by signs, communication depends on them.

Semioticians study how meanings are made and how reality is represented (and indeed constructed) through signs and sign systems. (p. 2, para. 2)

Chandler (2017) further found that semiotics may be “best thought of as a way of looking at the production of meaning from a particular critical perspective” (p. 3, para. 2) and that semiotics is “intrinsically interdisciplinary” (p. 4, para 2). Specifically to television and film, Chandler (2017) finds that these types of media draw on several interacting sign systems, utilizing “verbal, visual, auditory, and locomotive signs” (p. 63,

para. 2). An easy way to understand semiotics, is the use of colors in a traffic light. Having been taught the meaning of these symbols, Americans automatically understand what red, yellow and green mean. We learned it from childhood. Semiotics and the understanding of meaning is influenced by circumstances and surroundings; signs can have multiple meanings in different situations. For instance, the presence of lightning in a film can be used to depict multiple meanings. In a horror film where teenagers are running through the night, lightning and thunder might convey fear and impending doom to the characters. Conversely, in a Frankenstein film, the lightning would convey life being given to the monster.

Alexie uses creativity and complex signs to offer a challenge to commonly used and long-held stereotypes. In *Smoke Signals*, he creates multiple meanings in numerous ways. *Smoke Signals* can be seen as just a good-ole buddy movie, but Alexie has given insight and meaning to the film using symbols, even challenging viewers with bold use of stereotypes and ethnic humor. Rader, in *Engaged Resistance: American Indian Art, Literature, and Film from Alcatraz to the NMAI* (2011), notes that some of the best parts of *Smoke Signals* are the ones that provides layers to the Native American characters:

To those audience members accustomed to seeing Indian flatness on-screen, these small asides communicate that the filmmakers (and Indians in general) know history, culture, and popular culture. For me, these minute moments take back celluloid identity for Native people because Alexie and Eyre use the identity-encoding machinery of film against itself. (p. 155, para. 2)

Rader says scenes of Victor and Thomas talking often show them not talking about the trip itself and the main plot (a son going to pick up his dead father's ashes), but

rather the “rich topic of Indian identity” (2011, p. 155, para. 2). Alexie embraces the use of stereotyped semiotic imagery, such as long hair on Native Americans and the need to be stoic to be taken seriously, as a way of delegitimizing the ridiculousness of these stereotypes and the expectations of viewers for a film to meet these easy-to-understand stereotypes. Alexie might provide the stereotype, but not the one viewers are expecting. He is communicating, yes, the meaning of long hair and a tough, stoic look can depict a Native American, but equally Native American is a young, smiley man with oversized glasses and buttoned-up shirt.

Rader (2011) notes that even though Alexie uses autobiographical topics, he distinguishes himself from his characters: “Even if Victor and Thomas are not always fully aware of the extent to which Indianness is a construct, Alexie is. *Smoke Signals* is, in part, an insider document made public, a quick tour inside the territory of Indian identity” (p. 156, para. 3). Rader discusses Native American poets, writers, and filmmakers, and talks about how Gerald Vizenor, an honored Native American poet, suggests that the:

Postindian warrior obviates the antiselves propagated by Hollywood and the western, and if the western is the dominant text of dominance, the mass-produced method of manifest mannerism, then one might argue that a particularly effective new story might be one that invert the semiotic and cinematic language of the western as part of its larger project of advancing simulations of survivance (new stories of Indian sovereignty) within the framework of the simulations of dominance (Hollywood movies in general and the western in particular). (Rader, 2011, p. 156, para. 5)

Alexie uses humor within the film to convey numerous messages about the characters. He uses this humor to challenge stereotypes and the myths that mainstream America has about other cultures, specifically Native American culture. *Smoke Signals* may look just like any other film, but Alexie creates oppositional meanings to the shallow expectations found in stereotypes. Stuart Hall (1982) talked about how media tries to send one message, such as a television commercial trying to tell you your life will be better if you use their laundry soap (the preferred meaning), but that viewers may create negotiated meanings of that commercial (wondering if purchasing this product really make them happier) or even oppositional meanings (deciding there is no way spending more money on this product will make their life better).

Normally in critical cultural studies researchers examine these negotiated and oppositional meanings. But in Alexie's works, he seems to challenge the status quo again, by actually encoding his works with the oppositional meanings built in them. In encoding this oppositional meaning to begin with, he is flipping the idea of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional meanings, creating a new postmodern category refuting traditional expectations. He does this oppositional encoding, and does so creatively.

The preferred meaning found in the story might be two buddies coming of age; the negotiated meaning may have viewers examining Native American culture in relation to historical atrocities against them, and the oppositional reading of the plot, would be that this story is more than a buddy film, a window to a culture that goes beyond the stereotypes of alcoholics and abandonment. But Alexie created a postmodern piece of media by often encoding the oppositional meaning first. He puts the idea up front and challenges viewers to begin with; he created a world where people know the stereotypes,

fulfills them in a way that is almost laughable, as a result pushing boundaries and thought. This oppositional meaning can be found in how Gilroy (2001) explains that Alexie replaces “the film’s underlying message with an American Indian cosmology,” and “creates a frontier environment – particularly for a mainstream Euramerican viewer – to build a bridge from which viewers can examine stereotypical assumptions about American Indians” (p. 25, para 3). Alexie craftily builds bridges between expected low-grade stereotypes, the preferred meanings found in other films about Native Americans produced by whites. In his films, he delivers the oppositional meaning to begin with, interjecting deeper messages, and even showcases resistance to expected light-hearted stereotypes often found in films through the preferred messagery of filmmakers. This oppositional reading can be described by Rader (2011), who says that “it is this bridge, this play with genre and expectation, this charming, humorous new storytelling, which feels like old storytelling, that enables the viewers to engage Alexie’s narratives of resistance and make *Smoke Signals* the most iconic and most revolutionary mainstream American Indian text” (p. 160, para 3).

Specific instances of semiotic messagery in *Smoke Signals* include many things, such as water and fire. Water and river symbols are used by Alexie to create multiple meanings. At one point, a young Thomas sits by the river, looking lonely. The river is shown as a vast waterway capable of making Thomas disappear forever. Arnold comes along and picks Thomas up and spends time with him. The initial use of river imagery exhibits a preferred meaning of sadness and a world rushing by Thomas, ignoring him and making him seem small and inconsequential. But Alexie offers viewers a place to negotiate the meaning of the river. He does not make the river image a single dimension

of powerlessness. Rather, he utilizes this same river imagery to offer a negotiated meaning, a meaning of opportunity, one of cleansing and fresh starts. Later in the film, Thomas returns to the river. This is where for the older Thomas, Alexie allows the river to exhibit the washing away of Victor's past cruelties to Thomas, providing an opportunity for a cleansing of past transgressions, and ultimately offer forgiveness. The river is also used to offer negotiated meanings to viewers, and even can be seen as providing an end to Victor's feeling of abandonment, washing away his internal hatred and pain. Victor is challenged to throw his hatred of his father away with his ashes in the cleansing river, offering finality to his resentment. The preferred meaning of this may be one of a fresh start. The negotiated meaning may be one of resolution of his anger and hatred. You have heard the phrase, "I forgive but I will never forget." This is how I see the oppositional meaning to Alexie's use of the river as a sign. With that phrase in mind, the oppositional reading might show that Victor is open to the idea that his one-dimensional ideas of his father were incorrect, but that his decision to rethink these ideas does not absolve his father from the pain he caused so many people.

Fire is the most powerful semiotic image utilized in this film. Initially, its preferred meaning is one of happiness and carefree life, when the members of the tribe are enjoying fireworks. But always one to subvert viewer's expectations, Alexie uses that same fire of fun and excitement to cut like a knife, burning and generating sadness, loss, and hopelessness. The fire is a ruthless and unforgiving one, creating permanent scars, taking Thomas' parents lives and turning to ashes the family fabric of numerous people on the reservation. Thomas is forced to grow up parentless, and live with his grandmother. Arnold, who started the fire on accident, never recovers from his guilt and

bathes in self-hatred as a result of the fire. This fire burns these characters, the preferred meaning, physically. But it does not discriminate between burning those that think they might deserve it and those that merely get burned by accident. A negotiated or oppositional meaning conveyed by the fire is one of physical and emotional scarring. The fire burns Victor too. He despises his father until his ideas about his father are challenged by the glowing description Suzy Song gives about Arnold. She says he was a kind and generous man, overcome by guilt and shame about his accidental starting of the fire. Alexie uses fire to present the preferred meaning of physical damage. But he also uses fire to provide a negotiated emotional meaning, causing chaos and bringing death and destruction. Alexie uses fire to signify cleansing, bringing an end to tragedy. Suzy, Arnold's neighbor in Phoenix, sets fire to Arnold's trailer after his death. In doing so, fire is used as a semiotic message by Alexie as one of rebirth, an "act of ritualistic purification" (Slethaug, p. 137, para. 2). Slethaug found this fire set by Suzy to be "the most vivid symbol of the cleansing process required for personal and cultural rebirth" (2003, p.137, para 4). This fire closes the circle opened with the 4th of July tragedy. This fire, Suzy's fire, closes the cycle, a "symbolic bookend effect for the film" (Slethaug, p. 137, para. 3). Suzy alters Victor's understanding of his father after telling him that Arnold went back into the flaming fire to save him, thinking he was in the burning home. Alexie uses this flashback of the fire to open Victor's mind to a new understanding of his father, and possibly open his heart to the idea that his father did love him. In a way, Alexie uses this fire as a sign that changes meaning over time. Initially, one of loss, then morphing into an imagery of self-sacrifice, later being one of understanding. The

changing narrative about the house fire parallels Victor's changing ideas about his father as well as the semiotic meaning of the blazing fire within the film.

Main Characters and Minor Characters

Character development within the film is critical and was examined noting the complexities of positive and negative interpersonal relationships. If you grew up with parents, imagine your life without them. That is the life the character Thomas Builds-the-Fire (played by Evan Adams) experiences. He is raised by his grandmother on the sparse Coeur d'Alene Reservation after the gruesome death of both of his parents in a fire. Searing, blazing hot fire. Not only fire, but that specific fire, taking place on July 4th (ironically referred to as "White Man's Independence Day," by Arnold Joseph, Thomas' father). That raging, earth-shattering July 4th fire sparks the creation of this movie just as it did spark the birth of a nation in 1776. In its destructive path, it scars the main characters and others for life. Without that fire, there is no story. That fire, both figuratively and realistically, gives birth to *Smoke Signals*.

Doll (1998) shows how Alexie uses clichés in complex ways: "At times, the reference to standard Indian clichés, types, and stereotypes takes the form of a simple line of dialogue or a joke; at other times it is interwoven into the fabric of the characters" (para. 7). Victor is often contradictory in his criticisms of Thomas. He degrades him with historical Indian cliché's while also challenging Thomas to be more than just a cliché. Victor, a moody character fighting family and personal challenges, decides to embrace his moodiness and negative outlook on life and tells Thomas to do the same saying, "Get stoic, Thomas. You're an Indian." Thomas is a free spirit with an eye for the silver lining in every cloud. Victor, however, experienced being berated by his drunken father.

Behaving similarly to his own father, Victor talks down to Thomas, even challenging his Indianness. Victor admonishes sweet, unsuspecting, naïve Thomas about how many times he has seen *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

When you watch *Smoke Signals*, it is easy to think there are only two main characters, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. However, in true Alexie form, upon further examination you can see that this film has character beyond a typical buddy movie. It would be easy for a casual viewer to see the film as male-dominated. Upon deeper analysis, viewers would find the film depends on female characters such as Suzy Song, Victor's mother Arlene Joseph, and Thomas' grandmother Grandma Builds-the-Fire to fully present the storyline. Within *Smoke Signals*, Alexie sticks with the theme of making fun of how he thinks white people (and outsiders) expect (stereotypes) Native Americans to think and act. Alexie creates caricatures of ridiculous stereotypes to boldly confront viewers and challenge them. This is an emerging postmodern message taking head on the use of clichés and stereotypes by non-Native filmmakers.

Alexie is not alone in this use of humor to challenge societal expectations. Dave Chappelle and Neal Brennan on *Chappelle's Show* had a boundary-pushing skit starring a blind, black, white supremacist. Brennan notes the irony that the character is "black and then leaves his wife because she likes black people" (Gross, 2017). Terry Gross, the NPR journalist who interviewed Brennan, commented on the meaning of the skit being that "the larger thing here is that, like, people who are racist are stupid. They're not seeing" (Gross, 2017). Use of racial stereotypes in such a way as this, is similar to Alexie's in-your-face effort at racial humor on the bus scene with Victor and Thomas. Victor tells Thomas he "smiles too much" and should act "stoic" like an Indian, even grimacing to

show Thomas the serious look he “should” have. This fits in with the historical and often expected stereotype of Native Americans being serious all the time. Cue the image of the crying Indian billboard in the 1970s.

Later, when discussing Cowboys and Indians and how the “Cowboys always win,” the two buddies start singing a ridiculous, but classical-sounding Native American chant about John Wayne’s teeth. Alexie’s challenges the imaginary list of what whites expect of Native Americans, stoicism and chanting. Alexie knocks the viewer and their ridiculous ideas of Native Americans off balance by presenting them with the irony and humor of Victor and Thomas making fun of the expectation of stoicism for Native Americans, as well as the chanting about something as random and meaningless as John Wayne’s teeth (Hearne, 2005). Alexie is saying to viewers and society as a whole, that Indians do not have to be serious all the time; they don’t have to save the world with every chant.

Characters and Stereotyping

The characterizations and representations of characters in *Smoke Signals* are exactly what you might expect from someone as arduous as Sherman Alexie. The characters are complex, to say the least. At times, the characters perpetuate stereotypes and myths of minority characters, but Alexie has turned that expected stereotype around to create a postmodern image of Native Americans – one not seen in *Dances with Wolves*.
Thomas Builds-the-Fire

Evan Adams is perfectly cast as Thomas, a delightfully optimistic youth living on the reservation with his grandma. Adams smile is warm and engaging, a key part of Thomas’ character. Thomas has no choice but to live with his grandma since his parents

died in a fire on “White Man’s Independence Day” in 1976. The theme of family loss and tragedy is rife in Thomas’ life. Not only did he lose his parents, but also he had a special relationship with Victor’s father, Arnold, before Arnold left the reservation in haste to never return. Thomas has an outgoing spirit but it is clear he is isolated on the reservation. He is too square, wearing his shirts buttoned up to his neck and huge, nerdy glasses.

Thomas is a walking contradiction. This character has every reason to be bitter, angry, and aggressive (to be the angry Indian). But Alexie has made Thomas’ character one to challenge typical poor me stereotypes of Native American (and minority) characters who have experienced devastating hardship. Negligence caused his parents horrifying deaths, leaving him to be raised by his aging grandmother. These circumstances might be used to create a sad, despondent character, but Alexie has other ideas. Alexie created Thomas’ character as a contradiction of the stereotype of a child forever scarred by fire. Regardless of his circumstances, Alexie made Thomas the last person to exhibit rage or anger at others. Breaking free of the hopeless stereotype of life on the reservation, Thomas has been characterized by Alexie to not be a victim of circumstances. Life has tried to keep Thomas’ spirit down, but he does not let that rule his life. Thomas’ character decries the stereotype often found by Native American characters in film and television. He is as far from the angry, drunken Indian stereotype as you can get. He is supremely clean-cut even as a young child, wearing button up shirts instead of t-shirts. Later in life, he is known to wear a suit rather than casual clothing such as jeans and a t-shirt. Hunter (1998) described Thomas as bucktooth with “big square glasses like something Elton John would wear, he looks more as if he’d hug you

than scalp you” (para. 6). Thomas’ character fights many stereotypes expected of Native American characters on film. He looks like a young man going to a Future Business Leaders of America meeting rather than a decaying reservation school.

Thomas’ use of humor is a way for him to fit into the world. He is not a jock, but rather more of a bookworm. It would be easy to see Thomas’ character as a stereotypical, one-dimensional, simpleton, devoid of deep thought. However, Alexie challenges this stereotype by giving Thomas multiple dimensions and not making him a character full of funny one-liners. Baxter (2012), examined the use of humor in Native American works by Alexie, Gerald Vizenor, and Thomas King, noting “humor works both as a glue and a shield where, on one hand, the shared focus on the past unites tribes around a collective history, and on the other, re-contextualizes the more ‘desperate problems’ around comedy” (p. 51, para. 2). Baxter (2012) further notes that:

Re-imagining tragedy also means undermining colonial storylines and stereotypes that define American Indians through tragic and stoic representations. This ability to re-conceptualize tragedy is important in helping re-define American Indian representation. Laughing at the past helps expose the contradictions hidden there, namely that way tragedy re-enforces the “vanishing Indian” stereotype. (p. 51, para. 2)

Storytelling and oral tradition are part of the Native American way of life.

Thomas is the storyteller in *Smoke Signals*. He tells tall tales and makes everyone laugh and smile with his stories about dreams, life, and those on the reservation. Sometimes his stories use stereotypes of Native Americans, even ethnic humor. But these go beyond just the words spoken. Llui and Zhang (2011) express what effects humor can have:

Humor is a device that relaxes white readers, attracts them, and then surprises them when they are off guard. Many white readers read Alexie's works and viewers view his films simply because he is funny. He is funny on the surface but serious in the core. When readers/viewers try to pry open the core, they will sometimes be stunned and experience instructive epiphanies concerning white identity, Indian identity and their relationship with each other after being indignified by the surprise mock. (p. 107, para. 2)

Alexie uses humor to both embrace and then turn clichés upside down. Many times, characters play off the famous line from the film (about the only white man who supposedly survived Custer's Last Stand), *Little Big Man* (1970), "It's a good day to die." When *Smoke Signals* opens, you see a barren wasteland, the local Indian disc jockey on the reservation radio station declares, "It's a good day to be indigenous." Early in the film, Victor shoots hoops in the gym while Thomas watches. Victor, full of sarcasm and wisecracks, says, "Sometimes it's a good day to die; sometimes it's a good day to play basketball." Later in the film, Arlene, Victor's mother, jokes, "Sometimes it's a good day to die, and sometimes it's a good day to have breakfast." All of these characters are making fun of the quote as well as turning it around to blast the ridiculousness of a quote from a film full of negative representations of Native Americans.

Victor Joseph

Adam Beach stars as Victor Joseph, the second lead character in the film. Beach grew up on the Dog Creek Indian Reservation in Canada and is a member of the Ojibwa Indian Nation. His real life has had parallels of tragedy and sadness found in his character, Victor. At age 8, Beach's mother, who was eight months pregnant, was killed

by a drunk driver; some news reports are that it happened in front of the family home. Two months later, Beach's father died in a boating accident. Similar to Arnold's character in the film, Beach's father struggled with internal struggles, some reports say Beach's father was deeply depressed and took his own life (McLaren, 2007).

Stereotypes of Native Americans in film often revolve around anger and the savage Indian stereotype. Victor epitomizes this stereotype by physically attacking and belittling Thomas, especially bullying him in front of others. Early in the film, when Victor and other young men are playing basketball, Thomas comes to watch. First, Victor ignores Thomas completely, even though Thomas repeatedly calls Victor's name. Then, Victor embarrasses Thomas in front of the group berating him. Victor is an angry child, growing into an angry teenager. He lashes out, often blowing up and taking his anger out on Thomas. The two young boys grew up together, nearly like brothers. Thomas, however, loves Victor like family, and puts up with the abuse, often ignoring it.

Alexie often makes an effort "to deconstruct the silent, subservient, and disappearing stereotype of American Indians" (Llui and Zhang, 2011, p. 107, para. 1). It would be easy for Alexie to make Victor an angry bully who is never wrong. However, Alexie challenges the stereotype of the savage Indian by making Victor an evolving character. At times he is silent, reinforcing the stereotype of the stoic Indian. But this does not make him unreachable; he learns, grows, and is able to adapt his view of his friend, Thomas. This is an example of Alexie's challenge to the Hollywood ideal of the stoic Indian. "Alexie's Indian characters are talented, eloquent, and expressive, loving stories and endlessly telling stories" (Llui and Zhang, 2011, p. 107, para. 1). Although there are sides to Victor's character that meet that angry Indian stereotype, Alexie also

has Victor and Thomas stretching beyond simple stereotypes. The characters are not one-dimensional cartoons, but rather they “contemplate upon their identities and relationships” with Alexie criticizing “the negative influence of popular culture, especially Hollywood films” (Llui and Zhang, 2011, p. 109, para. 1).

The two young men argue about what it is to be a “real Indian.” This brings the two characters to life as more than characters in a film, but also commentators on the state of stereotyping of Native Americans. Victor, who is hardened by the trying times in his life, chides Thomas. He says to Thomas, “Always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you seen *Dances with Wolves*? A hundred, maybe two hundred times? ... Do you think that shit is for real? God. Don’t you even know how to be a real Indian?” (as cited in Cox, 1999, p. 232, para. 2). It seems that Victor thinks he knows what a real Indian should be like. Ironically, when Victor tells Thomas to look like a “mean, stoic warrior... ‘to look like you just got back from killing buffalo’” (Cox, 1999, p. 232, para. 2), Thomas protests, “But our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fishermen” (Cox, 1999, p. 32). A preferred reading of this dialogue might be a chuckle in response to their spat. But a negotiated meaning might be one of seeing that Alexie is challenging the expectation that this tribe hunted buffalo. Cox notes, “Alexie mocks romanticized images of Native Americans as both stoic and savage warrior, while also noting how these images influence the self-representation and identity construction of individual Native Americans” (Cox, 1999, p. 233, para. 1). This is one of Alexie’s twists. In a film about Indians and their struggles, he has the characters comment on stereotyping of Indians by white people while also expressing their own stereotypes

(Victor thinks Thomas should act tough to be a real Indian). Alexie uses dialogue to challenge viewer's expectations, without them even realizing it.

Victor's mother, Arlene Joseph, and Suzy Song are two powerful and strong female characters that make *Smoke Signals* a fully developed film with complex themes and characters. Without these strong female characters, *Smoke Signals* might be considered just a traveling, coming-of-age movie like *Sixteen Candles* or *Thelma and Louise*.

Irene Bedard, born in Anchorage Alaska to an Inupiat Eskimo and French Canadian/Cree, stars as Suzy Song (IMDB, 2018). Suzy is an important character in the film because of her knowledge and interactions with Victor's father, Arnold Joseph, after he abandoned his family and moved to Phoenix. Suzy's character seemed to bring out the best in Arnold Joseph, with him exhibiting to viewers a new affability and diversity to his character when he is around Suzy. If you asked Victor to describe his father, his description would be one-sided and shallow. Words such as alcoholic, abuser, drunk driver, angry, lazy, and hateful might be spoken. But Suzy, the female neighbor to Arnold in Phoenix, adds an emotional understanding to the character of Arnold Joseph. Suzy's interactions range from Arnold carrying her groceries, giving her rides, or sharing heartfelt stories about his family and culture. Suzy sees the many sides of Arnold, good as well as bad. But unlike Victor, Suzy does not focus on the bad. She would describe him as respectful of women, optimistic, chivalrous, kind-hearted, and a man that loves his son, acknowledging his shortfalls but understanding he was more than just those shortfalls.

Tantoo Cardinal, Cree and French, plays Arlene Joseph, Victor's mom. She has been thought to be "arguably the most widely recognized Native Actress of her generation" having appeared in "numerous plays, television programs, and films, including *Legends of the Fall*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Luna*, *Spirit of the Whale*, *Unnatural & Accidental*, *Marie-Anne*, *Sioux City*, *Silent Tongue*, *Mothers & Daughters*, and *Smoke Signals*" (IMDB, 2018). She is a "member of the Order of Canada, one of the country's highest civilian honors;" the Order of Canada recognizes Cardinal for her "contributions to the growth and development of Aboriginal performing arts in Canada" (IMDB, 2018). Arlene's character provides a strength of character beyond what might be expected of the wife of an alcoholic. Upon seeing how her husband's drinking is changing her son, she stands up to Arnold and tells him no more. This stand provides the catalyst for her son to grow up without his father, but also to not have to endure being physically and verbally abused by him. She is a rock both in her family and on the reservation, known for the best traditional Native American fry bread. Alexie gives Arlene's fry bread meaning beyond comfort food. The familial recipe is a sign for stability, with Arlene having gotten the recipe from her grandmother, who got it from her grandmother. The fry bread, and the recipe, are both symbols of the deep roots of Arlene's family tree and the family's commitment to future generations.

Narrative Analysis

Bordwell, Thompson and Smith (1997) discussed ways to study film as both art and communication. Narrative analysis of *Smoke Signals* reveals a story with a beginning, middle and end, but Alexie utilizes flashbacks to reveal emotional turmoil, family and community secrets, tragedy and pain sprinkled with kindness, humor, and

even happy memories. The plot of *Smoke Signals* can be rudimentarily described as a buddy film, with two friends traveling to overcome some of the pain in their past. But the story of the film is more intricate, with Alexie offering divergent information to challenge expectations. Moffatt (1990) was critiquing another academic's view of postmodernism in the 1986 comedy *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (a film about a young man skipping school and the comedic results) and found the plot in *Bueller* as "intricate" with the main character, Ferris, being "presented as a character both of surfaces and depths" (p. 368, para. 3). Similarly, Alexie presents Victor and Thomas' characters the same way Moffatt (1990) found *Bueller's* character, as "partially a lovable rogue or trickster" (p. 368, para. 4).

Similar to the upbeat feelings in *Bueller*, *Smoke Signals* opens with a happy, upbeat radio DJ describing nearly nothing exciting happening on July 4th on the barren highway outside the reservation. The joyful, but boring day, is to be celebrated later that night with a bring-your-own fireworks party. This enduring happiness is interrupted by an early morning, blazing fire and the eerie sound of babies crying. After talking about a fun party, Alexie immediately presents viewers with a devastatingly sad event, the imagery of people dying in a fire. Alexie allows viewers to infer that this fire will have an important effect on the characters in this movie and will lead the characters on a path of painful discovery. Alexie has gone out of his way to make the fire in this film a far-reaching tragedy spreading out and burning multiple characters in many ways, a film with depth. *Smoke Signals*, a comedy, can be seen as a complex drama similar to what Moffatt found in *Bueller*. Both are not just comedies, with Moffatt (1990) finding that *Bueller* is not simply a "farce," but rather a "melodrama of a type familiar from current American

movies and television – earnest discussions between the main characters about what they really think or feel, discussions which ultimately represent all of them as good people with good hearts – that is, as persons with authentic interiors” (p. 370, para. 4). The same can be said of *Smoke Signals*. The film is not just a buddy road movie about two teenagers leaving home to have fun and exploits on their way to pick up the ashes of one character’s father, but rather a dramatic and comedic glimpse at the myriad of challenges facing Native Americans trying to retain their heritage while navigating the world. Judith Katz, a fellow and seminar leader of the Yale National Initiative, included viewing and analyzing *Smoke Signals* as a part of her writing curriculum. Katz (2005) agreed the film could be categorized as a road movie, found in the buddy movie section. But, she saw it as more. She found artistry in the film and its characters: “There is an inherent poetry and rhythm to the language in the film, the slow revelatory nature of the film, and the visually compelling and complex actors that you’d be hard pressed to find in a typical buddy movie” (Katz, 2005, Lesson 3, para. 5). Katz (2005) finds the film “has all the typical elements of a buddy movie as well: a handsome teenage athlete who harbors a secret heartbreak, a geek he wouldn’t normally even talk to becomes his traveling companion, and a journey they must take to uncover and resolve the mystery and pain of a fire that changed both of their lives when they were infants. In addition, the geek is a storyteller, a word shaman, and a poet” (Lesson 3, para. 5).

Narrative Theory examines the way in which a simple story can be changed (including the order of the events in the story) and how that becomes a new narrative. I used Narrative Theory to examine how Alexie and the makers of *Smoke Signals* took a simple story, two buddies travelling to pick up the ashes on one’s dead father, and made

it into a complex narrative (featuring complex characters) while creating an emotional connection between the viewer and the filmmakers.

Roland Barthes, French semiologist, suggested that the concept of the narrative works with five codes for examining Narrative Theory. Barthes says, “the best literary texts possess a plurality of meanings and invite a variety of interpretations actively created by readers” (Rodden, 2008, p. 170). These five codes are:

The empiric (plot, story development), the hermeneutic (interpretive “puzzles,” suspense, tensions), the connotative (connotations, taut/implicit elements), the referential (readers’ general social knowledge, the cultural literacy of the audience), and the symbolic (binary opposites). These codes interact and develop both to generate and disclose the text’s diverse message. (Rodden, 2008, p. 170)

Claude Levi-Strauss also examined narratives. He is one of the “most important influences on the development of film narrative analysis in the 1970s” (Stam, 2005, p. 76). According to Stam, Levi-Strauss had:

an enormous impact on all branches of semiotic inquiry... and... his influence on early film narrative theory was especially pronounced, inspiring an approach which used the methodology of linguistics to provide wide-ranging cultural readings of certain film genres, notably Western and musical. (2005, p. 76)

In *Smoke Signals*, Alexie follows traditional narrative but sprinkles in some changes and contradictions. On the surface, stereotypes are reinforced: Thomas is the good Indian, optimistic and loving, while Victor is the bad Indian, angry and resentful. But in getting to know Victor, we see him lost and searching for happiness. At one point, he is so angry and self-loathing (like his father) that when he is asked by his alcoholic

father who is his favorite Indian, he says no one (Johandes, 2009). This might make Victor sound like he finds Indians unworthy of respect. However, there are times when he secretly wonders if it was his fault his father left. His character changes when he softens his feelings for his father after learning he actually went back into a burning building to save him as a child.

Themes

There are many themes in this film. From the beginning of the film, viewers can see that family struggles are a major theme. The beginning finds three adults standing outside a flaming house with loud sounds of a child crying. Fire wreaks havoc on characters of this film. It kills loving parents of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, leaving him to grow up with his grandmother. Alcoholism and the toll it takes on the alcoholic and those surrounding them is woven throughout the film. From Victor's father being drunk and hitting him to him driving drunk with Victor in the car, Alexie uses parental alcoholism in this film to create distance and mistrust within the families. Alexie has said this film is partly autobiographical in nature. Within this film, a major stumbling block for the characters is the breakdown of the family. For young Thomas, it occurs instantaneously due the fire tragedy. For Victor, it is the slow degradation of his family and the loss of his father due to alcoholism and deep guilt that his father holds inside himself. Arnold tells no one of his terrible deed, having a hand in Thomas' parent's deaths. So, he uses alcohol to bury his self-disgust and eventually runs away from his home and his reservation to put distance between him and his terrible secret.

The theme of alcoholism reaches everyone on the reservation; one that has extreme consequences. Early on, alcohol is the reason for Arnold accidentally starting the

murderous house fire. The film begins with this lethal event fueled by carelessness and alcohol. Victor does not know of Arnold's role in the deadly fire, so Arnold lives with the guilt. He has "turned furiously inward, quelling his aggressions with beer, which he consumes by the gallon" (Hunter, 1998, para. 9). Victor knows his father is an alcoholic, living to see the physical abuse both to himself and his mother. This is another way Alexie challenges the stereotypes often found in Native American films. Victor's character, revolting against what he has seen and experienced, has never taken a sip of alcohol in his entire life. Alexie uses this theme of alcohol abuse as one that tears family's apart but also provides some self-respect (for Victor never drinking) as well as conflict resolution (Victor forgiving his father). After meeting Suzy Song and hearing positive stories about his father, Victor begins to understand that it was not his fault his father drank, rather it was his father's guilt, self-hatred, and shame of accidentally starting the fire.

This film is filled with family conflict. As in real life, no family on the reservation is immune to a myriad of real issues facing today's families. Victor's life experiences include the reservation having "a vicious cycle of hopelessness, alcoholism, and abuse," as well as "love and fear and hatred and violence" in his relationship with his father (Hunter 1998, para. 3). Added to these experiences, Victor has been twice abandoned by his father, once in life 10 years before when he left his wife and child to go to Phoenix, and later by death, leading to "the final estrangement" between son and father (Hunter, 1998, para. 4). After believing his father never loved him and later learning his father loved him from someone else, Victor decides it is time to stop seeing his father as a one-dimensional monster. Victor begins to open his heart to the idea that his father was a

complex man with faults, as well as strength in character. Just as Arnold Joseph left his family to try to get away from his pain, Victor in the end decides to do the same. In deciding where to spread his father's ashes, Victor talks to Thomas about how his father found Thomas at the river. He decides to stop hating his father, and says he has decided to "clean out the attic, like throwing things away when they have no more use."

Numerous films came before Alexie's *Smoke Signals* that offered stereotypical, one-dimensional, stories about Native Americans and their dead-end lives on the reservation. *Smoke Signals* purposely chose not to be one of those films, filled with neglected Native Americans leading lazy and alcohol-fueled lives on the reservation. This is a way Alexie further pushes to disrupt societal power and hegemony of the ruling classes. Although Alexie chose to portray family breakdown in *Smoke Signals*, he does so by delivering the presence of such family breakdowns in numerous ways, none of which are stereotypes full of hopelessness and savage Indians. He has encoded a meaning that accepts the stereotype (many Native American families have been devastated by alcohol), but that these families actually grow and get stronger after dealing with the alcoholism. He shows that being touched by alcoholism is not a sentence to be an alcoholic. Alcoholism present in the families of his characters does not have to ruin their lives forever. One example of how he does this is by having Victor's father get clean when he moves to Phoenix, as well as having Victor proudly state that he has never taken a drink.

Alexie uses fire as a symbol to depict rebirth in the physical world, such as Suzy burning Arnold's trailer. But he also uses fire and the subsequent ashes as a symbol of emotional cleansing. Victor is able to clear out his mind of the hatred of his father by spreading his ashes in the river. These same ashes are a symbol of rebirth for Thomas

who decides to reimagine himself as more than just a geek. It is Alexie's use of fire and ashes as sign of rebirth that offers viewers a positive outlook for the characters and their families. Fire is tied to the families, but has not brought an end to their lives. Rather, Alexie uses fire and the tragedy brought by fire to show how these families have used these challenges to grow and become reborn in their own way. Alexie has made *Smoke Signals* more than just a Native American film, more than a buddy film. He has challenged the status quo. Hunter (1998) described how the film is relatable: "Despite the ethnic specificity of the setting, what these smoke signals are really saying is that the awkwardness between fathers and sons is universal" (para. 12). Although heartbreak and family breakdown are paramount in the film, Alexie gives the film and its characters an opening to forgiveness, through the use of fire imagery. Although Victor treats Thomas with disrespect and ire, Thomas chooses to forgive him. Although Suzy knows of Arnold's roles in the fire, she chooses to forgive him. Victor, ultimately, chooses to forgive his father in the end, after learning how much he loved him.

Some people see *Smoke Signals* as a simple road movie. It has even been named to numerous lists of the best ever road trip movies (Kimbell, 2010). Even though the characters are surrounded by others (family and friends), they often feel paralyzing isolation. Victor, considers himself the cool guy and acts like everything is fine in his life, while he looks down his nose at geeky, and simple Thomas. Thomas feels isolated, even when he is with Victor, because Victor treats Thomas as "his pal, punching bag and traveling companion" (Hunter 1998, para. 5). Arnold, dealing with the guilt of accidentally killing Thomas' parents, lives with his wife and child, but he too feels isolated. Hunter (1998) says that Arnold's character would have been, in earlier centuries,

“an immense and powerful man” who would have possibly been “the mightiest salmon fisherman of the Spokane River,” but instead in this century, “he’s 250 pounds of warrior machismo and strength with nowhere to go, nothing to do” (para. 9). Arlene feels alone because her husband and son are both angry and withdraw from her. In most buddy movies, characters are one dimensional and fit into a box (jock, brainiac, loser). Alexie pushes beyond these easy marks, unapologetically refuting banal expectations and stereotypes. An example, having the actor playing Arnold, Gary Farmer, show strength and pain, “a huge bear of a man with a little singsong voice” (Hunter, 1998, para. 10). It would be easy to make Arnold one-dimensional, a drunk, abusive husband that the family is glad to see leave. But Arnold’s character is more than that, Alexie has made him not “a tyrant chieftain of the absolute,” but rather a man “wracked by self-hatred, guilt, and yet desperately full of love” (Hunter 1998, para. 11).

Alexie uses many Native American traditions in the film. Some are used traditionally, such as the traditional meal of fry bread being used to bring family closer together, as well as others used to poke fun at the stereotypical expectations mainstream viewers see in films about native Americans, such as traditional chants. Fry bread, a traditional Native American food, is used within the film to weave the story about history and importance of family. Victor’s mother as well as Thomas’ grandmother and Suzy all make fry bread. It brings the families and traditions together and represents the deep-rooted ties of them to their Native American traditional birthright. In Native American tradition, storytelling cannot be ignored; it is a foundational part of their being. Alexie makes Thomas’ character this storyteller, but does so in a non-traditional way. Thomas tells typical Native American tales of bravery and family love and dedication, but he also

tells tongue-in-cheek tales both reinforcing mainstream viewers stereotypical expectations as well as blowing them out of the water with reimagined ideas. Slethaug (2003) noted that although Victor is “an important actor in this Native American drama,” it is “Thomas Builds-the-Fire who is the central storyteller, whose humanity, creativity, and imagination we admire” (p. 134, para. 3). Slethaug (2003) notes that Thomas tells many stories that are able to take the most mundane instances of reservation life and death and turn them into wonderful narratives and grand visions of the future (p. 134, para. 4).

Another tradition used by Alexie to challenge stereotypes is the use of Native American chants. Victor and Thomas are on the bus to Phoenix when they find some cowboys in their seats. Victor challenges them but gives up, being chided by Thomas saying, “I guess your warrior look doesn’t work every time.” Victor replies in his usual hateful manner, telling Thomas to shut up. But rather than starting a fight and ending up in jail, the two claim new seats on the bus with Thomas saying, “Man, the cowboy’s always win.” Victor disagrees. The two get into a discussion about the movie star John Wayne and how you never saw his teeth in the films. So, Victor decides to start trouble in his own way singing the earlier referenced, hilarious chant about John Wayne’s teeth being plastic, or steel, with Thomas joining in. The idea of Native Americans chanting could easily be considered a stereotype. But Alexie makes the chant ridiculous. These two Native American young men are riding on a public bus, traveling to Phoenix, and are loudly chanting about John Wayne’s teeth. The entire bus, “mostly white people, look back at these two Indians as if they are crazy. In the context of the film, the audience

can't help but laugh with these two who are just trying to make light or overcome racial discrimination" (Reiser, 2016, para. 12).

Discussion

Smoke Signals was Alexie's big break into traditional mainstream media. Up to this time, his work has included poems, books, short stories and many other media. The film broke ground in many ways, achieving astounding critical acclaim and surprising box office success. It crossed cultural boundaries becoming a hit with Native American as well as white audiences. Alexie created meaning using symbols that could be interpreted in many ways to convey the diversity of messages in the film. From fire as both a symbol of rebirth and death, to historic Native American chants being used as sarcastic songs about John Wayne's teeth, as well as using the stereotype of Native American as storyteller being expanded to both reinforce the stereotype and additionally use the tactic as a postmodern commentary on what viewers might expect when viewing a film starring Native Americans.

Stuart Hall (1982) examined how messages can be encoded by media makers and subsequently decoded in numerous ways by media consumers. He also examined the politics of signification and struggles in discourse. Alexie sometimes offers Hall's oppositional readings to viewers. He uses signs in *Smoke Signals* to challenge stereotypes, while also critiquing the imbalance of power in media production and Hollywood blockbusters about Native Americans. At times Alexie identifies these power struggles through dialogue (Indians should look stoic) while also making fun of Hollywood's storytelling in films such as *Dances with Wolves*. At other times he purposely encodes the oppositional meaning by challenging the stereotype in a forceful

way. Alexie critiques the power in filmmaking by making a film that changes the landscape of future depictions of Native Americans. He uses the same stereotypes of Hollywood's past films in his film to actually signify an opposition to that same stereotype.

The film was carefully constructed by Alexie paralleling his life. Tragedy and rebirth take place by using and challenging stereotypes, using humor and Native American traditions, and using character development to both meet the expectations of viewers as well as push boundaries, sometimes laughing with the viewers and sometimes laughing at them. As anyone trying to tell a story about their own culture while showing both the good and bad, while challenging stereotypes and simplistic ideas, Alexie has had his personal and professional struggles, all while battling his detractors. Slethaug (2003) examined Alexie's work and noted that some critics challenge him because some think he shows Native Americans in a way that makes them look like they "drink themselves to death, beat one another senseless, and survive for the moment with brutal self-destructive humor" (Slethaug, 2003, p. 131, para 4). But Alexie's works are not one-dimensional caricatures of his culture; they openly mock stereotypes while sometimes satirically using ironic humor and stereotypes to make fun of narrative expectations. Slethaug (2003) agrees, challenging how Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, author of *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*, views Alexie's portrayal of Native Americans. "Although Jacquelyn Kilpatrick thinks that the 'clichéd stereotypes' of 'alcoholism, injustice, and loneliness' continue to be prominent in the film" (as cited in Slethaug, p. 131, para 4), Slethaug "believes that *Smoke Signals* overcomes most of these stereotypes and more fully humanizes Native Americans and better accepts the cross-racial, cross-cultural, and

mixed blood relationships than the fiction” (2003, p. 131, para. 4). Slethaug (2003) finds in both “book and film, chaotic elements – weather and fire – are foundational causes of natural catastrophe, but they are also governing metaphors that address the personal lives of the main characters and the social conditions of Native Americans” (p. 131, para. 4) and that they are also related to “degrees of optimism or pessimism about the future prospects of Native Americans” (p. 132, para. 1).

Alexie made this film for a reason. He wanted to reach mainstream America, but wanted to present a story that went beyond a simple analysis of the plot. He wanted to present challenges to viewers, to subvert Hollywood’s stereotypes and expectations of Native American characters and films, and to remind people that what you see is not what you get; that the imagery and stories mean more than what you see on the surface.

CHAPTER VI – THE BUSINESS OF FANCYDANCING

The second film examined in this dissertation is the 2002 film *The Business of Fancydancing*. The film is a far cry from Alexie's earlier film which achieved box office success, critical acclaim, and won numerous awards, *Smoke Signals*. *The Business of Fancydancing* stars Evan Adams as Native American poet Seymour Polatkin. Adams is no stranger to Alexie, having also starred in *Smoke Signals* as Thomas Builds-the-Fire. The film has some parallels to *Smoke Signals*. *Fancydancing* revolves around the main character, Seymour Polatkin, making his way through life after leaving the reservation. Seymour is a member of the Spokane Indian tribe. He is openly gay and lives in Seattle making his living as a poet, while dressing and dancing in traditional Native American dress. He struggles with his relationships with his friends and family from the reservation who resent him leaving, as well as the struggles of living his life as a Native American living in Seattle.

Fancydancing parallels *Smoke Signals* with Seymour struggling with relational interactions between him, his friends, his history on the reservation, and relationships with outsiders, such as his white partner, Steven. The film is about "difficult material" and is "a drama of self-destructiveness" (Mitchell, 2002, para. 2). Similar to *Smoke Signals*, characters experience abandonment, isolation and suffer disconnectedness from each other. In both films, characters also struggle with loss, battle alcoholism, and try to survive while living in their Native American world on the reservation, all the while understanding the influences and temptations of the outside world (white people).

Critical Acclaim

Although it did not reach the level of critical acclaim found by Alexie's *Smoke Signals*, *The Business of Fancydancing* found acclaim in its own right. *The Business of Fancydancing* was first a 1992 book of poetry written by Alexie. The book was very successful, including being named by *The New York Times* Book Review as Notable Book of the Year ("Notable Books of the Year," 1992). Having authored the book, Alexie also penned the screenplay. The screenplay was highly regarded having won the Audience Award at the San Francisco Film Festival (Estrada, 2010).

Although the screenplay was highly regarded and awarded, there were opposing views of the film. *The Business of Fancydancing* was shot for \$90,000 on digital video (Corbin as cited in Marubbio et al., 2013, p. 175). It "played the festival circuit and screened for short periods at theaters in New York, Los Angeles, and Seattle" (Corbin as cited in Marubbio et al., 2013, p. 175). A number of reviewers noted the low-budget image quality, but "looked past its rough edges to see a conceptually original film that marked a real departure from the more mainstream uplifting tone of *Smoke Signals*" (Corbin as cited in Marubbio et al., 2013, p. 175, para. 1). Corbin (2013) said that:

Alexie purposefully created an atmosphere on the set that encouraged experimentation and collaboration among the inexperienced crew – as he told one interviewer, "I essentially tried to do everything I could think of to test myself, and to shoot every kind of scene imaginable. You know, I was never sure anybody would see this, so I didn't worry about it." (as cited in Marubbio et al., 2013, p. 175, para. 1)

Variety's reviewer, Dennis Harvey, found the film to be a success for Alexie with some "powerful moments throughout" (Harvey, 2002, para. 8) but lacking "theatrical viability" (Harvey, 2002, para. 1). He wrote, "Native American Author Sherman Alexie makes a promising directorial debut with *The Business of Fancydancing*, a complex drama about several Spokane Indians unhappily reunited at a peer's funeral" (Harvey, 2002, para. 1). Harvey found the film to be a change from *Smoke Signals*, being more "adventurous in theme, story structure and cinematic style" (Harvey, 2002, para. 2). Harvey, however, was not overwhelmed by the film, saying it had "stalled character development in the second half" (Harvey, 2002, para. 2). Other reviewers found the film not worthy of Alexie's reputation, with one even finding the film "clumsy" (Mitchell, 2002, para. 1). Rader (2011) was not impressed with the film, calling it "one of the few Alexie projects whose success was simply not commensurate with his talent and vision" (p. 160, para. 4).

One of the story lines in the film revolves around the lead character, Seymour, living his life as a homosexual. Stephen O. Murray, a reviewer for the *Homosexual Information Center*, generally liked the movie, calling it "absorbing" (Murray, 2004, para. 14). Murray (2004) also notes that the storyline of Seymour being homosexual creates a freeing opportunity for him: "Seymour commodifies being gay as he commodifies being Indian, charming his audiences with the story of coming out (as 'two-spirited') to his grandmother and being unashamed" (para. 9). Since Alexie chose to make the film on video, the quality was often a subject of the reviews, with Murray noticing. He stated that because of the poor quality of the film, he found the

“compositions are generally professional-looking though less striking than some in *Smoke Signals*” (Murray, 2004, para. 10).

Online reviewers were more contemplative, often finding themselves in the film and using words ranging from lyrical to exquisite, while acknowledging the film’s lower technical quality. Although not a review from a recognized film critic, one Amazon reviewer may have summed up the film’s individuality perfectly:

I would call it the best film about poetry and living in two worlds I’ve ever seen... you might like it even if you don’t like poetry or live in two worlds. (Although you have to have gone to a poetry reading or author lecture in a white university or artsy fartsy literary venue to fully appreciate the hilarious intercut scenes of Seymour doing his shtick). I don’t quite know how to say it, but this film totally captured (at least for me) the fear of any artist/writer/etc. who leaves where they came from and writes/makes art about their people and is celebrated as an outsider but is never accepted for what they want to be accepted for at home... of being found out as an imposter or being not accepted by their people in that role. (Barefoot rabbit, 2008, para. 1)

Box Office Success

The Business of Fancydancing was a complex film combining the topics of Native American struggle, homosexuality, fear, loss, substance abuse, and loathing of self and others that choose to leave the reservation. Alexie made a concerted effort to make the film in an artistic way. This combined with other contributing factors made box office success a challenge. The year 2002 was a year of incredible competition for box office dollars. Blockbuster films included numerous sequels to successful film series including

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, *Spider Man*, and *Minority Report* (IMDB, 2002). *Fancydancing* did not achieve the box office success of *Smoke Signals*. The “box office numbers were tepid, the film got very little theatrical release or promotion, and the awards from film festivals were nearly non-existent” (Rader, 2011, p. 160, para. 4). Rader (2011) did acknowledge some successes by *Fancydancing* saying that it was successful at the Durango Film Festival and the Victoria Film Festival (p. 160, para. 4).

Fancydancing may not have been Hollywood quality or a blockbuster sequel, but that may not only be to blame for its lack of success at the box office. Feier (2011) says “present-day Native filmmakers are confronted with a legacy of one-dimensional characterizations” where “Hollywood has perpetuated clichéd images of America’s indigenous inhabitants” (p. 2, para. 1). This has led to viewers being “inundated by the distorted depictions, which have eventually become entrenched in the general public’s mind” and that “American Indian directors, producers, and screenwriters have been presenting Native alternatives that expose the fictitiousness of Hollywood myths” (Feier, 2011, p. 2, para. 1). The lack of a Hollywood promotions machine behind *Fancydancing* exemplifies what Feier (2011) says demonstrates why “non-Westerns dealing with modern Native issues grossed only a fraction of the conventional Westerns’ box-office returns” (p. 11, para. 1). Further, Feier says that *Fancydancing* is part of a larger group of films that were not successful at the box office because they cannot compete with Western-themed films like *Dances with Wolves* (\$184.21 million in earnings), *Pocahontas* (\$141.60 million in earnings) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (\$72.46 million in earnings) (Feier, 2011, p. 14, para. 4-5, p. 15, para. 1).

Awards

The Business of Fancydancing did not receive wide-ranging recognition like Alexie's *Smoke Signals* did. However, it did win awards from diverse organizations.

These include:

2002 - Durango Film Festival, Jury Award, Best Narrative Feature Film, Sherman Alexie

2003 - First Americans in the Arts Awards, FAITA Award, Outstanding Performance by an Actress in a Film (Lead) (Michelle St. John)

2003 - ImagineNative Film + Media Arts Festival, Honorable Mention, Best Dramatic Feature (Sherman Alexie)

2002 - L.A. Outfest, Grand Jury Award, Outstanding Actor in a Feature Film (Evan Adams), Outstanding, Screenwriting (Sherman Alexie)

2002 - Philadelphia International Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, Audience Award, Best Feature (Sherman Alexie)

2002 - San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, Audience Award, Best Feature (Sherman Alexie)

2002 - Victoria Independent Film & Video Festival, Canada, Audience Favourite (Sherman Alexie) (IMDB, 2018)

Film Overview and Semiotic Analysis

Many people who saw *The Business of Fancydancing* had also seen Alexie's *Smoke Signals*. However, *Fancydancing* was an extreme detour from the seamless, fluid, emotional, yet funny, and even satiric *Smoke Signals*. From the very beginning, *Fancydancing* has an air of tragedy, tumult, and sadness. The trailer is true to the content

found in the film, assaulting viewers with sadness and conflict: sad violin music, a desolate landscape of empty, barren fields, and a sad voiceover explaining how to write the great American Indian novel:

All of the Indians must have tragic features, tragic eyes, arms, their hands and figures must be tragic and they reach for tragic food. The hero must be a half-breed, half white and half Indian, preferably from a horse culture. He should often weep alone.

The trailer awakens viewers with the sound of a phone ringing. This phone call brings sad news, "Somebody died on your reservation." Interspersed with traditional dancing, drumming, chanting, a kiss, fighting, screaming and the scene of a funeral to end in a black and white image of the traditionally dressed dancer falling to the floor, the trailer has a voice saying, "The great American Indian novel, when it is finally written, all of the white people will be Indians, and all the Indians will be ghosts." The trailer ends with the violinist using a racial slur about white people, asking them when they are leaving.

Semiotic analysis of the trailer alone brings *Fancydancing's* viewers to a level of sadness and sensing despair. Eco (1976), in *A Theory of Semiotics*, examined the "theoretical possibility and the social function of a unified approach to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication" (p. 3, para. 1) finding that such an approach "should take the form of a general semiotic theory, able to explain every case of sign-function in terms of underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one or more code" (p. 3, para. 1). Eco (1976) posits "a design for general semiotics should consider" (p. 3, para. 2) two things:

(a) *A theory of codes* and (b) *a theory of sign production* – the latter taking into account a large range of phenomena such as the common use of language, the evolution of codes, aesthetic communication, different types of communicative behavior, the use of signs in order to mention things or states of the world and so on. (p. 3, para. 2)

Alexie's work in *Fancydancing* is not a straightforward message. Rather, it relies on multiple meanings of the images and sounds Alexie provides to viewers things that can be interpreted in different ways. Stuart Hall (1982) described this interpreted meaning determined by viewers to represent three things, the preferred meaning, the negotiated meaning, and the oppositional meaning. Hall (1982) says:

But we say “dominant” because there exists a pattern of “preferred readings”; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized. The domains of “preferred meanings” have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of “how things work for all practical purposes in this culture”, the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions. (p. 57, para. 2)

In finding the preferred meaning, C. Campbell (2003) points out that Hall explains the first level as the “denotative or ‘preferred’ reading – that which was intended by the producer – and is followed by connotative (‘negotiated and/or ‘oppositional’) readings of the same message” (p. 49).

Hall says these dominant and preferred meanings are not a definitive process that determines how things are signified. Rather, he says it “consists of the ‘work’ required to

enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a *decoding* of the event within the limit of dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified” (Hall, 1982, p. 58, para. 1). Hall defines the second level of encoding meanings as negotiated. He says the negotiated meaning is one created by the viewer, utilizing a mixture of his or her own experiences and beliefs:

Decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules - it operates with exceptions to the rule. (Hall, 1982, p. 60, para. 2)

This third level of Hall’s take on media consumption is the oppositional meaning. This is where the viewer decides to disagree with what they are offered from the media producer; they understand the message, but choose to view it in a contrary way. Hall (1982) says “it is possible for a viewer to perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way” (p. 61, para. 2).

Throughout *Fancydancing*, Alexie is pushing back against expectations for a film about a male Native American going back to the reservation for the funeral of a friend. He does so with Seymour dealing with his homosexuality and the memories of his early love, Agnes. Alexie was ahead of the crowd. He made this film and actually encoded it with an oppositional meaning to begin with: a gay leading character was a sign of speaking out against traditional expectations. Youngberg (2008) says:

Little has been written at all about homosexuality in the broader field of Native American studies outside those authored by white anthropologists and historians who tended to romanticize or otherwise represent the experience of Natives who were not heterosexual. (p. 56, para. 3)

Tafoya (2003) says, “Two-spirited indicates someone that possess both a male and female spirit” (p. 404, para. 3). Further, Tafoya (2003) says that some researchers use the term two-spirited because it is widely accepted as not being a derogatory gay slur within Native American cultures:

A number of non-Native gay, lesbian, and bisexual researchers and writers have suggested the two-spirited tradition as a historic “gay” role model because it often carries with it a sense of positive acceptance or even celebration in Native communities. (p. 404, para. 4)

Alexie nurtured this two-spiritedness of Seymour. Within the film, Seymour openly talks about his homosexuality with his partner, Steven, his audience at book readings, and even his old love Agnes. At one point, he even recalls for an audience telling his grandmother that he was gay, two-spirited. He recounts her asking what he liked to do in bed with a man, “I’m not gonna tell you,” Seymour replies. At one point, his grandma talks of having owned a gay rooster, so she ate it. Seymour explains that was her way of saying that it didn’t matter to her. As he laughs telling this story to his white audience, they laugh with him.

Alexie has transferred his postmodern writings into filmmaking. Tabur-Jōgi (2004) says Alexie is the “symbiosis of the postmodern and the traditional” (p. 10, para. 3). Further, she says

Many of the things incorporated in postmodern writing, such as the subjectivity of history and blurred genres or negativized rhetoric including elements of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy, antitotalitarianism – all of which are mentioned, for example, by Linda Hutcheon in her *The Poetics of Postmodernism* among the characteristic traits of the Postmodern theory - are found also in Native American works. (Tabur-Jõgi, p. 10, para. 3)

Alexie set the stage of this film with his use of the term two-spirited. By using this term to describe Seymour, Alexie is encoding a message of acceptance. Rather than having numerous gay slurs thrown at Seymour and desiring the audience to interpret these slurs making an oppositional reading, instead he encodes the intended message – acceptance of Seymour’s homosexuality. Youngberg (2008) says that this term “coming from the lips of Seymour Polatkin also marks the confluence of queer studies and Native American studies at the level of popular culture by virtue of having found its way into the parlance of this film” (p. 62, para. 2), marking a “pivotal moment in the process of its circulation into popular culture as a coded identity reference” (p. 62, para. 2). This is where Alexie creates a one-of-a-kind masterpiece that ignores social expectations. His use of this term and the introduction of it to Seymour’s audience, as well as the film’s audience, is his way of making a statement.

Merskin (2001) examined stereotyping of American Indians and racist ideology in four national brand images including *Land O’Lakes* butter, *Sue Bee Honey*, *Big Chief [Monitor] Sugar*, and *Crazy Horse Malt Liquor*. The four selected products “were

analyzed according to Barthes (1972) semiotic analysis” (p. 164, para. 1). Merskin (2001) writes:

First, the material object was identified (signifier); second, the associative elements were identified (signified); and, third, these were brought together in what we as consumers recognize as the sign. Company websites, press releases, and product packages were used for visual and textual information... Through this method of analysis, we can see how these meanings are transferred to the different products on the basis of both race and gender. (p. 164, para 1)

Merskin’s semiotic analysis found that *Land O’ Lakes* butter was associated with the “generic ‘Indian maiden’” (2001, p. 165, para. 1). Further, she found that *Sue Bee Honey* and *Land O’ Lakes* both are “encoded with socially constructed meanings about female Indian sexuality, purity, and nature” (Merskin, 2001, p. 165, para. 4). She found *Monitor Sugar Company* featured “an American Indian in full headdress to sell the sugar goods” (Merskin, 2011, p. 166, para. 1). *Crazy Horse Malt Liquor* featured the image of an actual person, Tasunke Witko (Crazy Horse) (Merskin, 2001, p. 166). Using this real chief’s image to sell alcohol (when Crazy Horse was actually against alcohol use) generates the image of the savage warrior stereotype (Merskin, 2001, p. 166, para. 6). In examining these national brands, Merskin (2001) found that these “stereotypical representations of American Indians denies that they are human beings, and presents them as existing only in the past and as single, monolithic Indians” (p. 167, para. 2). She also found that these stereotypes not only “communicate inaccurate beliefs about Natives to whites, but also to Indians” (Merskin, 2001, p. 167, para. 6). Merskin (2001) found that

these “stereotypical images do not reside only in the past, because the social control mechanisms that helped create them remain with us today” (p. 168, para. 1).

Merskin’s method of semiotic analysis of these national brands utilizing Native American imagery can be related to Alexie’s work in this film. Throughout *The Business of Fancydancing*, Alexie uses many signs such as fire, and open, lonely and barren landscapes to convey meaning and communicate messages to viewers. He also uses music to signify emotional experiences of characters and to bring emotional feelings out of the audience. This is not the first time Alexie has created meaning by using imagery and sound to challenge viewers understanding of what they see as Native American. Lliu and Zhang (2011) found that “Alexie utilizes other art forms, such as film, music, cartoons, and the print media, to bombard mainstream distortion of Indian culture and to redefine Indianness” (p. 106, para. 1).

Early in the film, Seymour is seen dancing in colorful Native dress while chanting and drumming plays loudly. Alexie is using this loud drumming to create and signify an urgency to this moment in the film. Alexie uses this persistent drumming sound to signify to the viewer that this is something important; something is brewing that is intense. Mouse is Seymour’s cousin and friend from childhood. Aristotle is Seymour’s childhood friend who went to college with him. These two men are often shown abusing alcohol and other substances. Alexie uses hollow, slower, more synthesized, empty-feeling music during these scenes when Mouse and Aristotle go far beyond alcohol intoxication. This music provides a solemnity to viewers about the scene leaving them feeling as hollow as the music. Although at times Alexie encodes his messages with oppositional meanings, this use of music is encoded with a preferred meaning of sadness

and finality. While Mouse is consuming rubbing alcohol after emptying numerous cans of alcohol, he later dies (with Aristotle having been present for the bingeing session). During this time the foreboding music loudly plays through the wordless scene of the pair. In addition to instrumental music, Native American chanting is also used by Alexie to create a crescendo during emotional events. When Mouse dies, you see hands picking up his violin and laying it atop his dead body, while wrapping him in a blanket.

Throughout this entire episode of Agnes preparing Mouse's corpse, a ghostly, eerie and repetitive chant of a woman's voice sings "Goodbye, Mouse, Mouse" over and over and over. This scene of Agnes preparing his body could have been barely noted by viewers. Instead, Alexie used the insistent and ominous chanting to convey to viewers the seriousness of the event. It may sound uninspiring, but Jeffrey M. Anderson, a working film critic since 1997 and former staff critic for the *San Francisco Examiner*, said the song "continued to haunt me even after the movie was over" (Anderson, 2002, para. 8). In his final use of music to pull emotions from viewers, Alexie ends the film with Agnes loudly chanting while Seymour aggressively rips his Native American dress from his body. Seymour lies on the floor nearly naked crying. Although you never hear him cry, Agnes' singing provides the emotion for the viewers. Cut to Seymour driving away from the reservation, looking backward, and then joining Steven in bed. The film then cuts to a black screen for seconds, while Agnes' voice trails off. Alexie's use of the diminuendo in the song signifies his desire to gather viewers and their final emotions for the film and its characters. The softening of the music while Seymour steps into bed with his white lover seems to signify a finality of the story. Seymour has made his choice – it is his life in Seattle with Steven.

Similar to *Smoke Signals*, Alexie uses fire in *Fancydancing* to convey multiple meanings to viewers. Following Mouse and Aristotle making fun of Seymour's writing, Aristotle is shown angrily tearing Seymour's book apart and burning it. Aristotle repeats over and over, "Forgive him." Alexie uses this fire as a sign of destruction. However, Alexie also uses this same fire to signify emotional rage. Aristotle is saying forgive him, but he does not mean it. The fire in the bin is burning Seymour's lies while also fanning the flames of Aristotle's blind rage.

Another feature Alexie uses multiple times through *Fancydancing* is traditional Native American dance. If detractors thought Alexie did not purposely encode messages throughout the film, the explanation of the traditional dance in the opening scenes will change your mind. Youngberg (2008) says the opening dance was a message to a very small audience – an audience that knows what a Shawl Dance is and who traditionally performs a Shawl Dance:

The Shawl Dance, performed in the opening scenes of the film, comes as the most salient example of how a reference can carry surplus meaning for audiences with the cultural knowledge necessary to decipher the code. 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. (p. 63, para. 2)

This is Alexie's way of using dancing as a way to encode a secret message in his film. He knows only a very small audience can even identify a Shawl Dance. The preferred meaning of the dance might be interpreted by average viewers as any Native American man dancing, while the negotiated and oppositional meaning is meant to

signify an inside joke – Alexie is giving a peek into Seymour’s sexuality, but only for a finite number of the audience who know a Shawl Dance. Youngberg (2008) says this is a meaningful reference in its own right (p. 63) and that for those “familiar with the historical origins of the Shawl Dance, its use in the film accrues even more symbolic weight” (p. 63, para. 2). He adds that this is not the only Shawl Dance in the film: “There is a later scene in which Seymour and his friend, Agnes, dance the Shawl Dance together. On the commentary to the DVD, Alexie glosses the scene by calling them ‘the girls dancing’” (Youngberg, 2008, p. 74, para. 4).

Main Characters and Minor Characters

The Business of Fancydancing has actors that were also in Alexie’s film *Smoke Signals*. Seymour Polatkin is a popular Seattle Poet who left his reservation and has a thriving career based on his reservation experience. His friends include his former college girlfriend Agnes Roth (played by Michelle St. John), and his friends from growing up Aristotle Joseph (played by Gene Tagaban), and his cousin and friend Mouse (Swil Kanim).

The characters in *Fancydancing* are developed to varying degrees. Seymour, of course, is deeply developed with Alexie giving insight into his thoughts, feelings, fears, shames, regrets, and so much more. Even though the main story is about Seymour’s return to the reservation for his cousin and friend Mouse’s funeral, Mouse’s character seems to bear only surface development. It shows him sadly, in what can be characterized as typical stereotypes of Native Americans when the films are made by whites. Why would Alexie do this? Why does Mouse rarely speak, except in racist statements to his white girlfriend? “What the hell you doing here suyapi; when are you leavin’?” When she

asks what *suyapi* means, he responds, “Either it means dirty, ugly stinky, white person.” It then cuts to her, mimicking Mouse in a hateful voice, “Or it means uglier, dirtier, stinkier, whiter white person.” She goes on, “Yeah. That Mouse. He was never all that nice to me. But geez, he could play the violin.” Most of us have good sides and bad. But Mouse’s character does not provide any insight into his better sides. His character is summed up best by his girlfriend memorializing him by saying, “I’m really gonna miss that mean bastard. I’m gonna miss the way the river changed when Mouse was playing his music.” Her words endear the viewer to his musicality, but not his personality.

Another element Alexie uses within the film is the characters being their own directors in movies of their own making. Characters record themselves on personal video recorders, which creates a way for them to have direct conversations with the film’s audience. Mitchell (2002) found “the confessional aspect of the story is often pushed a little too hard; the characters are too eager to let us know exactly what’s going on in their heads” (para. 9). Alexie, in a visit to the Kenworthy Theatre in Moscow, Idaho, said his characters in *Fancydancing* are not what viewers might expect. His approach to creating characters so different than what might be expected while pushing the boundaries of mainstream conventions has been celebrated by some and relegated by others. “He admits there’s not a single lovable character, as most moviegoers long for, but rather people ‘that are really flawed and messy’” (Vogt, 2009, para. 13).

Characters and Stereotyping

Seymour Polatkin

Seymour (Evan Adams) is the main character of the film. Everything revolves around his past history on the reservation, his internal emotional struggles, and his desire

to have multiple identities that include both his reservation history and Seattle life with his white partner Steven. Seymour's sexuality is central to the story, but it does not overtake the film. The main story revolves around him leaving the reservation and the emotional price he pays for that decision. Alexie chose to use Seymour's character's sexuality to challenge society's stereotyping of a gay lead character. Alexie chose to be bold in his choice to encode the film with his desired message about homophobia. Tatonneti (2010) writes that, "Given Alexie's comments about the film, he clearly recognizes queer Indianness as having this same sort of radical signification" (p. 170, para. 2). Tatonetti (2010) explains:

For Alexie, Seymour's queerness takes center stage. Alexie explains his choice saying, "I've spent more time in urban situations and in the art world. I've made more friends who are gay. So it's a huge part of my life... Part of me writing about gay people in this movie was a larger social effort. I knew a lot of Indians will see this movie, so I wanted to slap them in the face a bit." (p. 169, para. 2)

Compared to his friends he grew up with, Seymour seems to have lived a charmed life. At one point Agnes even says to him, "You have this perfect dream life." He had wonderful friends growing up. He went to college with one of his best friends, Aristotle, and met Agnes there. Seymour's character uses humor, even ethnic humor, to bridge social gaps. He and Agnes met when he saw her on campus, saying, "I'm the President of the Native American Student Alliance. Well, white people call us an alliance but I like to think of us as more of an army." This use of ethnic humor, likening his current organization to the savage Indian stereotype, is one of the ways Alexie destroys conventional Hollywood stereotypes. By having Seymour address the savage Indian

stereotype straight on, Alexie is offering it as opposing the stereotype that if Native Americans organize, they are automatically forming an army.

Seymour is living in two worlds in his mind. One, the hip, cultural, exciting city of Seattle, and the second, his roots, history, and relationships on the reservation. Alexie has created Seymour's character in a way that fights stereotyping. He fights the stereotype of being a lazy, unproductive Indian by being a successful poet and author. He is constantly working, constantly writing, and travelling to book readings and meet and greets. Alexie has clearly stated he wanted to use Seymour's sexuality as a tool. He chose to do this to flip the script to those that are homophobic. He actually encoded the message knowing some people may begin with an oppositional reading of the film's gay character (I don't care what he shows, I still don't like gay people), but hopes to have presented them with enough information and exploration of Seymour's life by hoping their reading is changed after seeing the film to the preferred meaning (homophobia is not the answer). Seymour is the polar opposite of Aristotle and Mouse. He is not an alcoholic, does not hang around doing nothing, and finds purpose in his work. He is a driven man constantly writing poetry. In all ways, Seymour fights stereotypical historical representations of Native Americans found in films.

Agnes Roth

Agnes is played by Michelle St. John. St. John has numerous credits in movies and television including Alexie's *Smoke Signals* and blockbusters like the animated film *Pocahontas* (IMDB, 2018). Similar to the multiple characteristics to the character Seymour in *Fancydancing*, St. John has two parts to her; she is Jewish and Native American. The *Jewish Journal* says *Fancydancing* may be the first film to feature a

character that is both Native American and Jewish (Minkin, 2002). Agnes Roth has a complicated personal identity being the “daughter of a second-generation Russian Jew and Spokane Native American” (Minkin, 2002, para. 3). The most interesting thing about St. John playing Agnes, is that it was predestined. Minkin (2002) writes, “Alexie wrote the part specifically for actress/vocalist Michelle St. John, who like her character, is the daughter of a white Jewish mother and a Native American Christian father” (para. 3). St. John has experience that causes her to be able to deeply understand the characters in *Fancydancing*. As Minkin writes, “As an adolescent, St. John was aware that she was both Native American and Jewish, and that neither side of her heritage fit into her Canadian suburb” (2002, para. 7).

Agnes was Seymour’s first love. They met in college, kept in touch and remained friends after breaking up. Agnes is half Jewish and half Indian and is one of the bright spots in the film. Her character is kind, loving, forgiving, and inclusive of those on the reservation and beyond. She has a comfortable friendship with Seymour, even feeling like family. Agnes and Seymour’s characters use dry humor in many of their exchanges, sometimes even resulting in ethnic humor. The two former lovers have a way of communicating that allows them to be open and understanding with each other, in good times and bad. At one point, she reminds Seymour that she is both Jewish and Indian. To which he quips, “Jewish and Indian? So you got like tribal numbers tattooed on one arm and death camp numbers on the other?” Agnes responds that she does not think that is funny, so Seymour says, “No, but it’s ironic.” This exchange between Agnes and Seymour shows the two characters using humor as a way of reestablishing their connection and further increasing the depth of understanding between the two. Even

when Agnes says that she thinks his joke is not funny, she does not become enraged or deeply angry.

Aristotle

Aristotle Joseph is Seymour's best friend from childhood and college. Interestingly, Joseph is the same last name as some of the characters in Alexie's film *Smoke Signals*. The film opens with the two posing together for the camera at their high school graduation. Aristotle joins Seymour in college. This decision and what happens as a result eventually creates a permanent break in their relationship. Aristotle's character expresses rage often. When taking a test in college, he yells at the professor, followed by a war-like cry. He leaves the classroom full of anger. In a later scene from the film, an intrusive and antagonistic interviewer, played by Rebecca Carroll, sits across from Aristotle. Having interviewed Seymour and been equally combative, now she is targeting Aristotle. She is badgering him, to the point of asking him if he is autistic as well as alcoholic. He sits there stoically. Finally, just as in the classroom, he loses control and does a similar war-like cry in her face. Next we find Aristotle verbally attacking Seymour at a local café, even spitting on him. During their argument, Seymour admits he thinks he is "better than the rest of them" on the reservation. Aristotle is furious. "How can you say that man? That's our tribe. That's our reservation... You like it out here. Playing Indian putting on the beads and feathers for all these white people... Out here, you're the little public relations warrior." This is the last straw in their relationship; they never recover from this break.

The character of Aristotle has fewer dimensions in his character development and storyline than Agnes and Seymour. He is often shown drinking or angry, skirting the line

of reinforcing stereotypes of the drunk and savage Indian. Alexie rarely provides a softer side of Aristotle's character, but does show him being kinder when he is reminiscing about their childhood. Mitchell (2002) says, "Mr. Alexie doesn't make Aristotle and Mouse one-dimensional poles between which Seymour exists. Aristotle has squandered his gifts and lies about complaining and drinking instead of doing anything with his life; he's bitter because he was afraid to leave the reservation. And his anger is made worse by Agnes's respect for Seymour, despite the damage he did to her" (Mitchell, 2002, para. 6). Parts of Aristotle's character perfectly reinforce the savage Indian stereotype. This might be okay, if his character has shown development and made changes throughout his life. But this is not the case. At one point, he beats up a driver stranded on the side of the road. Seymour believes Aristotle has not changed and asks Agnes, "Is he still a bully?" She replies, "He has his good days." With this exchange, coupled with this assault of a stranger and other verbal attacks, Alexie is having Aristotle's character fulfill the idea that viewers would decode the whole of this character as a perfect example of long-held stereotypes of the savage Indian - even though Aristotle shows a softer side at times in the film.

Mouse

Without Mouse, played by Swil Kanim, the film has no plot. It is Mouse's tragic death and ensuing funeral that bring the characters together. Mouse is "an ill-fated violinist who never shirked telling the truth no matter how painful. When he dies, he leaves as much misery in his wake as he did while he was alive" (Mitchell, 2002, para. 3). Mouse never left the reservation. He pals around the reservation with Aristotle and it seems one of their biggest activities is drinking. There are scenes featuring Mouse

playing his violin. As much as Seymour's identity is directly related to his sexuality, Mouse's identity is directly related to his violin playing. He is also recording his life events. He and Aristotle record themselves angrily reading Seymour's poems explaining that the stories are not his, they are of their lives. Mouse, like Aristotle, is a character that reinforces stereotypical ideas of Native Americans. On one hand he is an alcoholic calling his white girlfriend a racist name, while on the other hand he is an accomplished violinist that brought joy and culture to the reservation.

Steven

Steven (Kevin Phillip) is Seymour's white partner in Seattle. Steven's character is underdeveloped, feeding into a number of stereotypes of how the white man has historically abused and controlled Native Americans. He is condescending when speaking to Seymour about the reservation ("white people don't call each other at three in the morning") and even goes so far as to plead with him not to go to the funeral saying that they are not your tribe anymore, "I am." This relationship is one that fits stereotypes of the minority having to become more white gain the approval of the majority. This is further reinforced by how the two met with Steven saying to Seymour, "What are you? Where are you from?" This decision to ask a stranger "what" they are is offensive. Sadly, Seymour's character does not find it offensive and does not rebuke him. Rather, the two enter into a relationship where Steven is comfortable calling Seymour "son," even saying, "You know son, you have all the tools necessary to someday be a very good writer." All of these offensive, arrogant encounters make Steven's character the spitting image of a stereotype. This is further reinforced by Steven's character experiencing no emotional growth throughout the film. Alexie, having written the screenplay, surely carefully

reviewed these words before they were placed in an opening scene in the film. This encounter reinforces the stereotype that the minority is subservient to the white member of the relationship. Seymour's relationship with Steven, however is not totally one sided. Alexie chose to give Seymour some power by having his answer to Steven's question about whether he is ashamed of him, and Seymour answers yes. Although Alexie has the relationship reinforce some stereotypes, he counters that with a twist on this desired subservience. Seymour reclaims his power by agreeing he is ashamed of Steven and ignoring his pleas for him to skip the funeral.

Through his work, Alexie has fought against stereotypical characterizations of Native Americans often found in films and other media. But in *Fancydancing*, he gives audiences a lens into some of the harsh realities within his culture. He presents Seymour and Agnes' characters to further the understanding of their culture and the complexities found by its people, while also admitting some of the stereotypes (such as Aristotle's rage and Mouse's drinking rubbing alcohol) still can be related to current reservation life.

Narrative Analysis

David Bordwell, Jacques Ledoux Professor of Film Studies in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the author of 17+ books on film studies and theories, says narratives “arouse emotions in us; some would say that's their chief purpose. The emotions can be of all kinds – pity, sympathy, indignation, joy, and down the line” (2008, para. 243). Bordwell (2008) says that theorist Meir Sternberg, in one of the “finest studies in narrative theory” (para. 273), *Expositional Modes of Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, suggested:

that a narrative as such, regardless of other emotions it can conjure up depends on three emotional states. Simplifying a bit, we can say that stories create curiosity about past events, suspense about future events, and surprise by means of unexpected events. Whatever emotions a narrative evokes, we need to feel at least one of these states. (Bordwell, 2008, para. 243).

In 2001, seven years before Bordwell's comments on narratives, Sternberg wrote that regardless of the "growing sophistication on matters of detail, Narrative Theory is still in its infancy because the disciplinary foundations have yet to be laid" (p. 115, para 1). In discussing whether narrative is language based or beyond language, Bordwell says:

One reason that narrative emerged as a distinct area of study rather late is that for centuries it was identified largely with spoken language. According to ancient tradition, a narrative was a story told, whereas a story that was enacted was considered drama. The rise of film, comic books, and the like encouraged theorists to rethink things. Now narrative is usually considered a transmedium phenomenon. A story can be presented not only in language but also in pantomime, dance, images, and even music. (2008, p. 3, para. 2)

Similar to the plot in *Smoke Signals*, the plot in *Fancydancing* focuses on life on the reservation. While *Smoke Signals* dealt with characters that have stayed on the reservation, *Fancydancing* revolves around its main character coming to terms with having left the reservation. While this may be seen as the major plot in the film, Seymour finds himself struggling with coming to terms with his homosexuality as well.

Fancydancing begins with solemn scenes finding its main character doing a reading at a small bookstore, poised in the window. With this positioning of Seymour alone in the

window, Alexie creates a narrative for viewers that he is alone and on display for all to see. The film does not tell Seymour's story alone. Rather, it intermingles the stories of Agnes, Mouse, Aristotle, and Steven with Seymour's story. The death of Mouse on the reservation is presented to viewers as a mystery. It is never disclosed what definitively caused Mouse's death, but Alexie shows him drinking rubbing alcohol, creating a narrative that leads viewers to conclude he died of an alcohol-related event.

In *Smoke Signals*, Alexie created a narrative that drove the film's continuity while flashbacks give more perspective and explanation to the whys and how's of the story. In *Fancydancing*, there is less continuity within the film. A viewer cannot leave the room while watching *Fancydancing* and expect to be able to follow the storyline. Alexie provides the audience with less of a chronological story; it does not use flashbacks to deepen understanding like was seen in *Smoke Signals*. Rather, in *Fancydancing* Alexie uses flashbacks within the narrative to assault viewers. He uses them as a way to shock viewers and even disturb them. At times, the composition of the film is decidedly offsetting. When the interviewer is interviewing Seymour and Aristotle, both times the camera rolls around them creating a jarring effect. This is used to create a narrative of opposition, which unsettles the characters and the audience at the same time.

Fancydancing does not create a narrative where the audience thinks they know the characters until they find out some new information that makes them like the characters more. Rather, it provides a narrative about the characters that is only further reinforced. Early on, you see Mouse and Aristotle among numerous empty alcohol cans, with Mouse even drinking rubbing alcohol. Later, Alexie reinforces Aristotle's character's narrative of being the drunk Indian when Agnes admits he has been on the

wagon for some time (intimating this is not a permanent decision), only for Seymour to quip how it is the same wagon he is constantly getting on and off again. Alexie admitted he created a narrative where the audience would not find sympathy or warmth for the characters in this film. By doing so, he is reinforcing the myth of marginality for these minority characters. He has created them outside of society (living on the reservation) and also developed their characters in such a negative way that the audience (mainstream society) does not want to invite them into their lives because, to say it plainly, they do not like them. Possibly the most powerful narrative Alexie provides is lurking beneath the surface: Seymour's assimilation into Seattle's society. In nearly all-outward ways (short hair, yuppie clothing, white boyfriend, white audiences), Seymour's narrative fulfills the age-old idea that the only "good Indian was a dead Indian - whether through warfare or assimilation" (Berkhofer, 1978, p. 30). The only way Seymour's narrative does not fulfill the myth of assimilation, is when he speaks of how he feels. At one point, he even discusses with Agnes how part of him thinks about a life on the reservation with her and a little child that looks like both of them.

Themes

Fancydancing features parallel themes found in *Smoke Signals*. The characters deal with alcoholism, identity struggles with family and personal isolation. Throughout the film, Native American traditions are woven in between life on the reservation and life in urban cities. This is shown when Seymour chooses to leave the reservation but carries his traditions with him, only to use them for financial gain and personal success. He does not deal with alcohol issues, but Mouse and Aristotle do, to extremes. Aristotle seems to live a life of regret, anger, and sadness; he is trying to deal with what he sees as the

breakdown of his idea of family. Seymour, who he considered his brother, left the reservation – and left him behind only to replace him. In addition to themes found in *Smoke Signals*, *Fancydancing* deals with the theme of homosexuality, admittedly because Alexie wanted to address the topic head-on in the film.

The beginning of the film finds Seymour alone in a deserted bookstore. Although he is smiling while reading his work, he looks around to no one in particular. Passers-by walk by him sitting in the window giving him no mind. In some respects, he looks like a zoo animal (Rader, 2011, p. 163) watching life go by. Alexie is presenting this idea of individual isolation even while being surrounded by numerous people. For Seymour, those people are different from him. He is Native American, a gay Native American, living in a world paradoxical to his upbringing. Seymour is not the only one to feel isolation. Aristotle, even after returning to the reservation, feels isolated. He longingly remembers his history with Seymour and seems to never find a similar bonding relationship on the reservation.

Agnes is caught in the middle of the breakdown of Seymour, Mouse, and Aristotle's relationships. These three formed a type of family unit growing up. Agnes struggles to live between Aristotle being angry with Seymour while defending Seymour to Aristotle and others on the reservation. This makes Agnes angry and even sad at times. She understands how they feel, but reminds them that Seymour has not abandoned them – that his work sends a message, "He is telling everybody that we're still here."

Seymour has travelled the world. When he is being interviewed in the film, the female interviewer is aggressive in challenging his use of Native American topics in his works. She reminds him (even though surely he knows) that his books have been

published in 18 countries, that he has had dinners with the president, the pope, and even Robert Redford. But still “95% of his poems are about the reservation.” Seymour replies that every time he sits down to write, he wants it not to be about the reservation, “But the reservation won’t let me go.” During this exchange, Alexie has Seymour dressed like a rich businessman in a handsome suit. But no matter how much he tries, Seymour will never be able to rid himself of the hold the reservation has on his life, and this makes him feel alone and isolated – knowing he can never fit in to either world, urban or reservation.

Native American traditions are an integral theme in the film. Seymour is criticized for using reservation stories and Native American traditions in his work. He is seen as commodifying his heritage for his own gain. Some people think he does this just to get rich. But in real life, Seymour is straddling this emotional and physical line between his reservation history, his current life in Seattle, and his undecided future. He is condemned by reservation residents “who criticize Seymour for using Native exotica and reservation trauma for his personal gain” (Corbin, 2013, p. 175, para. 1). In reality, Seymour is condemning himself for using his Native American traditions and struggling to cope with his decisions, past, present, and future.

Alexie’s *Fancydancing* stands apart for many reasons, but one that makes it unique is the combination of fighting racist stereotypes of Native Americans as well as homophobia. Alexie does so by using humor and postmodern attempts to use racist language as opposing commentary. Earlier it was described how Seymour and Steven are awakened by the 3 a.m. phone call, only to have Steven declare the call could not be for him because whites don’t call each other at 3 a.m. Seymour responds that is only something a white person would say. To which Steven replies, “Funny how that works,

isn't it? You being a racist jerk and yet still finding the need to get me naked." In a playful return, Seymour replies, "I just pretend you're Custer." The entire conversation is racist, from beginning to end. Offensive. Derogatory, and narrow-minded. But not only from the white actor, but equally so from Seymour. This exchange is a perfect example of how Alexie delivers something to viewers in a way that creates alternative meaning. The exchange is purely racist, yet Alexie is able to signify a meaning beyond just the words. He uses humor to make the exchange sound so ridiculous that it is understood the words are not meant to be literal, but rather they tell a bigger picture of the relationship between the two men – and a joke being played on viewers by Alexie.

Rader (2011) said *Smoke Signals* and *The Business of Fancydancing* are vastly different. "If *Smoke Signals* is the fry bread of Indian cinema, *The Business of Fancydancing* is bird brain stew – a dish hard to digest for some, but a real delicacy for those with the right palates" (p. 162, para. 1). This comment alone exhibits how specialized *Fancydancing*'s content was created. Further, Rader (2011) says that the two films are distinct saying, "*The Business of Fancydancing* stands as a kind of anti-*Smoke Signals* project, a nonnarrative experimental film that eschews all the trappings of cinematic pleasure its predecessor enjoys" (p. 162, para. 2). Although homophobia was not a strong theme in the film, homosexuality and Seymour being two-spirited is a featured theme. Why does this matter? Because the other themes in this film are relatable to the average consumer and the average Native American; they are more universal and less controversial. But the lead character being homosexual is not relatable, especially to Native American audiences. Youngberg confirms the film is interpreted differently by different people saying, "The straight white viewer sees a different film than does the gay

white viewer, who sees a different film than does the straight Indian, who sees a different film than does the queer Indian” (Youngberg, 2008, p. 73, para. 2). Further, Youngberg (2008) notes that combining Seymour’s everyday struggles with the addition of making the character homosexual may have been too much for the film to be successful, even for someone as accomplished as Alexie (p. 73). Early in the film, Seymour’s character kisses a famous statue of Chief Seattle in Pioneer Square in Seattle, WA. This image of Seymour heartily kissing a revered Indian Chief would unsettle someone with homophobic feelings, great and small. With images such as Seymour and Kevin in bed and Seymour kissing Chief Seattle, *Fancydancing*’s financial failure could be influenced by homophobic viewers avoiding seeing the film. Youngberg relates how the film’s homosexuality theme may have been a downfall for box office success. In quoting a working artist on the set, Johnny Satter, Youngberg (2008) says Satter possibly perfectly describes the film when he says, “This movie is going to be too white for Indians, too Indian for white people, and too gay for everybody” (qtd. by Alexie, DVD commentary)” (Youngberg, p. 73, para. 2).

Discussion

You cannot analyze *Fancydancing* without dealing with the elephant in the room, the film’s quality. Since Alexie recorded it on digital video (videotape), viewers had to overlook the poor image quality. This prevented many viewers from being able to fully understand the film because they were distracted by the low quality. *The New York Times* reviewer Elvis Mitchell found the film “an often affecting, low-budget melodrama that is occasionally sabotaged by its economy of means: the image quality is sometimes so poor that it’s like watching the pixel breakup on digital cable” (Mitchell, 2002, para. 1).

Never to be outdone, Alexie might be the only filmmaker able to squeeze two elephants into the same room with *Fancydancing*. The second pivotal issue in the film, which likely negatively affected box office success, is the controversiality of the main character's homosexuality. Alexie said he wanted to make this film to confront homophobia both on and off the reservation. Although Alexie did not care that, in 2002, mass audiences were not ready for this subject – not ready to accept a character aggressively kissing an Indian Chief's statue, not ready for two male characters to be sitting in bed talking about taking each other's clothes off. Alexie was open to the subject, but the nation was not – especially Native Americans. Alexie, in a 2003 interview with *The Guardian*, said most Native Americans “are socially conservative. We give our money to Democrats because they protect us, but we live very Republican lives – pro-gun, pro-death penalty, pro-life, homophobic, racist” (D. Campbell, 2003, para. 33). In 2002, homophobia was still a part of the power structure in America. A mere four years before *Fancydancing*, in 1998 Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi compared “being gay to a condition ‘just like alcohol... or sex addiction... or kleptomania’ – a pathology in need of treatment” (Franke-Ruta, 2013, para. 3). You might also remember a terrible tragedy in 1998, the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay 21 year old, who died after being “beaten into a coma and tied to a fence outside Laramie, where he would not be discovered for 18 hours” (Franke-Ruta, 2013, para. 5). In *How America Got Past the Anti-Gay Politics of the 1990s*, Garance Franke-Ruta in 2013 says, “America is a different country now, a dozen years on from what Frank Rich described in 1999 as ‘[t]he homophobic epidemic of ’98, which spiked with the murder of Matthew Shepard’” (para. 6). If 1998 included a homophobic epidemic, then in 2002

when *Fancydancing* was released it was not far from this epidemic. In 2002, the United States Military still did not allow openly gay members of the armed forces; this did not happen until 2011. Members were forced to be silent and live in silence within the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy (Gay Rights, 2017). On the heels of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” lawmakers further defended homophobia when “Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)” which President “Clinton signed into law in 1996” (Gay Rights, 2017 para. 36). Add all of this up and you get one thing – *Fancydancing* falling outside of the norms. Having such an important character (especially the lead character) in an openly homosexual relationship limited the viability of the film to mass audiences, and as a result, limited the potential for box office success.

Fancydancing is similar to *Smoke Signals* in that it represents the identity struggles of Native Americans on the reservation and in the outside world. Corbin (2013) says Alexie’s film envisions issues of identity “through innovative use of place and spectator positioning” (p. 175, para. 2). Seymour’s friends, Aristotle and Mouse, say Seymour stole their lives and their identities, while Agnes understands his dilemma. She identifies with Seymour and understands that his work keeps the outside world informed about their identities and culture. *Fancydancing* features key “cultural landscapes” that include “the Seattle culture of white art connoisseurs, the Seattle of the ‘urban Indian’ estranged from his tribal identity, and the Spokane reservation in eastern Washington State” (Corbin, 2013, p. 176, para. 1). Alexie has Seymour living with three cultural identities – one is living the dream in the cultural landscape of Seattle, the second feels pangs of guilt and self-loathing for leaving the reservation, while the third is living a two-spirited life. Corbin (2013) writes about how Seymour sees the reservation as a “place

with good memories of childhood play but also a ‘prison’ for an intellectual Native American who feels the reservation culture limits personal expression” (p. 188, para. 1). Alexie has Seymour escaping this “prison,” but using these “prison” experiences when dancing Native American traditional dances. He writes poetry about poverty and historical Native American slaughter, while also partying at clubs. All of these are his expression of his identities.

Alexie is not one to dodge polarizing topics, and this film is no exception. He does this in *Fancydancing* with his decision to brutally depict derelict alcoholism by Native American characters in the film. Not a single white person in the film is an alcoholic – only reservation characters. At one point in the film, Mouse even consumes rubbing alcohol. This is a very troubling part of the film, and it cannot be disregarded. Alexie had many options to depict Mouse’s bottomless pit of alcoholism. Visual representations such as illness, wrecked vehicles, and many others. But he chose this offensive imagery of a degenerate alcoholic, a Native American one at that, which epitomizes the drunk Indian stereotype. This is one of the reasons Alexie, and the storyline in *Fancydancing*, can be seen as controversial. Some critics say Alexie makes his living telling stories about alcoholism by Native Americans, in turn just reinforcing the stereotype of the drunk Indian. This may be a place where they are right. Although Mouse’s character does die in the film, the rubbing alcohol may have been a poor choice for Alexie, who says he is fighting against long-held stereotypes.

Seymour, Mouse, and Aristotle all grew up together on the same Spokane Indian reservation. Agnes was introduced into the relationship, but remained an outsider. Like three brothers, all grew into individualized adults with personal successes, failures,

struggles, and problems. Seymour remains softer spoken and turns more inward, only to write scandalous and immensely emotionally wrenching stories about the reservation. Mouse spoke through his violin or even racist remarks spoken to those he loved, while Aristotle sometimes spoke with his fist. In the end, Mouse and Aristotle seemed to be similar characters with anger and bitterness while Seymour seemed once again damaged by his return to the reservation. Seymour has been pulled in different directions - his career, his Native American upbringing, his childhood friends on the reservation, his early heterosexual relationship with Agnes, and his same-sex partner, Steven. It seems Seymour is trying to go between the two worlds, being indecisive. But Alexie ends the film with fateful imagery. Corbin (2013) finds that Alexie's choice of the final shot being Seymour and Steven in bed, shows Seymour's choice while also underscoring "a melancholy aspect of the film's message: while one may psychically inhabit many geographies, one can be physically present only in one" (p. 187, para. 2).

In the end, the three childhood friends and Agnes have not travelled far. Mouse may have died, but he had not changed before death. Seymour, Aristotle and Agnes all continue in their lives feeling the same isolation as when the film began. At the end, no one, not even Seymour, is doing any *Fancydancing*.

CHAPTER VII — CONCLUSION

Alexie's creative decisions in *Smoke Signals* and *The Business of Fancydancing* offers a peek into two momentous works in his career. The first brought Alexie's work to huge audiences allowing him to reach hundreds of thousands of people in mainstream society. The second was his individualized contribution to the world of filmmaking focusing on a purposeful storyline with Alexie seeking to pinpoint a different, more specialized audience.

Alexie has two sons. I see these two films as two more. These two films are like siblings. When you meet siblings, it is easy to find numerous visual similarities, and inherited traits. But being related by blood does not mean they are identical. The same can be said for these two Alexie films. These two films seem to be related by blood and show numerous nearly identical similarities. However, the films are not chromosomal duplicates, but also show diverging characteristics. In both films, Alexie aggressively fights myths and stereotypes of Native American characters. This seems to be the unbreakable sibling bond of these two films.

He fights the idea of Native Americans having broken families by showing strong familial links in *Smoke Signals*. Victor has a strong relationship with his mother and Thomas is a devoted grandson. Both young men dispel the stereotype of the silent Indian. Victor, who is the more brooding of the two characters, has loving conversations with his mother. His conversation with his mother about whether or not to accept the money from Thomas so he can make the trip dispels the stereotype of the stoic, angry, and savage Indian. His mother is cooking for their family, dispelling the stereotype of the despondent broken reservation families. The two are having a loving moment, her making a home

cooked meal while Victor gives her his full attention. Thomas, although his character is the polar opposite of Victor, has an equally stereotype-breaking conversation with his grandmother. Thomas is standing in a neat, tidy and clean kitchen cooking while his grandmother gives him her undivided attention. Although their conversation is more argumentative, his grandmother is concerned for his wellbeing and worried about him making the trip to Phoenix with Victor. Alexie could have had Grandma Builds-the-Fire going on a tirade with stereotypical complaints of a young man like Victor (bully, angry, negative, unpredictable, ungrateful), but she does not. She is doubtful of Thomas going with Victor, but does not show outward disdain for Victor excoriating Thomas about Victor's emotional failures and similarities to his abusive father Arnold. Alexie allows Thomas' grandmother to communicate her apprehensiveness, but does not make her outwardly contemptuous about the two travelling together.

Although it is not blood relations in *Fancydancing*, Alexie creates the same family bond between characters based on friendship and relationship history. Even though Seymour has moved on to the big city with his white boyfriend and his white acolytes, he is unwavering in his commitment to return to the reservation for Mouse's funeral. Agnes has the same level of dedication that Grandma Builds-the-Fire has for Thomas, but to Seymour and her friends on the reservation. Agnes is a motherly character challenging the stereotype of all Native American women being princesses. She is an educated and diverse woman who balances her dedication to her Native American history and Jewish ancestry. Alexie could have created the character as a stereotype of an angry and bitter Indian, but he did not. In the 90s era of television dramas, such as *Melrose Place* that ran from 1992 to 1999, she could have been a hateful, venomous ex constantly

plotting her revenge for being embarrassed and cast aside. She could have been a caricature constantly obsessing about her college boyfriend who she financially supported who broke her heart and told her he was homosexual. All of Alexie's works have been created with depth and diversity. This is true of *Fancydancing's* character Aristotle. Although Alexie has done many things to fight stereotyping of Native Americans, this is a time when detractors to his works may be right. Aristotle's character exhibits rage, violence and alcoholism – all of which are the perfect recipe for a stereotyped loser living on a Native American reservation. The choice to make Aristotle a perfect example of these numerous stereotypes angers those who say he exploits this for financial gain. But Alexie says he does this to admit to the shortcomings of Native Americans while also trying to create an irony that can be a postmodern commentary on ridiculous expectations.

Both *Smoke Signals* and *Fancydancing* involve Alexie making blatant, as well as circuitous postmodern commentary by way of using stereotypes of Native Americans in these two films as catalysts for change. At times he is using these films to tell two stories, one of truth and one of expected truths. This is exhibited by Victor's character in *Smoke Signals* having never had a drop of alcohol. The stereotyped expectation would be that his father was an abusive alcoholic who left him and his mother with no explanation; surely this means his son will work out his emotional aggressions by using alcohol. But he does not. Alexie uses one sentence in an 89-minute film to subvert societal expectations and ideas. Victor does not drink... ever. He has never and will never. He uses this fact to create an opposing message to challenge mainstream media's laughable representations of Native Americans. He has created a contradiction of a stereotypical

expectation and challenges the singularity of what Victor would be if *Smoke Signals* created its characters using Hollywood's formulaic stereotyped assumptions. He uses Victor's unwavering commitment to abstaining from alcohol to bust open the drunk Indian stereotype. Again, differing from its sibling, *Fancydancing's* Seymour does not use one sentence to fight an expectation, but rather an entire film. He starts the film with his white lover only to openly give viewers unfettered access to his life. Alexie uses Seymour's character to communicate a blatant message on social expectations and social constructs. Unlike many homosexual characters that battle shame and condemnation from friends and family, Seymour does not. This is yet another way Alexie has flipped the script. Seymour is not a slave to his homosexuality; rather it is a part of him that his friends and family have accepted. This is of unprecedented importance when talking about a Native American male character. He retains all of what would be expected of a Native American lead character (attractive, in touch with his culture's bloody history, reverent of those that have gone before him), but also happens to be homosexual without it consuming his character's storyline. Everything about Seymour could have revolved around him being gay, like the character Jack on *Will and Grace*, a 1990s comedic sitcom. Raley and Lucas (2006) write of Jack's character:

Sean P. Hayes's character, Jack is an example of the over-the-top stereotype of a flamboyant Gay male who receives the brunt of the laughs as the butt of the joke (Sarten, 1998). The continuous connection of laughter to the character sets him up to be no more than the show's comic relief jester (p. 24, para. 5).

Raley and Lucas saw that if homosexual characters in media are not carefully portrayed, they can reinforce harmful stereotypes. They said, "In the same way the

blackface minstrel shows ridiculed Blacks, the current TV comedies allow Gay male and Lesbian characters to be funny by ridiculing them” (Raley & Lucas, 2006, p. 24, para. 5). This is what I believe Alexie wanted to avoid. He chose to challenge hegemony and social power structures that believe that in films and television first, relationships should be heterosexual, and second, if you have a homosexual character they should be a jester. In doing so, he created Seymour’s character in a way that made a statement challenging these primary beliefs of morality and societal expectations in love relationships. Alexie is challenging the status quo, the Hollywood machine, and the expectation of homosexual characters to be shown as jesters. Another way Alexie challenges hegemony and media expectations in *Fancydancing* is the lack of time continuity – the film jumps all over – back and forth in time. This deconstructs the ability of viewers to expect what is coming next. They expect a film with a beginning, middle, climax, and resolution. *Fancydancing* does not do this; it creates questions in viewers about how the story fits together, which constantly keeps them guessing.

You can’t talk about most works by Sherman Alexie without also talking about humor. It may not be juvenile, slapstick humor seen in many films; it might be offensive ethnic humor used in a way to fight historical stereotypes and offer contemporary alternatives to these stereotypes. Alexie uses humor in *Smoke Signals* to fight stereotypical expectations by having characters do something reverent in Native American culture in an irreverent way. When Victor and Thomas chant about John Wayne’s teeth on the bus, it is a ridiculous sight and musical experience. Viewers might expect to watch them chant watching in silence and respect, but instead this scene causes audiences to wonder about the chant while laughing out loud. This desired effect of the

audience laughing during something so sacred and individual to Native American culture, Alexie challenging the idea that all stories about Native Americans are serious. They can be ridiculous and funny offering divergent storylines to cultural expectations. In *Fancydancing*, Alexie uses ethnic humor openly. A different filmmaker might not have made Agnes Jewish and probably wouldn't have had Seymour saying racist things. But he does. He has a racist exchange where his white partner calls him a racist jerk and still finding the need to get him naked, to which Seymour responds that he just pretends he is Custer. Alexie is offering a critique to society's expectation that Seymour would be one dimensional – all good. But he is not. Alexie does this to subvert expectations and he does this using blue and ironic humor. Seymour's comment to Steven is definitively off-color and offensive. He again uses dry humor asking Agnes which half of her is Jewish. This contradiction in Seymour's character does not fit the narrative of a perfect leading man; this is Alexie's way of challenging expectations of cookie-cutter character development. Probably the most definitive piece of evidence to prove Alexie's desire to subvert societal expectations, while poking literary purists in the eye, is his use of "literary hijinks" (Vogt, 2003, para. 18). hilariously and ironically, Alexie repurposed old dialogue, slapping one critic critique sorely in the mouth. Vogt (2003) recalls that:

One reviewer called a tender scene between Seymour and his college girlfriend "terrible writing," only to find out from Alexie that the dialogue was among the 35 lines in the film lifted from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. (para. 18)

The significance of Alexie's work in *Smoke Signals* has been recognized by reviewers, film festivals, educators, and many others. Even his detractors who allege he uses his Native American heritage to make a quick buck have to admit the undeniable

implications of this film. His decisions to create the characters as able to withstand their past (and not as victims) offered an alternative reality to viewers. *Smoke Signals* changed the way many viewers saw Native Americans in film. They were not living in cowboys and Indians dramas and this impacted viewer's expectations of Native Americans on film. *Fancydancing* pushed viewers even more. Since the film did not reach a nationwide audience, the impact was less significant than *Smoke Signals*. *Smoke Signals* may have opened the eyes of white audiences. But *Fancydancing* went even further and tried to open the ideas of Native Americans. Alexie openly admitted he wanted to push the boundaries of acceptance of homosexuality within his own culture, Native Americans. This has far different implications when examining Native Americans own prejudices. Alexie admits Native Americans need to be awakened of this subject and he uses this film create a new understanding, but not to whites, rather to Native Americans. *Smoke Signals* was groundbreaking – Native American writers, directors, actors, and actors. This opened the floodgates for Native Americans and other minorities to take control of their media products and choose to make their own mark in filmmaking and other media. Although there is not a direct correlation, following *Smoke Signals* it seemed like a door was opened for minority produced material. Soon after *Smoke Signals* and *Fancydancing*, in 2005 Tyler Perry, an African American writer and director started making his own films and other media. *Fancydancing's* implications for future minority-directed films was not equally as powerful as *Smoke Signals* but it did create a distinctive mark on the portrayal of Native Americans characters who are homosexual. The main character Seymour is not a gay caricature making everything in the film about his homosexuality, but rather a successful and professional writer. Alexie's work in *Fancydancing* proved

that Native Americans do not have to be portrayed in singularly designed one-dimensional roles.

The themes of alcoholism, family struggles, family breakdown, family conflict, individual isolation, separation from the family, and Native American traditions are all represented in *Smoke Signals* and *Fancydancing*. But *Fancydancing* added a homosexual storyline with Seymour talking about being two-spirited. The film was also decidedly different in its attempt (some reviewers found it an unsuccessful attempt) to be artsy featuring experimental film effects.

This research is significant because it examines two films by Sherman Alexie that had significant impact on differing audiences. Alexie has been recognized across the United States by national literary and film organizations as a leading figure in bringing stories and messages about Native American culture to diverse audiences. These two films had significant impacts in differing ways: *Smoke Signals* reached audiences beyond Native Americans changing their stereotypical cultural ideas and *Fancydancing* created a media item featuring a gay Native American character that used its message to widen the cultural ideologies of Native Americans. It is a common joke that parents are super-obsessive while raising their first child. They carefully follow rules and recommendations, only to become more experimental with their later children. The same can be said for Alexie. *Smoke Signals* is highly developed and follows a clean plot using flashbacks to provide viewers with insight and information. Years later, *Fancydancing* was approached with an openness and experimentality not found in *Smoke Signals*. If *Smoke Signals* was his first child, then unfortunately *Fancydancing* was a premature birth. With such a progressive leading character, being gay and a minority, the country

(and likely Native Americans), were not ready to see it and this was reflected by its lack of mainstream appeal. There are jokes about parents preferring their first born, but this cannot be said of Alexie. He is extremely proud of his work in *Smoke Signals* and equally joyous of his creative license and storytelling freedom exhibited in *Fancydancing*. Some have written that first-born children have higher IQs while younger siblings are more extroverted (“15 Fascinating Scientific Facts,” 2011). I see this as applicable to *Smoke Signals* and *Fancydancing*. *Smoke Signals* is a smart, intelligent and an even adventurous film with a consistent tone in story structure, presentation, and cinematography; viewers knew what to expect, could anticipate what was next, and hoped for a happy ending. *Fancydancing* was an imaginative drama full of visual, musical, and physical interjections and interruptions, all leading to a highly emotional, hollow-feeling ending that left viewers concerned about what the future holds for the characters.

This study is limited to two films by Native American writer, poet, and filmmaker Sherman Alexie and his ability to create postmodern commentary using differing themes and artistic approaches. Future research could examine further media made by Alexie and other media simply based on his works. For instance, the film *Jimmy P: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian* was based on Alexie’s poem *Tribal Ceremony* (by Sherman Alexie) and the book *Reality in Dreams* (by George Devereaux) (Hilger, 2015). It holds little or no similarity to the two films examined in this research. If *Smoke Signals* and *Fancydancing* were two of Alexie’s media offspring, *Jimmy P.* would be a distant cousin. It does not parallel Alexie’s films where Native Americans portray Native Americans. Rather it cast the main character, a Blackfeet Indian, with American actor of Puerto Rican descent, Benicio del Toro (Scott, 2014). One can only imagine Alexie was not consulted on this

selection. Examining this film comparing it to *Smoke Signals* and *Fancydancing* might provide insight into the differences of minority-produced media versus non-minority produced media.

Additional future research could include comparison of Native filmmakers versus non-Native filmmakers. In addition, content analysis of themes and actions within the films combined with critical cultural studies would offer increased information on minority representations. Further research could also compare media produced by minority filmmakers. Researchers could examine African American director and producer Tyler Perry and the ways his films try to avoid stereotyping or offending African Americans compared with Native American filmmakers such as Alexie. This could provide interesting insight into the two cultures and their feelings about how their cultures are represented by filmmakers.

Although depictions of minority characters may change, the fight against stereotyping of Native Americans continues. These two films and future works by minority producers and directors can create interesting and thought-provoking windows into minority cultures. But using *Jimmy P.* as an example, minorities such as Sherman Alexie should continue to create postmodern works desiring to change stereotypes. If they are able to continue to tell the stories themselves about their own cultures, they might win the battle of making the realities (and not stereotypes) of their culture increasingly understood by others.

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