

“The res has missed you”: The Fragmented Reservation of the Mind in *The Business of Fancydancing*

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Alexie’s directorial debut *The Business of Fancydancing* was released in 2002 to mixed reviews. Some critics referred to the film’s style as pretentious. What they perceived as pretentious is Alexie’s critique of himself and his place in the canon of American Indian literature. Alexie even anticipates his reviews by including blurbs at the beginning of the film. There is a positive review from a fictitious New York film critic, and the review from Indianz.com calls him “full of shit.” It seems that Alexie predicted correctly. Critics such as Elvis Mitchell of the *New York Times* recognized that the “visual clunkiness becomes secondary to the eloquent emotional desolation,”¹ and more importantly, film critic Hazel-Dawn Dumpert makes the distinction that “it doesn’t seem quite right to call it a film” with one of the reasons being that “the whole business is strangely non-cinematic. The picture is tightly constructed, with an unflaggingly lyrical pace and moving performances.”² Dumpert’s observation of the “lyrical pace” is significant because unlike Alexie’s *Smoke Signals*, *The Business of Fancydancing* is not based on a work of fiction with a fairly standard narrative structure; this is a film based on Alexie’s poetry. Constructing a standard narrative would be an impossible feat.

In the “film,” Alexie returns to issues that he has addressed in his other works such as the manipulation of Native images and stereotypes by non-Natives. However, here Alexie uses the semi-autobiographical character Seymour Polatkin as the one who fetishizes his own definitions of “Indianness” and his own identity as a Native person. He is the one who simultaneously criticizes non-Natives’ erroneous perceptions of American Indians, and exploits these perceptions to his advantage. As well, the major conflict in the film is Seymour having to resolve his

place in his homeland, and see the reservation as a place of recovery, rather than seeing it as a prison.

You talk and white people pay attention (Agnes): Sherman Alexie's Sandbox

The character Seymour Polatkin is semi-autobiographical in that he uses literary talent to gain success in the world outside of the Wellpinit reservation. Alexie himself has enjoyed the same success which has caused some tension between him and the Indian community. In interviews, Alexie describes himself as a bookworm, and because of his love of literature, he was largely disdained by others on the reservation. In many of Alexie's other works, the character Thomas Builds-the-Fire takes on the role as the reservation outcast, the storyteller who is not heard.

At the beginning of the story, Mouse is shooting a home video of Seymour and Aristotle's graduation from Wellpinit High School. Seymour and Aristotle discuss how they are going to St. Jerome the Second University. This is autobiographical in that Alexie went to a Jesuit school in Spokane after he graduated from high school. This scene is poignant because Mouse proclaims that he is going to work in the uranium mines. This establishes the guilt that Seymour will feel later in the film about Mouse's death and his deteriorated friendships with Aristotle and Agnes. This "Indian survivor's guilt" comes to a head later in the film when Seymour is being interrogated by an interviewer about his success off of the reservation.

"Indian survivor's guilt" is nothing new in Native American literature. Many characters who leave the reservation to pursue the "American Dream" often feel as though they have abandoned family and friends. This is not uncommon among some of Alexie's other characters such as Marie Polatkin in *Indian Killer* who finds herself caught between traditional tribal roles and academia. Even Evan Adams who plays Seymour recognizes the difficulty in negotiating success with his