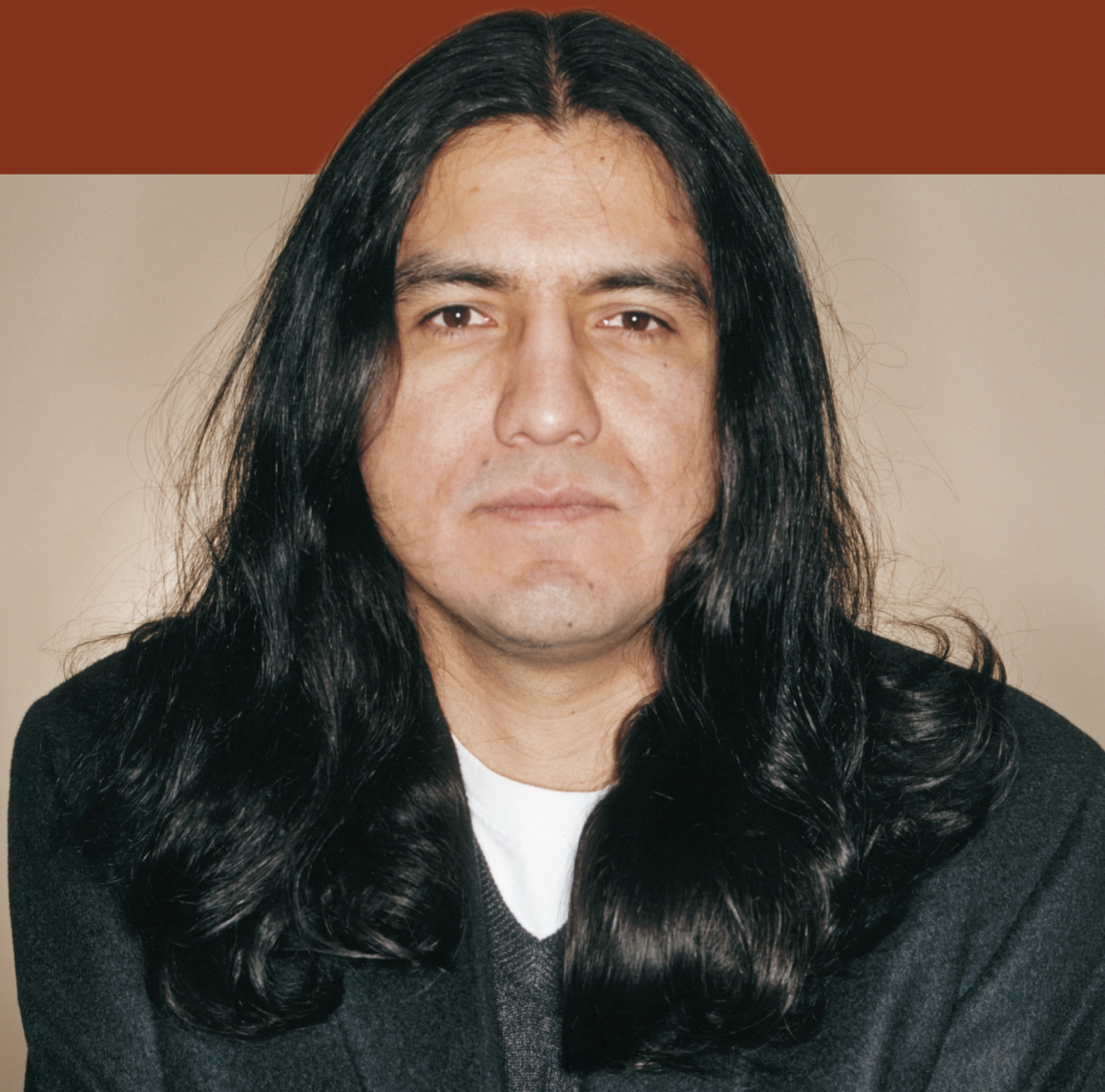
CRITICAL INSIGHTS

Sherman Alexie

Edited by Leon Lewis



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Articulations of Difference:
Minority Existence in White America in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Constance Bracewell

The psychological and emotional pain experienced by survivors of disasters such as the BP *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 or Hurricane Katrina in 2005 often fill the pages of American newspapers and magazines. The resultant stories and images of ordinary citizens who are directly affected by such disasters inevitably compel an outpouring of social responsibility in action on the part of others. This can be readily seen in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, when literally tens of thousands of ordinary American citizens took part in volunteer missions in the disaster zone, helping to rebuild homes and jump-start the revitalization of communities indiscriminately demolished by winds and devastating flood waters. Within these stories and images, citizens of all racial and social makeups stand shoulder to shoulder, working together to effect positive changes for the residents of particular communities, survivors of extreme human disaster. It seems at times like these that many ordinary Americans take a step back and reflect on the certain realization that they too could one day wrestle with just such a devastating human event.

Yet, for every heartwarming story of Americans from all backgrounds tirelessly working together for the common good, there are also countless stories without such happy endings, stories that are predicated on the persistent tendency of American society to divide along racial lines. In actuality, Americans have a long history of racial discord and social separation along ethnic lines, a very different sort of human disaster that belies feel-good stories of ordinary people of all racial and social classes coming together in an orderly camaraderie of human spirit. Historically, vast numbers of Americans of nonwhite

backgrounds have instead lived the ugly side of the American experience—that of racial discord and social standards of human value and beauty that often demand "white" characteristics, both of the physical body and of the inner person. Contemporary ethnic American writers of fiction often explore this aspect of the American experience. This premise—that ethnic Americans must somehow live up to arbitrary physical and behavioral standards deemed common to white Americans—is central to the plot of Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996). Novels such as *Indian Killer* and Nobel Prize-winning African American author Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) map out the psychological, emotional, and experiential pain of being "different" in an American society that is dominated by white standards of human worth. At first glance, Alexie's *Indian Killer* and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* would seem quite dissimilar; however, when read in conjunction the two novels reveal an extraordinary level of similarity in how the authors explore what it means to be "different" in a white-dominated world.

One of the more immediately noticeable similarities between the two novels can be found in the way each book emphasizes physical standards of human worth and the symbolic implications of having blue eyes, particularly if the blue eyes in question appear in the face of a brown-skinned person. In Alexie's *Indian Killer* the "blue, blue eyes" (76) of protagonist John Smith's adoptive mother, Olivia, are in contrast to the "startling blue eyes" (90) of half-white, half-Spokane Indian Reggie Polatkin. Olivia Smith is presented as a kind, well-intentioned woman who, despite her many unintended blunders in raising her adoptive Native American son, is nevertheless a fine figure of white American upper-middle-class womanhood. Well educated, open-minded, and open to love, Olivia appears to in some way *deserve* to have the blue, blue eyes and clear, beautiful, pale skin that are the mark of white America at its collective best. In contrast is Reggie Polatkin, the product of a painfully mismatched union between a Spokane mother and a brutally racist white father named Bird Lawrence.

Bird himself evidences some of the worst qualities of that segment of white America that deems persons of brown skin color and non-English-speaking ethnicity inherently inferior and undeserving of basic human consideration. In Bird's estimation, his son's brown skin marks his Indianness and renders him unworthy of human value—or, to put it another way, Bird views his son as an ugly physical manifestation of the utter inferiority of brown-skinned people in comparison to their white-skinned counterparts.

Bird flays Reggie's very existence on a sadistically regular basis, demanding that he somehow eliminate his physical and inner Indianness in order to be more like Bird himself. The father brutally confronts his son through countless challenges to Reggie's desire to be somehow more than an Indian, such as when he demands that Reggie answer whether he wants to be a "dirty" or "hostile" Indian all of his life. The object for Bird is not literally to change his son into someone else—even Bird must know this is an utter impossibility. Rather, Bird seeks to impress upon his son one essential fact: that, despite his beautiful blue Caucasian eyes, Reggie will always be just another dirty brown-skinned person who can only ever hopelessly aspire to meet standards of whiteness. In short, Reggie is "different" from white Americans, despite his biracial background, and Bird's brutal treatment of his son serves as a rhetorical device on the part of the author to impress upon readers the unhappy fact that, for many white Americans, people such as Reggie can never be of value in quite the same way that white-skinned persons can be. Although most characters in the novel, Indian and white alike, find Reggie's physical appearance to be strikingly handsome, his home situation tells him otherwise. Even though Reggie has possession of one key physical feature of white America, his bright blue eyes, and a handsome face in which to frame them, in the end he is still an Indian, which forever ties him to a category of "difference" in wider American society.

Similarly, the implication of having blue eyes is a prominent part of Pecola Breedlove's story in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Faced with a

home situation that from its earliest days is in many ways as brutal as that of Reggie Polatkin and that will become tragically compounded in brutality with the rape of Pecola by her father, the young girl fixates on blue eyes as the sum total of the highest level of human worth. This belief is brought home to her by all she sees around her. From the faces of baby dolls to the living doll that Mrs. Breedlove tends to in the home of her white employer, to the bright curls, dimples, and big blue eyes of Hollywood icon Shirley Temple, the world in which Pecola and other black girls like her live is dominated by white standards of human worth and beauty. Seeking to imagine her own plain, black, apparently unlovable features as something worthy of admiration, love, and respect, Pecola decides that the key to beauty must lie in having blue eyes. It becomes her mission in the raw, tragic life she leads to find a way to transform her eyes to a proper level of blueness—and, in the process, transform herself from a nobody into a somebody, from being unworthily "different" to a person who matters.

In the end, Pecola does indeed gain blue eyes of a sort, but only in her own now-broken mind, which has folded under the pressure of her desperate, unhappy life. When con artist Soaphead Church, a self-designated spiritual and life-matters adviser, is moved to compassion by her pitiful plea for blue eyes and so attempts to trick her into believing that God has answered her prayers to have blue eyes, Pecola is primed and ready to believe in a miracle for herself. However, beneath her seeming acceptance of God's miraculous change of her eyes to a beautiful Caucasian blue lies the inescapable truth that the only way Pecola can rise to standards of white beauty is by psychologically checking out of reality. Once Pecola turns away from the real world around her and instead sinks into the uncertain shelter of her own mind, she can pretend to herself that all has changed and she now has a beauty that transcends the labels of difference, unworthiness, and ugliness that dark-skinned black girls labor under in her community. In other words, there is no escaping her blackness except through an escape from reality itself. Left behind in the real world, in which stan-

dards of beauty remain based on Caucasian features, are Pecola's nominal friends, the sometimes-narrator Claudia and her sister Frieda, who—readers can assume—will continue to be held back by their own inability to escape physical and behavioral "difference" as nonwhites in American society.

Certainly both *Indian Killer* and *The Bluest Eye* use blue eyes as a rhetorical device to demonstrate the difficulty and almost certain inability of brown-skinned Americans to meet, much less surpass, white standards of human worth and beauty. However, there is yet another similarity between the texts in relation to blue eyes that is perhaps even more important for readers to note. There appears within each story, to one degree or another, a certain theme by which the very *idea* of blue-eyed, white-skinned standards of human worth is symbolically dismembered or broken apart through scenes in which blue eyes are literally targeted and physically damaged or destroyed. This takes place violently and with brutal finality in *Indian Killer*, in which the anonymous killer targets and fixates on blue-eyed victims, most of whom indeed wind up brutally murdered. The killer even goes so far as to savagely pluck out and swallow the blue eyes of his first victim, literally ingesting elements of acceptance. Although much could be made of this narrative detail and of the scene as a whole, there remains the noticeable fact that in many ways these actions on the part of the killer appear to be a physical representation of the killer's belief that white men must die in order to set something in the world right again. In this sense, the brutalizing of the white man's blue eyes is as much a symbolic destruction of whiteness itself (and all that it stands for) as it is a literal physical act of violence. Readers can also note that John Smith's conclusion that a white man must die to set his world right is yet another way in which the narrative in *Indian Killer* presents multiple avenues for symbolic destruction of whiteness and, by extension, white standards for valuation of human worth. Although the ambiguous final scene of *Indian Killer* does suggests the possibility for a literal destruction of white America and a return for American Indians to a condition

of existence similar to the period prior to European incursion, readers are denied knowledge of whether this will ever take place. In the absence of definitive answers on the matter of a literal return to prior systems of Indian existence, Alexie instead leaves readers with the suggestion that some things can perhaps change for the better—if not literally, then at least on a symbolic level.

In the case of John Smith, the symbolic nature of his determination that he "needed to kill a white man" (25) may be symbolic not only in a global sense (that is, applying to making something right for all Indians or all nonwhite people) but also in a way that is very specific to his own circumstances. An Indian who has been raised by a white couple, John is deeply confused about both the ambiguous, unknowable nature of his Indian background and the equally confusing white world in which he has been raised. His confusion is compounded by his experiences with the Jesuit priest Father Duncan. As a very young child, John spends just enough time with Father Duncan to gain a disquieting awareness of the ambiguity between white and Indian worlds that Father Duncan himself feels. When Father Duncan vanishes without a word, the seven-year-old John is left on his own to sort out his emotional confusion about where he fits between Indian and white worlds. In this sense, John's decision to "kill a white man" may not represent a desire to literally, physically end the life of a random white man. Rather, the white man he believes he should kill may in actuality be the white man he sees inside himself. By killing the inner white man that so confuses his existence, John can also symbolically kill the white standards of human worth that he unfailingly falls short of meeting, freeing himself to discover his personal value on his own terms rather than on terms that are dictated by men and women who look nothing like people such as the John Smiths of the world.

Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye* there appears a notable scene in which symbols of blue-eyed white beauty are used to literally and symbolically attack not only blackness but also the idea that standards of white beauty could or should dominate in a dark-skinned world. This occurs

in the scene in which Geraldine's cat is thrown onto the radiator by her sadistic, affection-starved, and emotionally damaged young son, Junior. After luring tattered Pecola into his dark, empty house with the promise of seeing nonexistent kittens, an act that seems to appeal to Junior purely as a means to relieve a day's boredom, he maliciously throws his mother's pampered, blue-eyed, black-furred cat into Pecola's face. When his act of household terrorism fails and he realizes that Pecola is responding as affectionately to the hated cat as does his cold and unaffectionate mother, Junior retaliates by swinging the cat by one leg and violently flinging the animal against the window above the hot radiator, onto which the mortally injured cat falls, "its blue eyes closed, leaving only an empty, black, and helpless face" (91).

It is not incidental that all of this takes place in the home of a woman who fits the pattern of young black women of elevated social standing who create a higher standard of living for themselves and their families, and who inevitably mimic the beauty standards of the white world they emulate with bittersweet accuracy within their homes and their beauty routines. The omniscient narrator in this section of the novel details the pains to which Geraldine goes to project a genteel sort of blackness in her household, one that sets her and her family apart from what she sees as the common, uncouth blackness of poorer black people. In short, Geraldine seeks to emulate white standards of value in the members and functions of her household, a process that is emphasized in the black-furred but blue-eyed cat into which she pours all of the attention and affection denied to her husband and child. When Junior kills his mother's cat, it is an act that undoubtedly affords him malicious but painful pleasure as he eliminates the apparent usurper of his mother's affections.

Readers realize, however, that the cat is merely the physical manifestation of a rejection on Geraldine's part that touches much more than her young son. Rather than a rejection of Junior himself, Geraldine's coldness and refusal to offer warmth to any but the black-and-blue cat represent her own inability to accept the blackness that

makes it impossible for her ever to truly escape the stigma of being "different" in white-oriented American society. Similarly, the death of the blue-eyed cat not only forecasts the death of something in Pecola's life in the acquisition of such eyes for herself but also suggests that there is an unviable, unhealthy aspect to nonwhite people attempting to orient their identities from a framework of white standards of human worth. In short, trying to "be more white than black," so to speak, is perhaps doomed to failure. In the end, the novel appears to argue that such white standards of human worth should literally be destroyed, much as they are symbolically destroyed with the death of the cat and the eventual collapse of Pecola's mind when she can no longer deal with her inability to be beautiful, loved, or valued according to the white standards that she sees all around her.

Sociologist Allan G. Johnson has formulated much of his life's work around a search for understanding of the ways in which standards of privilege function in relation to the establishment of systems of "difference" in American culture. In *Privilege, Power, and Difference* Johnson observes that when a particular privileged group has center stage in a society, there is inevitably a coexisting tendency on the part of most people to take this same privileged sector as the standard of reference for "the best that society has to offer" (95). Johnson goes on to note:

> Because privileged groups are assumed to represent society as a whole, "American" is culturally defined as white, in spite of the diversity of the population. You can see this in a statement like, "Americans must learn to be more tolerant of other races." The "Americans" are assumed to be white, and the "other races" are assumed to be races *other* than white. *Other* is the key word in understanding how systems are identified with privileged groups. The privileged group is the assumed "we" in relation to "them." The "other" is the "you people" whom the "we" regard as problematic, unacceptable, unlikeable, or beneath "our" standards. (96)

As Johnson points out, American society is persistently cast in terms that privilege whiteness in general. One could add to this the further observation that the same holds true in relation to how American society in general has historically measured human worth and beauty in terms of white standards of such, valuations that are readily apparent in the characters and events within *Indian Killer* and *The Bluest Eye*. At heart, each novel attempts to provoke readers to question these standards and the ways in which such standards of human valuation necessarily separate Americans into numerous categories of privilege and lack thereof.

In addition to the numerous ways in which Alexie's and Morrison's stories rhetorically explore ways in which nonwhite characters view themselves and others, the novels share similar approaches to underscoring the *how* of this process, which serve as a reflexive commentary on the very real difficulty experienced by ethnic Americans when they attempt to answer the question of *why* certain experiences happen to people of nonwhite ethnicity in the United States. In the opening pages of *The Bluest Eye* can be found the following observation from Claudia MacTeer, one of the narrators of the novel. Speaking of the story she is about to relate, Claudia notes: "There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*" (6). What is interesting to note here is that this insightful observation of the pain that is implicated in the ethnic American experience is provided not by the protagonist—in the case of Morrison's story, Pecola Breedlove—but by an observer of that protagonist. In similar fashion, the reader of *Indian Killer* encounters Reggie Polatkin primarily through the eyes of other characters, such as Clarence Mather, Bird Lawrence, and Jack Wilson. The observations of the characters are often filtered through their reactions to and beliefs about white Americans, rather than being presented in plain, unvarnished fashion through the perspective of the protagonist in the story. Pecola, the girl whose greatest desire is to have blue eyes, and Reggie, the mixed-blood man whose greatest desire is seemingly to vent his inner

pain on other people, are emblematic of the difficulty of being "different" (that is, not white) in white-dominated American society.

This narrative strategy is itself a telling commentary on the complexity of desires and outcomes often experienced by nonwhite Americans. For one thing, this aspect of Alexie's and Morrison's narrative strategies highlights that, regardless of how compelling the story of a particular ethnic American may be, the stories in this country are typically told by the dominators, not the dominated, and thus are necessarily reflected against white standards of living and being. Similarly, this narrative structure creates a system whereby the stories of those who are "different" are allowed to be told, while at the same time these "different" (that is, nonwhite) characters are actually silenced by virtue of not telling their own stories, in their own words. This can be seen in the way that readers obtain the details of Reggie Polatkin's life experiences, which are related primarily through the voice of the narrator and through the perceptions of those around Reggie rather than in Reggie's own words. Similarly, readers get Pecola Breedlove's story, but almost entirely through the filter of valuation assigned by white America, despite an African American narrator. Granted, this narrator, Claudia MacTeer, is utterly sympathetic to the tragic events of Pecola's life. And by extension, it could be argued that Claudia in *The Bluest Eye* and the early, Reggie-friendly period in which readers encounter Dr. Clarence Mather in *Indian Killer* represent the ability of white America as a collective to be sympathetic to the plight of ethnic Americans in postslavery, post-Western-expansion eras. Yet this sympathy in no way detracts from the fact that, although some situations have improved for American Indians and African Americans, in many circumstances there still exists a tendency to frame such discussions in the public forum through the perspective of an overseeing white American viewpoint.

In the case of Pecola Breedlove, readers encounter her story primarily through the reminiscences of young Claudia MacTeer, herself a black girl of lower socioeconomic status, although to a lesser degree

than the poverty of Pecola. However, many of Claudia's most poignant memories of Pecola are embedded with Claudia's perceptions of white standards of human value and beauty, valuations that seem also to permeate the mind-set of Pecola's mother, Polly. In fact, it could be argued that part of Claudia's empathy for Pecola derives from her own unsettled feelings about being black in a white-dominated world. In a way, concern for Pecola becomes a sort of substitute coping process born out of Claudia's inability to feel love or desire for the white baby dolls she is given at holidays or the white standards of beauty that she associates with the dolls. What Claudia cannot feel for the dolls she *can* feel for poor, plain Pecola. The affection that the dolls fail to elicit is cheerfully passed on to the unfortunate Pecola.

A somewhat related narrative structure is evident in Alexie's *Indian Killer*. For Reggie Polatkin, identity is painful and utterly unresolved—and likely will remain unresolvable. However, the narrative structure creates a framework whereby the reader encounters Reggie's circumstances through a sort of reflective pattern. That is, Reggie's experiences and his emotional reactions to those experiences are usually made evident to the reader through the medium of white characters and *their* impressions of Reggie and his situation. From the wannabe-Indian Wilson to Reggie's misogynistic father, Bird, to his onetime hero, Mather, Reggie's life is defined by his startlingly blue eyes and the ways in which his experiences are reflected back to him (and to readers) by the white characters who most define him as a person. And, as in the case of the observation made by Claudia at the opening of *The Bluest Eye*, Reggie's story evidences mostly an attempt to winnow out the *how* of it all, rather than the *why*. Here is what happened, and here is *how* it happened. Here is Reggie's situation, and here is *how* it became so. The implication at this point is that the *why* of it all is so complex as to be unknowable in its entirety—or, that the why of it all is too painful to be confronted directly. In this sense, the painful aspect of a life like Reggie's necessarily *must* be reflected through characters that represent a different stance than his own situation and culture. This sort of

process, while offering plenty of detail about Reggie's situation and circumstances, nonetheless blunts the details, allowing readers a distancing from the painful reality of Reggie's life and, by extension, that of all American Indians.

In addition to these types of strategies, whereby ethnic identity is reflected through the impressions and valuations of white characters, it is possible to identify a contrasting sort of reflecting strategy in both narratives, in which American Indian and black characters in the two novels are also reflected through the ideas that other nonwhite characters have about whiteness and being "different" in a white world. One example of this can be traced in Pecola Breedlove's pitiful attempts to find a way to possess the coveted blue eyes that she undoubtedly feels will make her as worthy of love as the curly-haired, blue-eyed Shirley Temple and the pink-and-gold, doll-like Fisher girl who has displaced Pecola in her mother's affections. On one hand, Pecola's determination to obtain for herself one of the features most closely associated with white standards of female beauty is made believable by virtue of the impressions of her that are held by other black characters in the novel. Practically every description of Pecola—from Claudia to Geraldine, to Polly, to Pecola's own ideas about herself—reflects not only that Pecola is singularly lacking in physical beauty but also that in general there is little beautiful about black girls anyway. In other words, the novel suggests that practically everyone, black and white alike, is at least partly convinced either that (a) black girls are necessarily ugly in comparison to white girls or (b) most people in society who are beautiful, well-dressed, well-moneyed, or otherwise socially privileged (most often white people) would agree that black girls are unattractive in comparison to most white girls in ways that are simply a matter of genetic, physical inferiority and thus not open to being rectified in any way. The unspoken implication here is that, although it of course would be impossible for black girls to obtain the socially privileged features and characteristics of white girls, nevertheless they would be better off if they could do so.

Morrison herself has alluded to this conundrum of being "different" in a white-dominated world in describing her thought process while she was creating the character of Western Indian Soaphead Church, a man who is himself a nonwhite in a white world and so could be capable of understanding Pecola's desire for blue eyes. Soaphead could also understand that, although the giving of literal blue eyes would be an impossibility, Pecola's painfully burdened mind could be tricked into believing that God had indeed granted her the desperately wished-for blue eyes. Morrison has noted that it was necessary for Soaphead's character to be convinced of the preferability for a child like Pecola to have blue eyes and be more like white people in order for him even to come up with the idea in the first place of convincing her that her wish had come true:

> I had to have someone—her mother, of course, made her want it in the first place—who would give her the blue eyes. And there had to be somebody who *could*, who had the means; that kind of figure who dealt with fortune-telling, dream-telling and so on, who would also believe that she was right, that it was preferable for her to have blue eyes. (in Taylor-Guthrie 22)

Soaphead's apparent agreement with the desirability of looking more like white people in a white-dominated world and his compassion for what he sees as Pecola's readily evident lack of physical beauty combine to offer a painful commentary on the pressures in America for persons of nonwhite ethnicity to aspire to Caucasian standards of beauty.

In *Indian Killer*, this sort of focus on establishing standards of beauty and worth through a Caucasian frame of reference is also evident. However, in Alexie's piece "beauty" can perhaps be more correctly understood as a *general* representation of human worth and beauty in the context of the sum total of the individual—physical, intellectual, spiritual, vocational, and so on—rather than a purely *physical* representation of human worth and beauty. This is most dramati-

cally presented through the character of Truck Schultz, a bigoted radio commentator whose blind hatred of American Indians is total and unrelenting. In Truck's estimation, there are quite simply *no* redeeming qualities of human worth and beauty to be found in any Indian, anywhere. In his weekly radio broadcasts, Truck sows rumor and misinformation about not only the Indian supposedly involved in the "Indian Killer" case, but all Indians as a collective. As he puts it, "We should have terminated Indian tribes from the very beginning. Indians should have been assimilated into normal society long ago" (209). Notice that Truck uses the word "normal" to describe white-dominant American society as a whole. The use of this word necessarily invokes the understanding that to be Indian is to be, by default, abnormal and unacceptably "different."

Truck's open disdain for all things Indian, from cultural practices to the very physical existence of Indian bodies, is reflected in the uneasy feelings that many Indian characters have about their own selves and their tribal cultures. This can be seen in Marie Polatkin's difficulty in reconciling her desire to make a different life for herself away from the reservation with her love for Indian people in general, her own tribe included. Although Marie herself is perhaps not fully aware of how intensely standards of human worth based on whiteness affect her outlook on self and life, readers have a more ready ability to evaluate Marie's complicated feelings about herself and the difficulties of being different, of being Indian, in a world in which she wants to succeed, but in which she nevertheless feels set apart from white people and Caucasian representations of those things deemed valuable in human beings.

As with Pecola Breedlove, much of what Indian characters such as Marie experience is influenced—sometimes subtly, yet often with little subtlety at all—by the pressures of a general American society that deems "difference" to be synonymous with lesser value on a human level. Interestingly, this aspect of "difference" is doubled and concentrated in the central character of John Smith, an adopted Indian man with profound cultural disconnection resulting not only from his adop-

tion into a white world but also from his complete inability to identify which tribe he comes from. In this sense, John's identity reflects not only the importance of not being different in the white world but also the importance of not being "different" among your own people as a person of nonwhite ethnicity. In yet another strange parallel, wannabe-Indian writer Jack Wilson creates a false sense of Indian identity for himself when he decides that (a) Indians are romantic and interesting, and (b) since his distant relative has a similar name to a real Indian, he must himself be an Indian. However, Wilson's Indianness is scoffed at by both Indians and whites, making a mockery of his individual worth and also underscoring John Smith's own inability to construct a sense of identity even within the general Indian community in the absence of tribally specific connections.

In this sense, Caucasian standards of human worth and beauty demand white characteristics, both in physical form and in ways of living, while Indian standards of worth and beauty require knowledge of one's specific tribe. John's inability to meet the demands of either spectrum reflect the ultimate in ethnic "difference," which itself reflects the negative effects of European colonization of American Indian lands and people. In "Muting White Noise," James H. Cox observes that "John Smith, a young Native man who imagines his adoption by white parents as a nightmarish abduction, is the primary victim of a violent colonial world created and maintained by the storytelling traditions in which Schultz, Mather, and Wilson participate" (178). In other words, the story of what is valued in America is usually told by white people, too frequently those who are deeply misguided or devoted to narrow or bigoted points of view. And when the stories of who we are and who we should be are predicated on the assumption that white ways of being and living are necessarily of more value than any others, it follows that to be "different" is to be of less worth than those who fit the standardized, white Euro-American norm. Or, to return to the term used by Truck Schultz, to be different is to be not *normal*. Readers are reminded of this over and over again, by virtue of

multiple characters emphasizing the need to meet Caucasian standards of beauty and human worth, of "normality."

In both Morrison's and Alexie's works, this sort of narrative cushioning effect found in the use of multiple character viewpoints to underscore the many difficulties experienced by ethnic Americans in meeting standards of human worth is of course effective in allowing readers insight into painful ethnic American circumstances while allowing them enough distance so that the details are relatively palatable. However, it is also a commentary on the tendency in American society to frame the cultural, ethnic, or racial outsider through the perspectives of white Americans and white America itself and to avoid suggesting solutions for such problems in favor of simply conceding that problems do exist. Or, to go back to Claudia MacTeer's observation concerning the telling of Pecola's story, "since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*" (6). In the case of *Indian Killer* and *The Bluest Eye*, the narratives deliver no summative commentary on the *whys* of being "different" in white American society, or the *whys* of the establishment and persistence of Euro-American standards of human beauty and value on the part of not only white Americans but many ethnic Americans as well. Instead, the two stories focus most of their attention on the many *hows* by which such standards are perpetuated.

Readers of the two novels, however, have the advantage of the reader's relation to the story, in which the *why* of it all is often the dominant quest for understanding on the part of the reader. One could argue that it is neither necessary nor even desirable for Alexie's and Morrison's stories to take overt stances on why such standards of worth are established and why these standards persistently play a dominant role in the maintaining of pejorative categories of difference among the many peoples in American society. Instead, the powerful, complicated stories of ethnic "difference" in Alexie's and Morrison's novels offer readers equally powerful opportunities to interrogate and better understand the many ways in which categories of human difference continue to domi-

nate and define standards of human worth in America. In *God Is Red*, leading Native American scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., makes the following observation about human behavior: "One can only conclude that while Christianity can describe what is considered as perfect human behavior, it cannot produce such behavior" (201). Although Deloria is of course speaking rather specifically of standards of human behavior in relation to Christian ideals, his observation also holds true if one omits the word "Christianity" in favor of something along the lines of "Euro-Americans" or "white America." As Deloria notes, just because one group of people demands that a particular standard be met does not mean that this will in fact be the case. And, although some persons of ethnic difference may become persuaded of the necessity to produce in themselves that which white standards of human value demand of them, such as in the cases of Reggie Polatkin and Pecola Breedlove, it is nevertheless within the power of readers of *Indian Killer* and *The Bluest Eye* to decide for themselves why such standards exist, why these standards continue to dominate how Americans think of themselves and others, and, finally, the ultimate *how*—how Americans of all ethnicities and cultures can move beyond restrictive valuations of human worth and create a future in which "difference" is simply an observation and not the sum total of the value of an individual human life.

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