

Name: _____

Date: _____

Period: _____

Introduction to Native American Literature

Stories from the Rez | Inquiry & Discussion Questions

Directions: Answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you have questions during the test, please raise your hand or come ask me.

Think Critically.

- ❑ It's about learning how to ask the right questions.
- ❑ Secrets from the English Majors & Bloomington Hipsters:
 - ❑ Socio-Economic Status (SES) | **It's all about the money.**
 - ❑ Power Hierarchies | **Who's got the power?**
 - ❑ Race/Ethnicity | **Race matters.**
 - ❑ Language | **It's how you say it and in what language.**
 - ❑ Gender | **Patriarchy. Feminism.**
 - ❑ Perspective | **Who is the speaker? Hidden agendas?**
 - ❑ Location | **Where is this coming from?**
 - ❑ Body Language/ Insinuations | **What you're saying without saying it.**

Native American Literature Unit

→ Spokane Indian Reservation (Washington)

Novel: The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie

Biography: Sherman Alexie Biography and "Indian Education"

Article: "Banning the Redskins Mascot" (AOW Sample)

Video: "Proud To Be" by the Congress of American Indians

→ Navajo Nation Reservation (Arizona & New Mexico)

Poem: "Hard to Take" by Luci Tapahonso

Article: "Skinwalkers" by Noah Nez

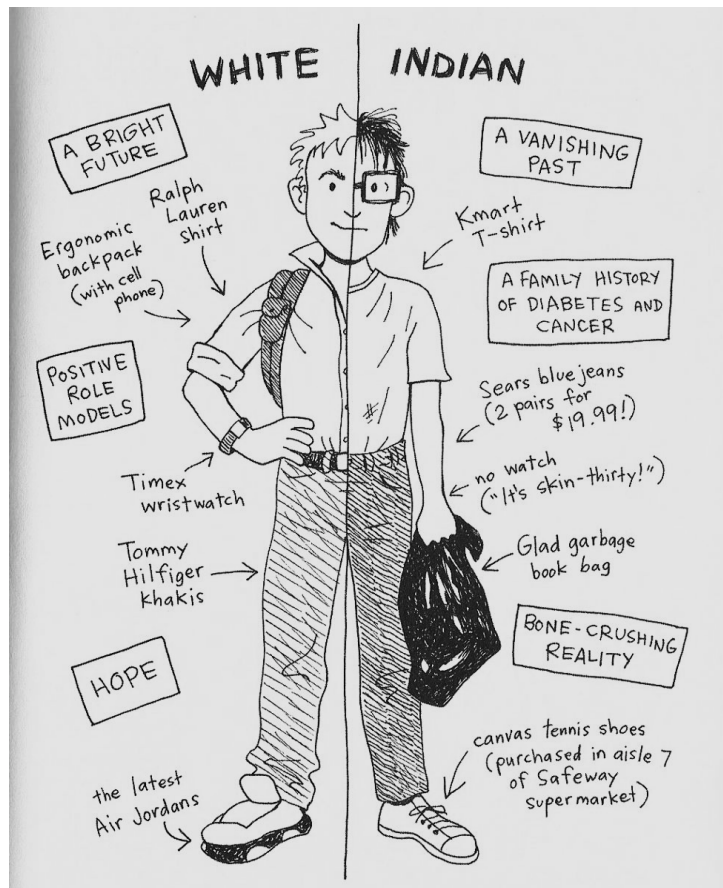
Reflection: "Makes Sense... Sort Of"

→ Objibwe Leech Lake Reservation (Minnesota)

Novel: Rez Life by David Treuer (Introduction)

1. Theme: Divided Identity

- How does Junior adapt to the change in schools? At which point does he feel divided? Why is the basketball game against Wellpinit and the subsequent win symbolic?
- Analyze the image below. How does this exemplify the theme of a split identity for contemporary American Indian students (who are raised traditionally, but attend schools that promote the ideals and expectations based on Western culture)?



2. Theme: Collectivism (Tribal & Family Unity)

- How is collectivism demonstrated in the texts? Consider Grandmother Spirit's wake and the gathering of David Treuler's family when his grandfather committed suicide. How were these situations different? How were they similar?
- In the poem, "Hard To Take," how is a collective sense of Navajo identity shown?

3. Theme: Power of Native Language & Western Educational Views

- In Rex Life, language is discussed and its insights into the migration of the Objibwe people. In "Hard to Take," Tapahonso integrates Navajo to demonstrate the connotations revolving around language. Consider more broadly, how can language shape identity? How is language a barrier? Think about Junior's cartoons and/or music. How are languages responsible for shaping our understanding of the world? Do you believe that American education systems should require a second language as a part of the curriculum?
- How do school systems play a part in the identity and future of contemporary Native Americans?

4. Theme: Traditional Identity

- At the end of the text, Rowdy tells Junior that he was researching early Spokane Indians. He said that they used to be nomadic (meaning they travelled often as hunters and gathers instead of

claiming one location). Rowdy says, “No, I’m serious. I always knew you were going to leave. I always knew you were going to leave us behind and travel the world. I had this dream about you a few months ago. You were standing on the Great Wall of China. You looked happy. And I was happy for you.” How does this solidify Junior’s tribal identity and allow him to live in a “white world” but also maintain his “part-time” Indian heritage?

- B. Alexie and Treuer have different tones regarding white individuals who become “Indian.” However, both have negative connotations towards “culture vultures.” How is Ted (in Alexie’s novel) a “culture vulture?”

5. Theme: Debunking the Concept of Indian Stoicism

- A. A lot of individuals believe that Native American texts and stories carry with them some level of stoicism (some level of taking the pain without showing weakness). However, Alexie demonstrates a very different perspective. He writes, “It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor. You start believing that you’re poor because you’re ugly and stupid. And then you start believing you are stupid and ugly because you’re Indian. And because you are Indian, you start believing that you’re destined to be poor. It’s an ugly circle and there’s nothing you can do about it. Poverty doesn’t give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty teaches you how to be poor.” Even Treuer seeks to debunk the concept of Indian stoicism. He writes, “What one finds on reservations is more than scars, tears, blood, and noble sentiment. There is beauty in Indian life, as well as meaning and a long history of interaction. We love our reservations.” In what other ways do the texts that we have read support the above quotes?
- B. In “Sherman Alexie on Writing,” he states that, “Laughter is a ceremony... [you] can write about pain and anger without having it consume [you].” Explain how this theme of laughter, humor (even crude humor) is balanced with hard realities and pain? Find specific examples.

6. Theme: The Dynamics of Rez Life

- A. How do the following viewpoints exemplify the complicated relationship of feelings towards Rez life? Junior says, “Our reservation is located approximately one million miles north of Important and two billion miles west of Happy.” However, when he climbs the tree, he expresses, “We could see our entire world. And our entire world, at that moment, was green and gold and perfect.” What drives the dichotomy between these varying perspectives of the Rez?

7. Theme: Assimilation Attempts & Acculturation Remnants

Discuss how the following bullet points tie into your understanding of assimilation and acculturation?

- A. Basketball (Interchange between Western and Indian culture)
- B. Redskins Mascot Article (Linguistics & Connotative Meanings)
- C. Skinwalker Folklore (Current Media Reproductions)
- D. American Constitution & Iroquois Influence
- E. Wars & Service (Navajo Code Talkers)
- F. Religious & Spiritual Beliefs (Native Beliefs Merged with Christian Beliefs)
- G. “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” Approach

8. Theme: Hardship, Alcoholism, Drug Use, & Death

- A. Junior talks about being at 42 funerals by the time he is fourteen. A drunk driver hits and kills his Grandmother Spirit when she is walking back from a local powwow. His dad’s best friend, Eugene, is shot and killed by another friend over the last sip of wine. Junior’s sister dies because she is too drunk and passed out to realize when her trailer catches on fire. Both of Junior’s were alcoholics (dad=current / mom= ex-drunk). In Treuer’s introduction, he talks about his grandfather’s wake. Junior corrects Tolstoy’s theory on families. How so? Tolstoy claims: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (200). Explain why Junior disagrees.

- B. What are some statistics and details in the Treuer piece and the Tapanhonso poem that might lead to higher levels of stress for reservation Indians and subsequent drinking and drug use problems?

9. Theme: Racism & Inequity

- A. Think back to the discussion that we had over the poem. At which point does implicit racism become explicit racism in the poem, "Hard to Take." What about in Alexie's story about Junior?
- B. What current institutions perpetuate the concept of white privilege and racism (even at the micro level)? How are there still traces of social Darwinism in Western culture and society?

10. Theme: Contemporary Perspective & Folklore

- A. What are skinwalkers? What connotations revolve around skinwalkers? How are skinwalkers a part of the Navajo Origin story? How does acculturation (the Navajo Witch Purge of 1878 and the Long Walk) play into the information regarding skinwalkers?
- B. How are the Western conceptualizations of witches different from the Navajo conceptualization of witches? Why do you think there is such a difference in witchery perspectives?

11. Theme: Universality

- A. Okay, I have spent a lot of time trying to scaffold you to realize the inequity among races, among socio-economic classes, among genders, among languages, etc. However, I also want to clarify that I these differences are not the most important aspects of studying culture and understanding literary criticisms. (Yes, they are an important factor- but maybe not the most important). What I would like for you to do know is create a list of similarities between your life and the life of contemporary Native Americans. This is called applied literary analysis. How is your life or the life of others similar to those of Native Americans (based on the text that you have read)?