

# [Above the stereotypes](https://assignbuster.com/above-the-stereotypes/)

Sherman Alexie, author of Flight and a biracial Native American, is quoted as saying “ don’t live up to your expectations.” The Native American story is one of genocide, violence, and a battle for equality that still stands in the way of many to this day. Past events in American history have shaped biases against American Indians, which continue to affect members of this ethnicity. In Sherman Alexie’s Flight, Zits uses stereotypes which have been formed by historical events and scenarios to understand and identify himself, to situate his own life within a larger history of strife.

When Europeans first began settling in the Americas, many Europeans were fearful of the darker skinned tribes, who were in turn angered by the reckless disrespect they had been shown; with attempts to lead them away from their land began “ their perception of Native threat.” This expectation of violence and anger from Native Americans was “ highly dependent on European perceptions of the origins and malleability of [their] presumed backwardness,” and is still present in modern society. Drawing on the perspective of Gus, an Indian hunter working with the US government, Zits remembers “ When he, [Gus], came upon those slaughtered white settlers. Dead white bodies stripped naked and mutilated and ruined” (86). This gruesome imagery of violence and anger, though not fictitious, was not true of the entire Indian race, though it became a generalization expected of all. In colonial times, often “ captivity narratives were offered as proof of the kind of Native barbarism that merited violence,” and white militias would go with Indian hunters, such as Gus, to search out and slaughter entire tribes.

Throughout the lifespan of the United States, many who feared Native Americans wanted to “ wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth.” With such aggression in play, it is unsurprising that many American Indians fought against their oppressors in hopes of survival. When seeing a psychiatrist, Zits is told that he is merely “ programmed for violence,” and accepts the diagnosis as merely a mark of his Native American heritage (27). In recent years, it has become common for many Native American families to be ‘ broken’ or ‘ damaged,’ and this misfortune has become a stereotype, even an expectation. Though “ virtually nonexistent in traditional American Indian communities, today American Indian women and children experience family violence at rates similar to those” families of European, and Caucasian descent” (source a). This growth in Native American families who are affected by conflict has been attributed to a trait “ learned from the white man” during such events as forced assimilation, which continue to plague the culture today. During his time in the foster system, Zits lives with “ two Indian foster fathers, [but finds that] they were bigger jerks than any of [his] eighteen white foster fathers” (9). This mangled sense of family for many Native Americans has made a division between those who choose to live traditionally and those who choose to live as ‘ Americans’. This conflict is similar to the past when “ a permanent demarcation between the “ good Indians” and the “ bad Indians” [was formed], either as tribes or individuals,…based on their willingness to assimilate or cooperate.”

Historically, Native American cultures have taken pride in the tribe they come from, and fought for the sense of belonging which centers around their traditions and heritage. When forcibly assimilated into American culture “ Federal agents…[used] non-tribal ideas about belonging” in order to place and classify Native American children. This rude objectification of the Native American culture has developed the importance of heritage in the Native American community and formed a stereotype of belonging to one tribe alone and being shunned from any other. Zits’ father “ was never legally established as [his] father” and so Zits is left without a sense of belonging, his father being merely “ from this or that tribe…, this or that reservation” (9, 4). Zits accepts as fact that the stereotypical Native American belongs to a tribe, and is a part of a family; he classifies himself as “ not an official Indian,” different from the rest (9). When Zits is able to experience being a child on an Indian reservation, he is finally a member of a true Indian tribe. Zits is “ happy for the first time in [his] life,” finally beyond loved and hugged by a father, though the father figure is not his own (65).

In colonial times, during battles and when ‘ hunting’ Native Americans, many white accounts generalized entire tribes as wearing the long headdresses of chiefs and having war painted faces, evolving the ‘ red-face’ stereotype which is seen today in the media and in mascots such as that of the Cleveland Indians baseball team. There may be real-life roots for some of these stereotypes, as indicated by the man Zits sees when he is a small child on the Indian camp, a man who is “ war painted in ten different colors, he’s carrying this epic tomahawk.” Yet most Indians did not have these exact attributes (64). Zits gives a detailed description of Crazy Horse, an Indian leader famous for “ kill[ing] hundreds of white people,” who was “ pale, almost white-skinned, [with] hair that isn’t black at all” (67). Some of these discrepancies are from the inability of historians to access photographs of Native Americans; these historians relied on accounts of battles and travels from mostly white settlers.

In more modern times, the stereotypes behind the physical attributes of Native Americans have in part come from censuses which have taken place during the last few centuries, classifying many multi-racial citizens as Native American and merely basing distinctions for their race on the minority group they claim in their heritage. Censuses “ which date back to the 1800s and were largely dictated by federal agents” were noticeably “ flawed,” and though nothing was done about it at the time, it has become clear in recent years that many people were classified incorrectly. Though Zits is aware of his Indian heritage and that his “ father was an Indian,” there are discrepancies in his classifications when it comes to foster care, being placed with non-Indian fathers and, because of his biracial background, believing himself not to be “ the real deal” (4, 60). Zits struggles to understand himself and find his identity behind the clouding stereotypes that his society has placed on him. The stereotypes that Zits uses to identify himself exist because of different historical scenarios which have left an impression on society as a whole. The violent Indians, the savage Indians, Pocahontas; none of these things are true representations of an entire culture but have become a generation’s connection to a race. And while Zits is aware of his Native American heritage, he is unable to be a part of the traditions and culture, and finds his connection in the stereotypes which are prevalent in the present day.