Sherman Alexie's Version and Subversion of Native American Storytelling Tradition

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Abstract
Sherman Alexie understands writing as a means of fighting for the cultural identity of the American Natives against the dominant culture and also against the social compliance and lethargy of his own people. Since for him literature equals rage and imagination, the task of an artist is to be loud, poetic, cruel and inappropriate, in other words, to undermine mythologies. This assumption results in cruelly realistic work, for which reason Alexie is controversial. To non-native readers his voice is surprising and entertaining, but native readers often passionately disapprove of the images of natives Alexie depicts, as well as his distortion of the traditional narrative voice and its sacred function. What seems, however, to be the least traditional feature of Alexie's work, an abundance of markers of popular culture, strikes me as a potent, though discomforting, challenge, inviting the reader, as good storytelling always does, to participate in the construction of meaning of our mutual present.

Keywords
Native American literature, Sherman Alexie, storytelling, trickster, popular culture, subversion

In Sherman Alexie's short story "A Drug Called Tradition" a storyteller teaches thus:

> Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you [...] Now, these skeletons are made of memories, dreams, and voices. And they can trap you in the in-between, between touching and becoming [...] but no matter what they do, keep walking, keep moving. And don't wear a watch. Hell, Indians never need to wear a watch because your skeletons will always remind you about the time. See, it is always now. That's what Indian time is. The past, the future, all of it is wrapped up in the now. That's how it is. We are *trapped* in the *now* [original italics.] [1]

These words are also a fitting introduction to Alexie's work in general. His writing appears caught between the past and future, as it tries to realize its voice of he "now" and as its characters try to imagine themselves into existence within a palpable world. But he must first define the "now", which to him appears as an elusive realm, much like Philip Larkin's "time traditionally soured / a time unrecommended by event" ("Triple Time"). Replicating the situation in which an author tries to meet his community's ethical call to reify traditional values in the relativistic world in which a creator in words sometimes feels trapped, Alexie's work takes on an elusive shape, shifting from grief to delight, hopelessness to elation, from traditional storytelling to an avant-garde comics. In his book *Sing with a Heart of Bear*, Kenneth Lincoln introduces Alexie as a "stand-up trickster and postmodernist Washington Indi'n." Lincoln quotes Lewis Hyde who in his book *Trickster Makes This World* says: "If the shaman in touch

1 Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 21-22.

with higher spirits is the prophet of Native America, then trickster, his laughing shadow, is a prophet with difference." The difference between trickster and shaman, Lincoln explains, "could be parodic realism, between shaman and priest, percentage of conviction. A priest carries the command of tradition, a shaman negotiates tribal margins and mainstream, a trickster parodies the priest's aspirations and shaman's bivalence."[2] Trickster energy helps Alexie negotiate the publishing industry and articulate Indian experience in an appropriated, alien form, but still in an authentic voice.

Alexie's tricksterish, carnivalesque, and parodic work comes from a combative impulse to dismantle controlling ideologies and radically revise the cultural identity of American Natives. Because, for him, literature equals rage and imagination,[3] the task of an artist is to be loud, poetic, cruel and inappropriate, in other words, to undermine mythologies. Yet it is not only the invented Indian, as found for example in Edward Curtis' photographs, which forces a successful Indian in white culture to be a fake Indian. The problem is also the social compliance and lethargy of natives, who Alexie believes live in a trap of someone else's idea of what an Indian is supposed to be. In an interview with Katherine H. Wyrick, he explains that although more than 60% of Indians live in the cities, a very small part of Indian literature deals with the urban experience, thus substantiate their alienation from general culture. While negotiating boundaries between the two cultures – the tribal traditional and the urban global – Alexie's work seems to have little to do with the traditional native narrative. Few traditional symbols are featured. Rarely may be found the tribal totem, salmon or the unavoidable trickster coyote, although the last may be found crucified and frozen on the wall of that stereotypical North-American chronotope the gas station. When these traditional symbols are invoked, they are introduced with shrill laughter, as if to ask "Is this what you expect me to do?" Already some of his titles, like *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, *Indian Killer* or *The Toughest Indian in the World*, offer an ironical inversion of romantic expectations, revealing the contamination of history while destabilizing and reconstituting stereotypes, developing on a street rhythm rather than on shaman rhythms.

Humour is almost universal trait of native stories and traditionally serves as celebration of culture and community. As Lincoln writes in *Indi'n Humor*, Indian humour has always been a weapon against assimilation. "Indians [...] laugh hard and deep among themselves and grimace around whites, exorcising pain, redirecting their suffering, drawing together against the common enemy – cultural ignorance." The trickster figure, whom Lincoln calls "an antiheroic comic teacher and holy fool" helps fashion an image of "surviving Indian as a comic artist more than a tragic victim, seriously humorous to the native core."[4] Yet, understanding a "joke [as] a play upon form," which "decentres the certainties of 'structure' [...] sets free the creative impulses that organize structure as play in the first place,"[5] Alexie also dares to play with native traditional imagery and storytelling; his people often find his intentional frivolousness and the abject simplicity of his tricksters insulting. Instead of making stories that would bring communities together in a circle of common knowledge, Alexie's self-described life writing has

2 Kenneth Lincoln, *Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusion of Native and American Poetry (1890-1999)* (University of California Press, 2000), 239.

3 Cf. Katherine H. Wyrick, "Crossing Cultures: Sherman Alexie Explores the Sacred and the Profane," accessed August 14, 2008, http://www.bookpage.com/0306bp/sherman_alexie.html.

4 Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.

5 Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* (Barkley – Los Angeles – Oxford: University of California Press, 1997), 64-65.

earned him a reputation as an ego-driven and opportunistic writer.[6] He "betrays Indian people by presenting them as clichés who deserve to be laughed at,"[7] thus "deflect[ing] any 'lesson in morality'." Alexie returns the image of the generic Indian back to its producer.[8]

His ridicule is often striking. In *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Thomas Builds the Fire is "a storyteller that nobody wants to listen to. That's like being a dentist in a town where everybody has false teeth."[9] Besides, it is insisted that "he told the same damn stories over and over again."[10] Asked to tell a story, he closes his eyes and speaks:

> There were these two Indian boys who wanted to be warriors. But it was too late to be warriors in the old way. All the horses were gone. So the two Indian boys stole a car and drove to the city. They parked the stolen car in front of the police station and then hitchhiked back home to the reservation. When they got back, all their friends cheered and their parents; eyes shone with pride. *You were very brave*, everybody said to the two Indian boys. *Very brave*.[11]

The absurd position of this storyteller obviously results from a greater lack of meaning in a native cosmos, but Alexie does not comment on this. Instead he highlights stereotypes: "So much time alone with a bottle of one kind or another and James and I remember noting except the last drink and a drunk Indian is like the thinker statue except nobody puts a drunk Indian in a special place in front of a library."[12] In "One Good Man" from *The Toughest Indian in the World*, the narrator remembers one of his mother's dirty jokes: "Jeez, if I wanted to sleep with part-Indians, then I could do that at every powwow. Hell, I could get an orgy going with eight or nine of those Cherokees and maybe, just maybe, they would all add up to one real Indian."[13] Quite disturbing to many was the remark of an Indian father: "They'll kill you if they get the chance [...] Love you or hate you, white people will shoot you in the heart. Even after all these years, they'll still smell the salmon on you, the dead salmon, and that will make white people dangerous."[14] For these reasons, one critic believes, very few school boards will welcome Alexie into their curriculum.[15]

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6 Jonathan Penner, "Full Blooded," in *Washington Post Book World* (2000), p. 7. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select* (Detroit: Gale), accessed August 30, 2009, http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lsua.edups/-start.do?p=LitRC&u=lln_alsua.

7 Joseph L. Coulombe, "The Approximate Size of His Favorite Humor: Sherman Alexie's Comic Connections and Disconnections in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*," in *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 94, accessed August 28, 2009, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4128476.

8 Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 74-75.

9 Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 61.

10 *Ibid*., 62.

11 *Ibid*., 63.

12 *Ibid*., 122.

13 Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (New York: Grove, 2000), 226.

14 *Ibid*., 21.

15 Cf. Ron McFarland, „Review of *The Toughest Indian in the World* by Sherman Alexie and *Women on the Run*," in *Wicazo Sa Review*. 16.2 (2001), rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*, Vol. 107 (Detroit: Gale), 154-158, accessed August 30, 2009, http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lsua.edu/ps/start.do?-p=LitRC&u=lln_alsua.

Yet, it is interesting to notice that in one legend the Great Spirit tells Coyote that he is a being of rules: in the deconstructive parlance of today, he plays within the ules and exposes the arbitrariness of every culture. This attitude is demonstrated in Alexie's response to Paula Gunn Allen's famous claim "We are the land":

> I don't buy it. For one thing, environmentalism is a luxury. Just like being a vegetarian is a luxury. When you have to worry about eating, you're not going to be worried about where the food's coming from, or who made your shoes. Poverty, whether planned or not planned, is a way of making environmentalism moot. [...] Besides, Indians have no monopoly on environmentalism. That's one of the great myths. But we were subsistence livers. They're two different things. Environmentalism is a conscious choice and subsistence is the absence of choice. We had to use everything to survive. And now that we've been assimilated and colonized and we have luxuries and excesses, we're just as wasteful as other people.[16]

Alexie's heteroglosia no longer comes from the "frontier writing," that "unstable, multidirectional, hybridized, [...] indeterminate"[17] discourse of the unrepresentable other. It no longer abides in liminality, but speaks loudly from a post-Indian perspective, poignantly aware of the vulnerability of any Indian author-function. He asks:

> How can we imagine a new language when the language of the enemy keeps our dismembered tongues tied to his belt? How can we imagine a new alphabet when the old jumps off billboards down into our stomach? Adrian, what did you say? *I want to rasp into sober cryptology and say something dynamic but tonight is my laundry night.* How do we imagine a new life when a pocketful of quarters weights our possibilities down?[18]

The position of an Indian author is more complex than simply colonial or postcolonial. In 1999, Gerald Vizenor wrote that English, the "mother tongue of paracolonialism," has been "the language of invincible imagination and liberation for many tribal people,"[19] therefore a language of "survivance." Yet "survivance," the destabilization of "the simulation of the *indian*" is necessitated by "the absence of real natives – the contrivance of the other in the course of dominance." It also includes "the right of succession or reversion of an estate."[20] However, this estate is as prone to becoming apollonian,[21] as white culture is. Here I particularly have in mind the new

16 Joelle Frase, "An Interview with Sherman Alexie," in *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (University of Iowa, 2000/2001), 62, accessed August 27, 2009, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20154868.

17 Louis Owens, *op. cit*., 26.

18 Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 152.

19 Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners in Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln – London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 105.

20 *Ibid*., vii.

21 Margaret Atwood says that trickster appears when the tradition becomes too apollonian. (Cf. Margaret Atwood, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art* by Lewis Hyde, *L.A. Times* (January 25, 1998), accessed August 15, 2008, http://www.owtoad.com/trickster.pdf.

pan-Indian tradition, mostly constructed by whites and readily accepted by many natives, whom Vizenor calls tribal "kitschymen." Reacting against the false normality in which natives are recognized only as exotic strangers (on their own land), Alexie observes: "You throw in a couple of birds and four directions and corn pollen and it's Native American literature, when it has nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of Indians."[22] Likewise, to those who readily applaud similarities of orality in contemporary fiction, Alexie points out that "my writing has nothing to do with the oral tradition, because I typed it."[23] With the spectacle made of the Indian subject and trickster's almost unavoidable presence in critical discourse, a once sacred communal signification begets the same suspicious patterns. No wonder the native authors feel that voices of their cultural analysis are being stolen,[24] especially because, as Craig S. Womack explains, "there is no such thing as trickster in indigenous cultures [...] tricksters were invented by anthropologists [...] no Indian language has the world 'trickster' in it."[25] Alexie points to an ultimate ambiguity he calls the "relativistic abyss" of contemporary theory, which disables both normative truths and tricksters. Another issue that native authors now have to deal with is how to respond to this latest historical trick – just when postcolonialism has dismantled the dominant discourse and freed the voice of the subjected, the newest insistence on subjectivity has stripped any relevance from that voice.[26] Such a shifting epistemological openness immobilizes the narrative raison d'ętre, raising a question, as Lincoln observes, "Free to what? To exploit Indian issues? To rip off Tricksters? To trip through intercultural insult?"[27]

Newton argues that Alexie's affiliation with mass culture is not a dismissal of tradition but a playful postmodern activism,[28] the only way to express his solidarity with the godless universe. ("I could write about fry bread and fried bologna," Alexie says) When in "A Drug Called Tradition" Victor, Junior, and Thomas drive out to a lake to tell stories, they are conscious of the artificiality of the performance: "It'll be very fucking Indian," one of them says. "Spiritual shit, you know?"[29] Fighting for native agency not only undermines the invader's image-repertoire as Andrew Dix suggests,[30] but also deconstructs native-made stereotypes. Here we read a sophisticated political approach which answers pointedly to a recent claim[31] that Native identity does not exist apart from a fundamental hybridity, the a result of five centuries of contact with Europeans.

22 Joelle Frase, *op. cit*., 63.

23 John Newton, "Sherman Alexie's Autoethnography," in *Contemporary Literature: American Poetry of the 1990s,* Vol. 42, No. 2 (University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 412, accessed August 27, 2009, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209128.

24 Cf. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "Who Stole Native American Studies?" in *Wicazo Sa Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 9-28.

25 Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, Christopher B. Teuton, *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 19.

26 *Ibid*., 41.

27 Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America*, 158.

28 John Newton, *op. cit*., 413.

29 Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 14.

30 Andrew Dix, "Escape Stories: Narratives and Native Americans in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*," in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 31, *North American Short Stories and Short Fictions* (Maney on behalf of Modern Humanities Research Association, 2001), 166, accessed August 25, 2009. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3509382.

31 Cf. Elvira Pulitano, *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* (Lincoln – London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

A writer, on the other hand, must authenticate a recognizable representativity among emancipated signifieds and signifiers. If environmentalism is a luxury, then the position of a disillusioned spectator is also redundant because there is no longer an outside vantage point to fight from. Trying to determine the status of today's Indian, as he walks around the text looking "like a Gap ad,"[32] Alexie investigates the necessity of reinforcing the old stereotypes as the only way to be recognized and heard. Reading Alexie is going through layers of meanings: realism disintegrates into allegory, allegory into ideology, ideology into farce, and farce into an exhaustion of itself. Arriving at an absence of univocal meaning, we inevitably ask: must the final revelation be an acceptance of oblivion, and how does one negotiate the delicate line between recognition of nothingness and identification with it? (Alexie's Indian characters are often left with the white noise remaining on TV after the day's broadcasting has ended.) In "Family Portrait" a character relates one of the most formative events in his youth, his first encounter with a TV, revealing the depths of myth he has been subjected to:

> The television was in the window of a store in Coeur d'Alene. Me and all the guys would walk down there and watch it. Just one channel and all it showed was a woman sitting on top of a television that showed the same woman sitting on top of the same television that showed the same woman sitting on top of the same television. Over and over until it hurt your eyes and head. That's the way I remember it. And she was always singing some song. I think it was "A Girl on Top of the World."[33]

Another young Indian explains to his father, a fan of Jimi Hendrix (an allusion to the vision of emancipation enacted by the hippies), the deprivation he as an Indian of today is faced with. The young man contrasts his situation with his ancestors', who could claim something at least ostensibly real: "You know [...] my generation of Indian boys ain't ever had no real war to fight. The first Indians had Custer to fight. My great-grandfather had World War I, my grandfather had World War II, you had Vietnam. All I have is video games."[34] Disappointed with his son's reasoning, the father makes the point that these wars never belonged to Native Americans. Yet the father then proceeds to talk about "war and peace," because there is "nothing in between. It's always one or the other." Finally, when the son observes that the father sounds "like a book," the father's rhetoric slides down into the orthodoxy: "Indians are pretty much born soldiers anyway. Don't need a uniform to prove it."[35] Although this statement does conform to the stereotype, it also relates to the stressful history of the survival of the natives. Along the same lines, in another story a character openly states that: "It's hard to be optimistic on the reservation. [...] But it's almost like Indians can easily survive the big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land rights. It's the small things that hurt most. The white waitress who wouldn't take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins."[36] The stereotypes have so contaminated everyday domains that the representation has become more real than the living people and is the only standard against which to judge the real. In the

32 Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, 50.

33 Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 197.

34 *Ibid*., 28.

35 *Ibid*., 29.

36 *Ibid*., 49.

infamous story "Amusements," which Owens has criticized as an example of Alexie's shameless literary shenanigans,[37] two young Indians put their drunken friend on a roller coaster as a public spectacle for the whites, who, gaping with open mouths become "jury and judge for the twentieth-century fancydance of these court jesters who would pour Thunderbird wine into the Holy Grail."[38] However, after running from the scene, one of the characters observes that the warped reflection he sees in the circus mirrors is no more false than any other image: "*Crazy mirrors*, I thought, the kind that distorts your features, makes you fatter, thinner, taller, shorter. The kind that make a white man remember he's the master of ceremonies, barking about the Fat Lady, the Dog-Faced Boy, the Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty."[39] Alexie is not alluding here only to someone else's constructed Indians, but to construction itself as an essence of every presentation, including his own.

Alexie cannot be bothered with political correctness. He speaks of himself as an Indian, using the term Native American only when referring ironically to the compensatory function of a conscience-ridden liberal's discourse. When a Spokane meets a Cherokee, although their conversation reflects the distressful past, it easily turns into a joke:

> "What tribe are you, cousin?" Victor asked him.
> "Cherokee."
> "Really? Shit, I've never met a real Cherokee."
> "Neither have I."
> And they laughed.[40]

They are laughing off a fear of nonexistence if "Indian" is to be removed from all social references,[41] becoming "Native Americans" who adopt and adapt to the demythologizing force of contemporary theory, the language of nonrecognition, absence, and schizophrenia. The tribes do understand themselves as cultures through meaningful ceremonial representations. Yet, as Womack bitterly observes, when in the year Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was published in English translation, Native Americans were given freedom to practice their religion, by this time their religion had been stripped of its meaning by postmodernist and commercialist reifying powers. Womack is not naively arguing that the old religion should or could be re-established; he instead understands religion in wider terms of core values on which individuals must rely. Arguing that it is not possible to set up politics and religion in easy opposition to one another, Canadian scholar Garry Watson contemplates group identity and belonging in light of Debray's conception of the other as the absence of group (*Critique of Political Reason*, 1981). As the other is the external invisible element (God, Republic, Working Class), the group must find a way of making it visible or present it through things that bind, for instance representations, ceremonies, alliances, charters, oaths, pacts, friendships, doctrines. This is where religion, "as a way of managing the sacred element in society," plays a role, as it gives transparency to the group.[42] Furthermore, exchanges between these three subjects – me, the other, and the group – unavoidably involve violations in the form of

37 Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 80.

38 Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 56.

39 *Ibid*., 58.

40 *Ibid*., 91.

41 Cf. Craig S. Womack, *op. cit*., 65.

42 Garry Watson, *Opening Doors: Thought From (and of) the Outside* (Aurora: Davies, 2008), 49.

comparisons and judgements. This means that politics, responsibility, sacrifice, and guilt are all unavoidable. Therefore, an author must be courageously honest to claim them all.

Investigating possibilities of existence, creating spaces for understanding and embracing his identity, Alexie clearly shows that he cannot abstract the white centre and cannot accept that the opposition should form the basis of his identity. Instead, as Womack suggests, identity must be seen as "a transformative process rather than measured in terms of its purity. What is relevant is not the degree to which identity is contaminated by European views or free from such contamination; the point is the way in which Native people make identities meaningful for themselves and their communities."[43] Therefore, one of Alexie's characters wonders what it would be like if the Ghost Dance finally worked after five centuries, imagining that the "Tribal Council has ruled that anything to do with whites has to be destroyed."[44] In the ruined house of his own imagined post-apocalyptic scene, he finds a little transistor, but doesn't dare to play it: "What would I hear? Farm reports, sports scores, silence?" Suggesting that it is simply impossible to talk about one in the absence of the other, he further portrays this absurdity in a specific brave-new-world language:

> The Skins, Indians who lived on the reservation when it happened, can never marry Urbans. The Tribal Council made that rule because of the sickness in the Urbans. One of the original Urbans was pregnant when she arrived on the reservation and gave birth to a monster. The Tribal Council doesn't want it to happen again.[45]

The madness of this mirror is too intense to stand; therefore the narration of the next story in the collection, "Jesus Christ Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation," turns exhausted and fragmented. One utterance is reiterated in different contexts as "The world changing the world changing the world."[46] The fact of five hundred years of European colonization has been repeated so frequently that when one finally starts crying it will be "like five hundred years of tears."[47] For five hundred years Indian parents have learned from the white doctors that Indian kids normally develop slowly;[48] someone suddenly finds himself in "7-11 of my dreams, surrounded by five hundred years of convenient lies."[49] A young wife remarks that the five hundred years are not only an Indian problem, but that the whole world has been infected by lies: "Don't know if I want to raise kids in this world. It's getting uglier by the second. And not just on the reservation."[50] In an interview Alexie observes:

> I think there are three stages of Indianness: The first stage is where you feel inferior because you're Indian, and most people

43 Craig S. Womack, *op. cit*., 388.

44 Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 105.

45 *Ibid*., 106.

46 *Ibid*., 114.

47 *Ibid*., 115.

48 *Ibid*., 120.

49 *Ibid*., 150.

50 *Ibid*., 207.

> never leave it. The next stage is feeling superior because you're Indian and a small percentage of people get into that and most never leave it. At the end, they get on realizing that Indians are just as fucked up as everybody else.[51]

The first line of "Assimilation," the opening story of *The Toughest Indian in the World*, suggests that the assimilation process works both ways: "Regarding love, marriage, and sex, both Shakespeare and Sitting Bull knew the only truth: treaties are broken."[52] Here Alexie depicts a female Indian with a relatively successful career who has four children with a racially emancipated white husband who loves her. They are both "handsome to the point of distraction" and could have been subjects "of a Shultz photograph or a Runnette poem." Yet, Mary Lynn suddenly feels a life crisis she cannot understand: "it was because of pessimism," she tells herself, "existentialism, even nihilism, but those reasons – *those words* – were a function of her vocabulary and not of her motivations" [italics in original].[53] Because she knows these are only words that need not actually apply to her, she understands that her dissatisfaction would be at least comprehensible to others if expressed through her ethnicity:

> If forced to admit the truth or some version of the truth, she'd testify she was about to go to bed with an Indian stranger because she wanted to know how it would feel. After all, she'd slept with a white stranger in her life, so why not include a Native American? Why not practice a carnal form of affirmative action? By God, her infidelity was a political act! Rebellion, resistance, revolution![54]

The complicity of playing with clichés is transparent in the story of an Indian journalist who often travels and usually picks up Indian hitchhikers. One of them is a street fighter covered with scars who evokes a dangerous nostalgia in the driver. While listening to his story of fighting a Flathead Indian "like he was two or three white men rolled into one,"[55] the driver exclaims in recreated reservation jargon: "Jeez [...] You would've been warrior in the old days, enit? You would've been killer. You would have stolen everybody's goddamn horses."[56] His feelings deepen into a special connection with the warrior, who after teaching the other the beauty of homosexual love and what it is like to "smell like a salmon,"[57] walks down the highway and "rise[s] from earth to sky and become[s] a new constellation."[58] Here we encounter several aspects of native cultures: their traditional sexual emancipation, their recreation of the two faces of the mythical trickster in the two characters (one is teacher and helper, the other is insatiable fool), as well as their evocation of native magical realism, which unifies mundane and mythical. Louise Owens praises James Welch's novel *Fool Crow* (1986) for "accomplishing the most profound act of recovery in American literature" by erasing

51 Quoted in Joseph L Coulombe, *op. cit*., 108.

52 Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, 1.

53 *Ibid*., 4.

54 *Ibid*.

55 *Ibid*., 29.

56 *Ibid*., 30.

57 *Ibid*., 32.

58 *Ibid*., 33.

"disjunction between the real and the magical."[59] In Alexie, however, this venture can no longer offer a new "conceptual horizon" and the experience of "an Indian world."[60] Alexie's work expresses rather a painful invocation of confused tribal contemporaneity, a pale attempt of a man to fantasize a union which is lost forever. While tribes must adapt to the future, they still cannot figure out whose future it will be. As Lincoln remarks, the tribe needs a trickster to move on, but a trickster with a finely developed cultural taste.

The matter of who grants the trickster the right of disrespect[61] is investigated in "Sin Eaters," which most readers approach as an exaggerated reflection of Indian fear. The story presents layers of meanings that swoop down on available signifiers. First, the narrator's name Jonah tricks us into reading this story as a Leviathan metaphor of Indian culture being engulfed by the "whale" of white civilization. Further, playing with the clichéd genres of science fiction and apocalypse, the story suggests that by appropriating white forms, Indians are appropriating white culture and as such the "sins" of the whites. One of these is the conception of linear time that ends with an apocalypse in which Indians are to be destroyed, but only if they don't obey the master, the creator (of the invented Indians), the father (of the colonial discourse). In an enormous building dug into a desert (which might allude to the nuclear storage sites around the pueblos), Indian survival is ensured through forced procreation (an obvious inversion of history) because their spinal cord contains a substance that heals cancer. As the choice of narrative agents provoke an expectation for the worst, we remember that suspense is not a part of traditional native narrative and look for prefiguration within the story. But this has happened already at the beginning when the narrator said that he had dreamed about the annihilation of Indians. As the basic function of prefiguration is to help readers re-imagine and re-live what they already know, the narrator has let *us* read in this story what our corrupted imagination is capable of creating. Without being able to escape the habit, we encounter what we expect to find in a text written by an "angry" author, thus becoming sin eaters ourselves.

Alexie rightfully dares to challenge tradition, Indian or white, if its forms no longer suffice. Because we have feasted on our words already, he turns to graphic devices for the last story in the collection, "One Good Man." It begins: "Outside the house, Sweetwater and Wonder Horse were building a wheelchair ramp for my father."[62] Then an arbitrary box frame is placed around a random statement by one of the characters: "Jesus was a carpenter." Since no one can take back what is once pronounced, these two Indians have to find a way out of the new disturbing story:

"Harrison Ford was a carpenter, too," said Wonder Horse. It was
all that he could think to say.
"Who?" asked Sweetwater.
"Harrison Ford, they guy who played Han Solo, you know? In
Star Wars, the movie?"[63]

59 Louise Owens, *Other Destinies* (Norman-London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 165-166.

60 *Ibid*., 166.

61 Cf. Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America*, 153.

62 Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, 209.

63 *Ibid*.

The border between reality and fiction is erased, Jesus, Harrison Ford, and Han Solo are rendered equivalent ontological status, the Bible and *Star Wars* presented as equally important formative influences. Sweetwater goes deeper: "But Jesus was, you know, a *real* carpenter" [italics in original].[64] When Wonderhorse asks if real also means good, the only available reply must include all conditional possibilities: "I don't know. I mean, maybe, yeah, of course. He had to be." Wonderhorse's world comes crushing down with the suggestion that perhaps he himself is only as good (or real) a carpenter as the one in the mentioned fiction, but he hopes that keeping to an institutionalized belief might get him out of trouble. He asks: "Have you ever read the Bible?" The conventional reply slides into an epistemological impasse: "No, not really," Sweetwater says, "but I know all about it."[65] Shared "conventional wisdom" is the only reality Sweetwater can rely on and he feels he has every right to do so.

Inside the house we meet the story's narrator and his dying father. This frequent father figure in Alexie's work is an alcoholic with diabetes who, as suggested in *War Dances*, is suffering from a "natural" Indian disease.[66] One question reverberates throughout Alexie's oeuvre: "What is an Indian?" An Indian may be: "a child who can stroll unannounced through the front doors of seventeen different houses";[67] "a boy who can sing a body electric or a woman who could not stop for death";[68] "the lead actor in a miracle or the witness who remembers the miracle?";[69] "a son who can stand in a doorway and watch his father sleep";[70] "a son who brings his father to school as show-and-tell";[71] "a man with a spear in his hands";[72] "a son who had always known where his father kept his clothes in neat military stacks";[73] "a man with a good memory";[74] "a man with waiting experience, a man who can carry ten cups at the same time, one looped in the hook of each finger and both thumbs";[75] "a man who can share his son and his wife."[76] These and other possibilities hover around the narrator's personal, social, political and innermost definitions of self. Is an educated Indian, an English teacher, a real Indian? If he has to confess that his son is better off in the half-white world to which his wife escaped? In the middle of this existential crisis, the narrator of "One Good Man" remembers a classroom situation in which he was approached with the question of whether he was an Indian by a professor of "Cherokee-Choctaw-Seminole-Irish-Russian" origin.

> Of course I was. (Jesus, my black hair hung down past my ass and I was dark as a pecan!) I'd grown up on my reservation with my tribe. I understood most of the Spokane language, though I'd

64 *Ibid*., 211.

65 *Ibid*.

66 Sherman Alexie, *War Dances* (New York: Grove, New York – Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2009), 37.

67 Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, 217

68 *Ibid*., 218.

69 *Ibid*., 221.

70 *Ibid*., 222.

71 *Ibid*., 227.

72 *Ibid*., 229.

73 *Ibid*., 230.

74 *Ibid*., 231.

75 *Ibid*., 235-236.

76 *Ibid*., 236.

always spoken it like a Jesuit priest. Hell, I'd been in three car wrecks! And most important, every member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians could tell you the exact place and time where I'd lost my virginity. Why? Because I'd told each and every one of them. I mean, I knew the real names, nicknames, and secret names of every dog that had lived on my reservation during the last twenty years.[77]

Being native is an ethnic "fact," but it is hardly a personal issue as long as it is not insisted upon as a divisive identity marker, or, as Mary Lynn indicates, "as an excuse, reasons, prescription, placebo, prediction, or diminutive."[78] Apart from this, "an Indian" is as fictional and arbitrary a trait as anything else. The narrator brings his father into the class. The father's appearance would tell a lot to a sociologist: he "set at a desk, pulled out his false teeth, tucked them into his pants pocket, and smiled his black-hole smile the whole time;" he "wore a U.S. Army T-shirt that said *Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out*."[79] But he is also, most atypically for a fictional Indian, a dance instructor. When the professor claims his own ethnic heritage by having taken part in the Alcatraz and the Wounded Knee "incidents," the father readily makes a political distinction: "You might be a Native American but you sure as hell ain't Indian."[80] When questioned about his whereabouts at these crucial historical moments, the answer to the dancer seems obvious: during the first incident he had taken his wife and kids "to the Pacific Ocean, just off Neah Bay. Most beautiful place in the world."[81] On the second occasion he was teaching his son how to ride his bike, thus giving greater importance to his family connection: "Took forever. And when he finally did it, man, I cried like a baby, I was so proud."[82] It is in this way that the question "What is an Indian?" is answered.

To dramatize our shared rhetorical condition, the narration of young Arnold Junior is performed in cartoon form. The boy says he draws because he hopes that he "might grow up to be somebody important."[83] Acknowledging the jester role many an ndian is forced to accept, he says: "Just take a look at the world. Almost all of the rich nd famous brown people are artists." Artists produce, we have learned, but not necessarily from fantasy. Although Arnold Junior confesses that he draws "because I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation,"[84] this escape is a metaphorical flight from one limited world:

I draw because words are too unpredictable.
I draw because words are too limited.
If you speak and write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning.

77 *Ibid*., 225.

78 *Ibid*., 2.

79 *Ibid*., 227.

80 *Ibid*., 228.

81 *Ibid*.

82 *Ibid*., 219.

83 Sherman Alexies, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Half-Time Indian* (New York: Hachette, 2007), 5.

84 *Ibid*.

> But when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it. If I draw a cartoon of a flower, then every man, woman, and child in the world can look at it and say, "That's a flower." […] I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats.[85]

Nevertheless, most of the cartoons depict the dilemma of the boy's situation as he steps out of his reservation into a world of "hope," into a world in which he belongs to no-one.

Although the drawing might reflect how Alexie felt when accused of flirting with the white audience, the circular story "Breaking and Entering" from *War Dances* suggests not only that intolerance is dangerous, but that it is in surplus in the multicultural urban milieu. While depicting the complexity of experience in the urban multitude, the narration of movie editor George Wilson shows that individual life is more a product of modern communication media than of ethnicity, and then more of commerce than of communication. In one dramatic monologue he relates how he was considered "legally innocent" when he accidentally killed a black boy who broke into his house.[86] Yet, while he was fighting with questions of his moral innocence, the media created a spectacle out of the incident as "just another black boy killed by a white man."[87] It is only now, the narrator explains, that he has become "an enrolled member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians,"[88] but he doesn't look "typically Indian."[89] In addition, his behaviour is not traditional; he doesn't attend powwows, doesn't speak his native language or fight for tribal sovereignty, and has married a white woman. Therefore, he assumes, "one could easily mock my lack of connection, but one could not question my race. [...] So when I heard Althea Riggs misidentify my race – and watched the media covertly use editing techniques to confirm her misdiagnosis – I picked up my cell phone and dialled the

85 *Ibid*., 5-6.

86 Sherman Alexies, *War Dances*, 12.

87 *Ibid*., 13.

88 *Ibid*.

89 *Ibid*.

news station."[90] By his insistence on correcting the misinformation about his race, he is turned into a town celebrity – "My fellow liberals spoke of my lateral violence and the destructive influence of colonialism on the indigenous, while conservatives lauded my defensive stand and lonely struggle against urban crime."[91] Thus he becomes a fiction in a movie of his life. His identity is just as real and as edited as the films he is making. In other words, the fictionalization of his life has made him consider how all the tragedies of the world easily turn into distant fictions; this is the "shame that runs the world."[92] Anxiety about race comes more from this reifying force than from the "Genocidal Olympics" both the narrator's and the black boy's people have been objects of. Commercialisation is bereft of compassion, robbing us all of our humanity. Moreover, media cycles last briefly, and amid the urban rush

> one just finally walks out of his basement and realizes that the story is over. It's old news. There are new villains and heroes, criminals and victims, to be defined and examined and tossed aside.
> Elder Briggs and I were suddenly and equally unimportant.
> [...]
> Nothing happened, of course. Nothing ever really happens, you know.[93]

By openly addressing us, the narrator battles against the fear of silence and extinction. He suggests that unless we take part in the creation of meaning, unless we assume not only the political but also ontological act by which we grant him existence, he may go on playing with words as freely as if he were just copying them from an accidentally opened page in the dictionary on his table. Without our full participation, "life is infinitesimal and incremental and inconsequential."[94]

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90 *Ibid*., 14.

91 *Ibid*., 15.

92 *Ibid*., 17.

93 *Ibid*., 16-19.

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