

# SHERMAN ALEXIE'S AUDACIOUS REVAMPS OF NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY IN *THE TOUGHEST INDIAN IN THE WORLD*\*

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## ABSTRACT

Sherman Alexie's collection of short stories *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) offers one of the sharpest and most touching renditions of the challenges faced by Native Americans in the new millennium. The reader soon realizes that Indians from different tribes are pigeonholed as representatives of a particular ethnic and/or social category, which reduces the complexity of their character and restricts their possibilities for meaningful transformation. Although the clashes are usually against white Americans, there are also instances in which their own people reject them or question their roots for various reasons. Alexie's stories can be said to have a liberating power as they poke fun at the pseudo-scientific discourses that attempt to classify human groups into closed categories.

**KEYWORDS:** Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, Native American Literature, identity issues, trickster aesthetics.

## RESUMEN

La colección de relatos *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) de Sherman Alexie ofrece uno de los retratos más agudos y emotivos de los problemas que asedian a los indios americanos hoy en día. Enseguida observamos que los nativos de diferentes tribus son encasillados como pertenecientes a categorías étnicas y sociales concretas, lo cual limita tanto la complejidad de sus personalidades y como la posibilidad de cualquier transformación significativa. Aunque sus choques son casi siempre con los blancos, hay también momentos en que se ven rechazados por su gente que pone en duda sus raíces. Los relatos de Alexie poseen un poder liberador ya que ridiculizan los discursos pseudo-científicos que intentan clasificar a los seres humanos en categorías estancas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, literature nativo-americana, cuestiones de identidad, la estética del trickster.



My father never taught me about hope. Instead, he continually told me that our salmon—our hope—would never come back, and though such lessons may seem cruel, I know enough to cover my heart in any crowd of white people.

*The Toughest Indian in the World*

Thomas: But...but, it's the United States.

Lucy: Damn right it is! That's as foreign as it gets. I hope you two got your vaccinations.

*Smoke Signals*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire—the two protagonists of Chris Eyre's and Sherman Alexie's award-winning, all-Native film *Smoke Signals* (1998)—are leaving their Coeur d'Alene reservation in Idaho to travel to Arizona to retrieve the ashes and belongings of Victor's father, they bump into their friends and cousins Lucy and Velma driving their car in reverse on a reservation road. Velma asks where the odd pair of wanderers are going and whether they are carrying their passports, for, as she points out: "Yeah, you're leaving the rez and going into a whole different country, cousin" (Alexie, *Smoke* 40). Thomas, as the second epigraph above plainly shows, is quite surprised by Velma's comment, since they have no intention of crossing any international border. However, Lucy's ironic words make it clear that for many Native Americans the experience of leaving their reservation behind may be as trying as that of a migrant or an exile who, for whatever reasons, is compelled to abandon his or her homeland for an unknown place. Indeed, Lucy's witty remark begins to make sense later on in the movie when we watch the two young Indians repeatedly crashing against the huge barriers of prejudice and discrimination created by a context of "ongoing colonialism and [...] the history of Native American images in the media" (Hearne xx), primarily, among white Americans. Over a decade ago, I argued elsewhere that Eyre's and Alexie's film offered, besides the venturesome and entertaining journey of the two unusual "heroes," an invaluable opportunity "to investigate the potential of a variety of situations for the subversion of traditional stereotypes and the (re)presentation of a realistic portrayal of Native Americans as complete and complex human beings" (Ibarrola 152). Much the same thing could be claimed in regard to Alexie's 2000 collection of short stories *The Toughest Indian in the World*, which also introduces the reading public to the kind of Native Americans that readers have rarely encountered in fiction (and film) and who, despite the

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hard fact that they are Indians, still long for love, recognition, and trust. Duncan Campbell wrote in an article in *The Guardian* that in Alexie's writing,

the native American characters are not particularly stoic or noble or tragic, as they have often been portrayed in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature. They may be gay intellectuals or thwarted basketball players, middle-class journalists or elderly movie extras, boozey rock musicians or alienated construction workers, or reservation girls whose cars only go in reverse because all the other gears are broken. (Campbell n.p.)

In spite of the immense variety of indigenous, white, and mixed-blood characters that we meet in *The Toughest Indian*, one question that seems to unfold diffusely in the nine stories of the collection—except for the concluding chapter, in which it is overtly formulated several times—is “What is an Indian?” and, also, the kind of exigencies that this identity dilemma poses for those concerned. In fact, the Native protagonists of all these narratives seem to be aware of the difficulties in remaining faithful to their roots in a country that constantly reminds them of their cultural difference and of the possible hazards and “advantages” that may derive from that condition. As novelist Jonathan Penner noted in a review of the collection, “Being Indian in America is not, for them, an easy condition. Race shapes their entire lives, including the search for love” (n.p.). Indeed, a pattern—or leitmotif—that underlies several stories in the collection is the inner struggle faced by half-assimilated Native Americans from different tribes when they realize that the lifestyle they have chosen is pulling them increasingly away from the values and traditions that their ancestors and co-ethnics would seem to cherish. More troubling still is the fact that they become convinced that their behavior is deeply influenced by the oversimplified perceptions that the mainstream society—or white America—has of them in particular situations. Thus, the protagonist of the opening story, Mary Lynn, justifies her outrageous decision “to have sex with an indigenous stranger” (*Toughest 1*) just because she wishes to transcend the expectations that others would have regarding her ethnicity and her marriage with a white man:

[...] Yes, she was most certainly a Coeur d'Alene—she'd grown up on the rez, had been very happy during her time there, and had left without serious regrets or full-time enemies—but that wasn't the only way to define her. She wished that she could be called Coeur d'Alene as a description, rather than as an excuse, reasons, prescription, placebo, prediction, or diminutive. She only wanted to be understood as eccentric and complicated! (2)

Like the animosity felt by many of his characters, Alexie has often declared in interviews that much of his indignation comes from the tendency of both outsiders and insiders to perceive Indians in terms of a few essentializing features that reduce their complexity and trammel their possibilities of transformation: “There are more rules to being an Indian than inside an Edith Wharton novel about which fork to use at dinner” (Nelson 42). In the following pages, some of the injurious stereotypes and racialized representations of Natives that Alexie tries to combat in *The Toughest Indian* will be explored, as well as the kind of ethics and aesthetics that he develops



in order to disrupt conventional ways of thinking about Native Americans and to foster a reevaluation of their place in current American society. Coulombe has identified various types of humor and a highly dialogical imagination as the key instruments that Alexie employs to allow his “Indian characters to connect to their heritage in new ways and [to encourage] non-Natives readers to reconsider simplistic generalizations” (12). As this scholar sees it, “Whereas humor can provide a method of self-defense in a divisive world, it also offers the opportunity to surmount the false distinctions that separate people and reinforce the connections that demonstrate our unity and equality” (Coulombe 138). However, it will become evident that Alexie’s iconoclastic intervention in the politics of representation of Native identity is far from offering any easy answers to the challenges posed by the dissemination of flat or blatantly distorted images of Indians by the media and the mainstream culture (cf. Shanley 28-30). Ultimately, the attempt at “indigenizing” conventions of storytelling in *The Toughest Indian* proves particularly successful because, while subverting traditional stereotypes of Natives as brave warriors and nobly-vanishing communities, it presents a gallery of characters extremely human in their boldness and vulnerability, in their innate intelligence but also their common ineptitude.

## 2. NOXIOUS STEREOTYPES AND OTHER HAZARDS OF MAINSTREAM CULTURE

Stuart Hall has rightly argued that racialized regimes of representation—typical in imperialist and colonial contexts—have the effect of essentializing, reducing, and naturalizing a set of (mostly unflattering) features of the cultural Other. According to Hall, “Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (257). Several critics and reviewers of Alexie’s fiction have remarked that one of his main aims has been to counter the effects of what Gerald Vizenor has called “the Manifest Manners of domination” that Euro-Americans have practiced against colonized Others and to reconstruct “a sense of self and of community in the wake of conquest” (Andrews 49). As happens to Mary Lynn in “Assimilation,” the opening story of *The Toughest Indian*, many other Natives see their ethnicity reduced to “an excuse, reasons, prescription, placebo, prediction, or diminutive” (2), so as to preserve certain mythologies that constrain their chances of developing more free and equal identity projects. Stultifying stereotypes such as the stoic warrior, the noble redskin, the doe-eyed princess or the vanishing Indian are seen to make it difficult for contemporary Native Americans to find a usable past that they can rely on to deal with their problems in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Vizenor’s words, “postindian warriors” need to ensnare the contrived mythologies and stereotypes of the past by means of their new storytelling strategies in order to revamp their own “simulations of survivance”:

The postindian warriors bear their own simulations and revisions to contend with manifest manners, the “authentic” summaries of ethnology, and the curse of rationalism and modernism in the ruins of representation. The wild incursions of



the warriors of survivance undermine the simulations of the unreal in the literature of dominance. (Vizenor 12)

In a discussion of Alexie's filmmaking ventures, I contended that he could easily be considered a "postindian warrior" of sorts since, apart from undermining many of those "simulations of the unreal," he managed to endow his art with various "palliative and integrative elements" that contribute to bearing out new cultural intersections and dialogues uncommon in the works of other minority writers (Ibarrola 154). In narratives such as "Class" or the title story of the collection, Alexie can be said to portray middle-class, urban American Indians who, like Mary Lynn, hope to salvage a sense of the tribal identity they gave up when they decided to cross certain ethnic boundaries to integrate into the mainstream society. Nevertheless, it soon becomes evident that this is not an easy task, for they are themselves "prisoners" of a number of assumptions that prevent them from seeing how they can regain their place in a community from which they have gradually drifted away. The protagonist of "The Toughest Indian in the World," for instance, is a Spokane Indian who has become a journalist on an all-white newspaper in Seattle, in which he gets "all the shit jobs": "[...] there is no journalism more soul-endangering to write than journalism that aims to please" (25). The first pages of the story are packed with flashbacks and symbolism relating to the lessons that the young reporter received from his father concerning the white man. As the first epigraph to this article shows, his progenitor was positive that, whenever white people "get the chance," they "will shoot you in the heart" just because "they'll still smell the salmon on you, the dead salmon" (21). Although the protagonist has grown estranged from his reservation and his people, he retains, out of some kind of nostalgia, a habit he inherited from his father: picking up Indian hitchhikers standing beside the road. The "expatriate" Native reporter is convinced that these rides accompanied by co-ethnics in his gorgeous Toyota Camry will allow him to keep some connection with his people, even if his colleagues at the newspaper think of the practice as dangerous and utterly absurd:

At the newspaper where I work, my fellow reporters think I'm crazy to pick up hitchhikers. They're all white and never stop to pick up anybody, let alone an Indian. After all, we're the ones who write the stories and headlines: HITCHHIKER KILLS HUSBAND AND WIFE, MISSING GIRL'S BODY FOUND, RAPIST STRIKES AGAIN. If I really tried, maybe I could explain to them why I pick up any Indian, but who wants to try? Instead, if they ask I just give them a smile and turn back to my computer. My coworkers smile back and laugh loudly. (24)

The story takes an unexpected turn when the protagonist gives a lift to a tough Lummi boxer who has made a career of fighting other Indians around the reservations: "I felt as Indian as Indian gets, driving down the road in a fast car, chewing [deer] jerky, talking to an indigenous fighter" (27). The protagonist is seen to reconnect tenuously with his Native roots during his conversation with the deeply-scarred, muscular fighter, and the two decide, in a rather forlorn manner, to have a homosexual encounter in a motel room. Lisa Tatonetti has cogently argued that the central character's "search for indigeneity" is intertwined in this story with



“a simultaneous exploration of queer desire” (206) for a co-ethnic whom he views as “a warrior in the old days” (*Toughest* 30). The ending of the story is rather ambiguous because, while it is true that the closing lines suggest an undeniable epiphany connecting his sexual experience to some sort of ethnic renewal, the narrator also wonders “what [is] going to happen next” (33) after his brief affair with the warrior:

[...] I woke early the next morning, before sunrise, and went out into the world. I walked past my car. I stepped onto the pavement, still warm from the previous day’s sun. I started walking. In bare feet, I traveled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die. At that moment, if you had broken open my heart you could have looked inside and seen the thin white skeletons of one thousand salmon. (34)

Nancy Cahoon has observed that, like the title story, most of the other pieces in the collection “deal with urban Indians who are straddling two worlds: an intimate but indigent life on the reservation and an affluent but strange and sometimes hostile white middle-class existence” (n.p.). Predictably, caught in this double bind that often makes them uncertain about their identity and their relationships with others, Alexie’s Natives are driven to behave in preposterous ways that only show how arduous it is for them to function outside the preconceptions defined by others about Indians. Of course, in most instances those preconceptions are perceived as signs of oppression that impel them to look for some sort of contact with their “authentic” Native traditions. Yet, it is not unusual either to come across Natives who also use those preconceptions that whites entertain to their own advantage, as they can provide in that way easy solutions to their current ordeals and fulfill the expectations of their closest kin. This is definitely the case of Edgar Eagle Runner in “Class,” who decides to pass for what he is not in order to pave the way in his sexual relationships with white women, both to please his mother and to advance his career as a corporate lawyer:

As for me, I’d told any number of white women that I was part Aztec and I’d told a few that I was completely Aztec. That gave me some mystery, some ethnic weight, a history of glorious color and mass executions. Strangely enough, there were aphrodisiacal benefits to claiming to be descended from ritual cannibals. In any event, pretending to be an Aztec warrior was a lot more impressive than revealing I was just some bright kid who’d fought his way off the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington State [...] (40)

Like many of the other bourgeois, city Indians in the collection, the Native protagonist of this story faces a severe identity crisis when he and his spouse, a white Catholic woman, lose their first child and he realizes that his wife had been faking her orgasms “probably since the first time we’d made love” (46). In an attempt to look for refuge from the rigid behavioral codes, expensive hobbies, and emotional obligations of his social sphere, Edgar escapes to a local Indian dive in Seattle where he hopes to find the understanding and recognition that he cannot find among his fellow lawyers. However, he is promptly assailed by Junior, a huge,



herculean patron of the establishment, who eventually pummels him badly after the protagonist expresses his wish to fight. When he regains consciousness in the lap of the Native bartender, he tries to explain to her the reasons that had brought him to the Indian tavern to begin with:

“I wanted to be with my people,” I said.

“Your people?” asked Sissy. “Your people? We’re not your people.”

“We’re Indians.”

“Yeah, we’re Indians. You, me, Junior. But we live in this world and you live in your world.”

“I don’t like my world.”

“You pathetic bastard,” she said, her eyes swelling with tears that had nothing to do with laughter. “You sorry, sorry piece of shit. Do you know how much I want to live in your world? Do you know how much Junior wants to live in your world?” Of course, I knew. For most of my life, I’d dreamed about the world where I currently resided. (55)

As was the case with Mary Lynn in “Assimilation,” who finally declares her love for her husband “across the [ethnic] distance” (20) in the concluding paragraph of the story, Edgar Eagle Runner also returns to his estranged wife after his failed attempt at building a bridge toward “[his] people.” Alexie’s stories often show that his Native characters are also victims of the stereotypes forged by the dominant culture and that their efforts to reconnect with their roots are profoundly troubled by those notions. Due to their misleading conceptions of their people and the strange intersections of their ethnic background with other identity features—sometimes sexual, others professional or related to class—, it is hard to predict how their identity crises are going to be solved. In Scott Andrews’ opinion, “What works one time does not work another. What works for some does not work for others. Like life, it is complicated and just a little bit random” (51). Indeed, we have seen that, searching for one’s identity under the potent influence of the mainstream culture’s reductive myths and human types, it is quite difficult to find convenient answers to that quest—no matter how intense the search for one’s self and one’s community happens to be.

### 3. DARKLY-COMIC CONFRONTATIONS AND TRICKSTER STRATAGEMS

In her review of *The Toughest Indian* in *The New York Times*, Joanna Scott described Alexie as a “clever satirist” who “won’t hesitate to attack racist idiocy and historical injustice” (n.p.). She also explained that “He’s good at turning a plot in unexpected directions and making a sequence of events surprising” (Scott n.p.). Nevertheless, to conclude that Alexie’s primary aim in these stories is merely to bewilder his readers by making his characters behave in “transgressive ways” at the critical moment is to miss other important objectives of the collection intimately related to ideas of Indian masculinity and, more broadly, to “mainstream American



male culture” (cf. Grassian 158). Several critics and reviewers have maintained that Alexie’s fundamental strength lies in his use of irony and sarcasm to criticize and possibly deconstruct the kind of standards of Indianness and masculinity primarily promoted by the dominant culture, but also by “primordialist” Natives reluctant to see their braveness or “spirituality” ever questioned. Author Joyce Carol Oates has observed that Alexie is “the bad boy” among the older generation of Native writers—Momaday, Silko and Erdrich—because his “mocking, self-mocking, unpredictable, unassimilable” (n.p.) voice is likely to unsettle some of the values and traditions that have been considered sacrosanct by some. A few Native scholars have gone so far as to accuse Alexie of being “utterly irreverent” and, even, of submitting to the old mythologies “taught by the oppressors” and colonial rulers (see Cook-Lynn). However, one needs to be a bit obtuse not to realize that, what Alexie is trying to do in his fiction by retrieving some of the historical grievances and racist attitudes of the majority group is to move away from the mainstream standards of a sweetened, sanitized version of Indian literature. As he has stated in several interviews, “You know, as an artist, it’s not my job to fit in; it’s not to belong. I’m not a social worker; I’m not a therapist. It’s my job to beat the shit out of the world. I’m not here to make people feel good” (Capriccioso n.p.).

A great deal of the dark comedy readers hit upon in Alexie’s stories derives from the unanticipated ways in which the author plays with ethnic, sexual, professional, and tribal boundaries. In most instances, those boundaries existing between members of a group and outsiders are reinforced by the emergence of ghosts from the past or some unconscious fears that haunt the characters. Thus, the protagonist of “Indian Country,” Low Man Smith, a successful Coeur D’Alene writer of mystery fiction, experiences a significant degree of sexual and cultural alienation when, during a trip to Montana, he meets up with a former sweetheart, Tracy, who, after ten years, has become a lesbian and an aspiring writer herself. Although both of them have gained weight and Tracy clarifies to him that she has fallen madly in love with a Spokane girl, Sara Polatkin, whom she is planning to marry, Low Man still finds Tracy very desirable: “Forty pounds overweight, she was beautiful, wearing a loose T-shirt and tight blue jeans. Her translucent skin bled light into her dark hair” (137). After Tracy reveals to him that her reason for becoming a lesbian is that “[she’s] running away from the things of man” (139), the key confrontation in the story takes place when the two girlfriends and the bestselling author meet Sara’s homophobic and religiously-minded parents for dinner. Not only is Sid Polatkin offensive about his daughter’s notion of marrying a white woman, but he also disparages Low Man’s talents as a Native writer: “You’re one of the funny Indians, enit? [...] Always making the jokes, never taking it seriously” (144). In spite of Tracy’s and Sara’s considerable efforts to put a lid on the explosive situation, the two men’s ethnic and gender codes prove too indomitable to keep them under control:

Sara looked at Low and wondered yet again why Indian men insisted on being warriors. *Put down your bows and arrows*, she wanted to scream at Low, at her father, at every hypermasculine Injun in the world. *Put down your fucking guns and pick up your kids*. (144, italics in original)



The story ends on a lugubrious note as it becomes clear that Low Man fails to convince Sara's dogmatic father that there are alternatives for love and happiness outside their narrow-minded views on heterosexual, endogenous marriage: "Sid, these women don't belong to us. They live in whole separate worlds, man, don't you know that?" (147). Sid's contentious and violent reaction toward his daughter only confirms Low Man's—and the author's—worst fears about this man's inability to communicate beyond his deeply-rooted sexual prejudice. Still, in Daniel Grassian's opinion, "gender codes aren't completely responsible for the violence; the impoverished conditions on the reservation also contribute to the rage that helps produce the violence" (159). Indeed, the closing scene of the story has been partly foreshadowed earlier on when Low Man recalls life on his Coeur D'Alene Reservation—a very wet and spiritually-monotonous place:

The tourists didn't know, and never would have guessed, that the reservation's monotony might last for months, sometimes years, before one man would eventually pull a pistol from a secret place and shoot another man in the face, or before a group of women would drag another woman out of her house and beat her left eye clean out of her skull. After that first act of violence, rival families would issue calls for revenge and organize the retaliatory beatings. (122)

"Indian Country" concludes with the two male "warriors" crouching on the floor after fighting each other at the restaurant exit and Tracy towering above them, suggesting somehow her moral superiority: "The two Indian men sat on the ground as the white woman stood above them" (148).

In his well-known book *Native American Tribalism*, D'Arcy McNickle mused on the "surprising hardiness" (13) of Indian cultures despite the massive economic and socio-political forces moving them away from their roots and traditions. In order to explain their survival, McNickle quotes several passages from the work of Norwegian social anthropologist Fredrik Barth regarding the phenomenon of "ethnic boundaries":

The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed, even the organizational form of the group may change—yet the fact of continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of continuity. (Barth qtd. in McNickle 14)

Stories such as "Indian Country" and "South by Southwest" make it evident that Alexie is fully aware of both the significant transformation and reduction of cultural difference that Native Americans have experienced—especially, since they began "to go urban" in the 1950s—and the ways in which boundaries have still been maintained between the majority and minority groups in the U.S. While "Indian Country" shows how boundary-maintaining processes are very much at work in the minds of whites and Natives alike, "South by Southwest" is a hilarious experiment to demonstrate the absurdity of such divisions. The story follows a white man, Seymour, and a fat Indian, nicknamed Salmon Boy, "on a nonviolent killing



spre” (58) from Spokane in Washington State to Tucson, Arizona, which becomes a farcical quest for an authentic language of the heart. Of course, the deafening verbal noise of contemporary America does not seem the most hospitable environment for “romantic love” and a male-male relationship to flourish naturally (cf. Peluso n.p.). After robbing the patrons of an International House of Pancakes, the pair of “outlaws”—mostly following Seymour’s extravagant ideas about the Gentlemen Bandits—head South on a journey that makes fun of many of the premises of films and narratives of criminals on the run:

Do you think the police are following us? asked Salmon Boy.  
If they’re not now, said Seymour, they soon will be.  
Well, then, said Salmon Boy. He asked, Do you think we should kiss now?  
It seems like the right time, don’t it? asked Seymour. He licked his lips.  
Yes, it does, said Salmon Boy. He wished he had a mint.  
They kissed, keeping their tongues far away from each other, and then told each other secrets. (60)

Seymour’s and Salmon Boy’s affective relationship has a hard time consolidating due to the many boundaries—some of them racial, others related to gender and sexual codes, and still others linked to their status as fugitives—that society and history have set for them to cross before their feelings can materialize. When Seymour finally asks his partner whether he is learning how to love him near the end of the story, the latter can only show his doubts: “It’s a difficult thing, Salmon Boy said after a long time. Salmon Boy whispered, It’s a difficult thing for one man to love another man whether they kiss each other or not” (73). Although the narrative closes on an optimistic note, with the two “criminals” running out of the local McDonald’s with their bounty “into all the south and southwest that remained in the world” (75), the author has made it clear that their adventure could be either a hopeful first step beyond social boundaries or a short-lived delusion: “They were men in love with the idea of being in love” (75).

Jeff Berglund has remarked that, in the best trickster fashion, “Alexie’s inventive style conveys to readers his characters’ suffering and anguish but also the enduring power of humor and imagination” (xvii). He is convinced of the power of dark irony and storytelling to connect the past, present, and future of the nation so that the most pathetic and the most hopeful facets of human nature—both Native and white—can be shared with readers of all backgrounds. Despite the burden of the traumatizing forces that his people have suffered (see “The Sin Eaters,” *Toughest* 76-120), he believes in the capacity of humor and laughter to heal some of the psychological wounds and to build some productive exchanges with the mainstream culture. In this regard, it is no coincidence that he should resort to references to both the highbrow literary and historical discourse but also to the popular contemporary culture that his readers are more familiar with (cf. Berglund xxvii). In a similar vein to Vizenor, he is positive that Native trickster strategies still have an important role to play in resisting more conventional ways of thinking and forms of writing about “the Indian”:



The trickster is a comic discourse, a collection of “utterances” in oral traditions; the opposite of a comic discourse is a monologue, an utterance in isolation, which comes closer to the tragic mode in literature and not a comic tribal world view. (Vizenor, *Narrative Chance* 191)

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Judy Doenges noted in *The Seattle Times* that *The Toughest Indian* was “a short-story collection more mature, self-assured and witty” than his earlier work in the genre mainly because it portrayed a “community of endearing, odd characters” with great “emotional strength and humor” (n.p.). And she goes on to point out that Alexie is particularly skillful at drawing characters with which the reader can easily connect due to their human flaws and virtues. As my discussion above has shown, his Native characters’ fragility and resilience derives primarily from the fact that they are restless people in motion, moving across various types of boundaries—ethnic, professional, sexual, etc.—that make it difficult for them to define who they really are. It is logical, then, that they should feel annoyed by the general tendency to categorize them under one-dimensional labels that betray the nature of their human dreams and aspirations. As another reviewer rightly explained,

They are stories that let their characters live and breathe; they are stories that refuse easy answers; they are stories in which Alexie shows sympathy and compassion for his characters as people rather than as mere vehicles for his thematic concerns. (Peluso n.p.)

Alexie’s overwhelming sympathy for his characters and his subtle revamps of their identities in tight situations becomes most evident in the last three stories of the collection: “Saint Junior,” “Dear John Wayne,” and “One Good Man.” Interestingly, all of them tell the stories of Indians who, after having spent some time within the context of the mainstream society, decide to return to their reservations for reasons often related to their responsibilities to their community or their inability to find the relationships and lifestyle they wanted in urban milieus. Fixico has described at some length the serious problems that Native Americans faced in trying to adapt to urban environs during the Relocation Program launched by the Government after World War II (18-23). Like other scholars, this author also puts the blame of the early failure of many Indians to integrate properly in city contexts on the stereotyping and social stigmatization that they suffered those first two decades (Fixico 26-38). In “Saint Junior,” Roman Gabriel Fury and his wife, Grace Atwater, live a fairly simple life on the reservation, he as a basketball coach and she as a fourth-grade teacher. Although both of them had the talent and intellectual potential to succeed in the mainstream world, they run into barriers along their way—in the form of prejudice and discrimination—that incite them to return to their birthplace where they come to believe in “one basic truth: It was easy to make another person happy” (177). Although the confined existence they lead on the reservation probably lacks



much of the excitement and glamour that they had enjoyed away from it, they are able to invent little rituals and ceremonies that help them stick together: “Damn, marriage was hard work, was manual labor, and *unpaid* manual labor at that. Yet, year after year, Grace and Roman had pressed their shoulders against the stone and rolled it up the hill together” (178, italics in original).

The closing story of the collection, “One Good Man,” brings together many of the qualities we have seen represented in the other tales discussed in this article: there is the pain, the shame, the anger, and, of course, the humor. Once again, the protagonist—who also tells the story in this case—is an Indian urbanite who returns to his reservation to take care of his dying, diabetic father. The tone of the story is typically bittersweet because the narrator feels compelled to revisit his father’s—and his own—past in order to contemplate his/their missteps and partial victories:

I thought about my father’s opportunities and his failures, about the man he should have been and the man he had become. *What is an Indian?* Is it a man with a good memory? I thought about the pieces of my father—his children and grandchildren, his old shoes and unfinished novels—scattered all over the country. [...]. I wondered if there was some kind of vestigial organ inside all of us that collected and stored our grief. (231, italics in the original)

Although the question “*What is an Indian?*” comes up several times in the story as some sort of refrain and is given different potential answers, in the end the narrator realizes that showing his love and care for his progenitor in his final days may prove more productive to his self-knowledge than any of the other features he comes to associate to his ethnicity.

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