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"INDIAN? FICTION? INDIAN FICTION? COMMUNICATING CULTURE BETWEEN RESERVATION AND NON-RESERVATION REALITIES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN LITERATURE" BY JUDIT SZATHMÁRI

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American Indian fiction is often regarded a “cultural manual” constructed to cover “a curriculum designed for the outsider” (Treuer 16). If one accepts its function as a “cultural manual,” its creators and users should both be regarded as distinctly different parties whose mutual aim is to establish new channels of communication and a better understanding between Indian and non-Indian communities. However, problematic issues arise from the application of this metaphor. Early writers of Indian literature felt alienated from their native communities specifically because of their attempts to bridge the communication gap between Indians and non-Indians. Today’s readers are expected to display more sensitivity, and through exposure to the vast pool of “cultural manuals” so readily available eventually increase their ability to initiate literary communication and be more responsive to it.

Contrary to David Treuer’s concept of the cultural manual function, Gerald Vizenor states: “Postindian warriors ... counter the surveillance and literature of dominance with their own simulation of survivance” (5). Vizenor’s claim establishes an entirely different aim for contemporary Indian fiction. Manifest manners backfire, and today’s Indian fiction functions as a method of survival of a culture popularly regarded as exotic, extinct, but at best invisible in mainstream America. Contemporary Indian literature in particular is permeated with questions of belonging, distancing and balancing. However contradictory they may seem, both the function of Indian literature as cultural manual and its function as simulation of survivance are valid, as the mechanisms of communicating Indian culture through literature in Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and his short story collection titled *The Toughest Indian in the World* illustrate. In *The Invention of Native American Literature* Robert Dale Parker contends that “[t]here is nothing necessarily artistic in cultural identity, but in the act of expressing itself cultural identity takes on aesthetic form” (3). Contemporary Indian fiction creates possible forms of expressing identity by fighting the generalizations of Indian cultural identities and

posing new textual challenges. Since in Vizenor's view "the Postindian is the absence of invention, and the end of representation in literature" (11) in the following I will demonstrate how Alexie's latest prose work utilizes and at the same time modifies the American Indian literary tradition in its function as a cultural manual.

Although the author's ethnic affiliation may be seen as adequate reason to classify his work as American Indian fiction, the fact that "over the last thirty years Native American fiction has been defined as, exclusively, literature written by Indians" (Treuer 3) calls for a more explicit definition of first what should be considered Indian and secondly what is regarded Indian literature. Alexie's standpoint on the issue is: "If I write it, it's an Indian novel. If I wrote about Martians, it would be an Indian novel. If I wrote about the Amish, it would be an Indian novel. That's who I am" (qtd. in Grassian 7). He also comments on the popular understanding of Indian fiction and denounces "the corn-pollen, four directions, eagle-feathered school of Native literature" (qtd. in Grassian 7). Alexie's explicitly voiced creed is "to concern the daily lives of Indians" (qtd. in Grassian 8).

Such a belief entails the inevitable application of the notions of identity and authenticity, which Treuer terms "the terrible twins" (5). Vizenor further buttresses the issue when stating: "simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary'" (13). I consider it crucial to ask "what traditions and habits of thought have been mobilized and by what means" (Treuer 5) in Alexie's fiction. Reading his stories with these questions in mind enables the reader to make a clear distinction between "Indian" and "fiction," and shift the focus to the latter.

A characteristic feature of Alexie's fiction is how book titles themselves entangle the reader in the concept of what an Indian is. In *Indian Killer*, *First Indian on the Moon*, *Ten Little Indians* and *The Toughest Indian in the World*, and one may well add *Reservation Blues*, Alexie mobilizes "what the reader thinks he knows about Indians ... The result is the kind of sentiment Alexie most abhors – a form of knowingness based on nothing" (Treuer 24). In a slightly modified form, the ethnic component will be the reader's primary point of reference with respect to the story.

The mobilization of this "knowingness based on nothing" functions as a reaction to the still prevalent concept of Indians as an invisible, inaudible minority, therefore fictional Indians seem to possess a more active and visible presence than real-life Indian people (Treuer 11). This larger than life role is responsible for the representative function of Indian literary characters. Arnold Spirit-Junior of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is not merely a Spokane teenager living on the Spokane Indian reservation with aspirations that lead him to stray from familiar surroundings and eventually enter an all white school. He is also an embodiment of a community, a tribal and ethno-racial minority voice speaking of and for a culture displaying signs of manifest manners in order to conform to the literature of dominance. In this interpretation Arnold Spirit strengthens the notions of "less than human and more than human, [...] the fetishized antiselves made by civilizing histories" (Vizenor 38). Thus, *The Diary*, fictional even if permeated with the personal, records the life not only of an individual, but of the Spokane Indian reservation, the Spokane tribe, and the American Indian ethno-racial block.

Similarly, the plot of "One Good Man," the closing story of *The Toughest Indian in the World* also combines personal, tribal, and ethno-racial notions. The story of a middle-aged son fulfilling the last wish of his diabetic father to go to Mexico moves beyond the exploration of the father-son relationship and extends its scope to self-identification. The first person narrative voice keeps posing the recurring question of "What is an Indian." Answers phrased as questions range from personal ("is it a son who can stand in a doorway and watch his father sleep?" [222]; "is it a son who had always known where his

father kept his clothes in neat military stacks?" [230]) to tribal ("is it a child who can stroll unannounced through the front doors of seventeen different houses?" [217]; "is it a son who brings his father to school as show-and-tell?" [227]) to ethno-racial ("is it a man with a spear in his hands?" [229]; "is it a man with a good memory?" [231]) to Postindian ("is it a boy who can sing the body electric or a woman who could not stop for death?"²¹⁸; "is it the lead actor in a miracle or the witness who remembers the miracle?" [221]). Not until the very last repeated question does the narrator answer in a declarative sentence: "What is an Indian? I lifted my father and carried him across every border" (238). This very declarative act combines the personal, tribal, ethno-racial and Postindian components.

It is significant that the "what" question is never changed to "who is an Indian." The most general of the 15 answers is:

Of course I was [an Indian]. 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 always spoken it like a Jesuit priest. Hell, I've 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 because I'd told each and every one of them. I knew the real names, the nicknames, and secret names of every dog that had lived on the reservation during the last twenty years. (Alexie, *Toughest* 225)

Such a self-designation plays upon the reader's preconceptions of reservation Indian life, and it both criticizes and reinforces the knowingness based on nothing. As Vizenor sees it "some Postindian warriors feign the [...] masks of a real tribal presence" (13). It is also significant to mention that there is hardly any stylistic difference between the middle-aged, college-educated off-reservation literature teacher of "One Good Man" and Arnold Spirit-Junior of *The Diary*. This similarity may derive from the tendency to portray Indian deaths as communal rituals generally attributed to American Indian fiction. Death as a timeless notion may unite the middle-aged and the teenager in their discourse on the past.

INDIAN DEATHS AS COMMUNAL RITUALS

Treuer views Indian death as an ultimate determinant of contemporary fiction, acknowledging that the phenomenon is rooted in the 19th-century romantic literatures on Indians. "Indian death is never private, it is always attended by larger meanings ... It is death that gives fictional Indians their power. Death grants them a knowing essence. And Indians ... function as knowing ghosts whose presence alone speaks back in time to the crimes committed against them" (Treuer 16). Vizenor also acknowledges the significance of death as a notion without any possibility of simulation (16).

Death, although not a central issue to the teenage Junior's every day life, does bear larger meanings in *The Diary* than it may seem on the surface. Reading the diary as a record of some (post)modern initiation ritual attaches a deeper significance to the three deaths Junior witnesses in his life. His devotion to his distant sister, the wise grandmother and his father's best friend explains the tragedy of their loss to him, but their untimely, accidental and violent deaths are deprived of personal significance. All die "Indian deaths," recurring motifs in Alexie's fiction. The sister is killed in a house fire while drunk, Eugene is shot in the face by a friend for the last sip of a bottle of wine, and the grandmother is run over by a drunk driver. Alcoholism, depravity, cultural loss, and invisibility all evoke long-known associations of Indian cultures and overwrite the personal tragedy of the loss of loved ones. Even more so, since all three characters are

explicitly attached to the reservation they function as the Indian component in Junior's transitory Indianness. Likewise, in "One Good Man" the slow agony of the diabetic father prompts the narrator to contemplate his own identity. Thus, in both works, death becomes a central motif to trigger the arising need of self-identification.

Due to the nature of the diary and also to Arnold Spirit-Junior's own estrangement from everyone, even his own body, *The Diary* is replete with the use of the first person singular. Yet the grandmother's funeral scene and to some extent the sister's death prompt Junior to reflect: "And when we said good-bye to one grandmother, we said good-bye to all of them. Each funeral was a funeral for all of us. We lived and died together" (Alexie, *Diary* 166). The only other time the narrative voice shifts into first person plural is in Arnold's records of Reardan basketball games. While the latter is justified by the team spirit of which he craves to be part, funerals and wakes receive a universal quality. However down to earth they may seem, both the funerals and basketball acquire a communal ritualistic quality also characteristic of American Indian fiction. This ritualistic quality may tempt the reader to consider *The Diary* as a manifestation of culture instead of viewing it merely as "capable of *suggesting* culture" (Treuer 5), even if the title forces the reader to expect a very personal narrative, not a cultural one.

QUEST FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY

The process by which the main character arrives in a modern urban environment and his reaction to that environment are characteristic of minority literatures. In the course of experience which may later lead to adjustment, the ego becomes a stranger to itself, an Other to mirror its own identity (Boelhower 26-27). In Alexie's fiction, the image of the part-time Indian embodies this notion. Arnold Spirit-Junior ceases to be able to exercise control over his own body and memories; the identity shaping capacity of these phenomena is shifted to his reaction to the new environment. In Western culture the notion of part-time is generally associated with work. In the sense of ethnic identity rarely do we claim ourselves or are we claimed to be sometimes Hungarian, American, or American Indian and other times affiliated with different identities. Yet, the connotation of part-time suggests the temporal, voluntary, and alterable nature of ethnic identity, an on-off play of ethno-racial affiliations identified by David Hollinger as a postethnic perspective. Hollinger himself refrains from the more explicit application of the term society and prefers perspective as a future possibility, thereby allowing for a more flexible structure.

Resounding Hollinger's perspective, Alexie's title also suggests a conscious commuting between ethno-racial blocs at any given time. In the given settings provided by the bipolar topography of the reservation and the all-white high school, Junior is supposed to invoke certain affiliations rooted in the physical locale. The family and his old friend Rowdy are expected to strengthen his Spokane identity. Yet the plot is constructed along the tensions deriving from the lack of this strengthening. Junior, after an act of juvenile delinquency at his old Spokane reservation school – and a pseudo-conversation with the white math teacher involved – decides to transfer to the socially and ethnically homogeneous, all white high school off the reservation. Symbolically he scouts an antagonistic setting for his developing identity. The school acts as kind of indicator to test his Otherness or sense of difference. Part-time thus gains a pragmatic interpretation, because – unlike in "One Good Man" – what or who is an Indian has never been an issue on the reservation, while after his transfer he has to face his own Indianness from 9:00 to

5:00, in something like a full-time job. The reservation is designated as "HOME," as indicated by Junior's illustrative cartoon (Alexie, *Diary* 43). The signs read: "Rez/Home ↔ Hope/???" (43). The reservation is juxtaposed by hope, whereas home has no explicit counterpart on the guide posts. To the Indians remaining within reservation borders, Junior becomes the Other: by genealogy not a non-Indian, yet an outsider, a traitor who voluntarily decides to pursue happiness in accordance with the rules of the enemy. The metaphoric teaching offered by the off-reservation setting is rather a process of learning whereby Junior's ethnic identity is explicitly outlined by the reception of two opposing homogeneous communities, never achieving the community consent Hollinger considers a prerequisite for a postethnic identity. Thus, the cultural manual function is offered to the character and not the reader.

This quest for ethnic identity is confirmed by the setting of *The Diary*. The plot is not divided between the reservation and the small off-reservation town: topographically Junior spends much more time travelling between the reservation and the off-reservation town than at either of the geographically clearly defined places. As Paula Gunn Allen explains, the notion of orientation is one of the cornerstones of American Indian literature: "orienting oneself to the directions is basic to all Native North American peoples" and thus "the directions themselves are the major motif" (110). This orientation is physically recorded in *The Diary*. Furthermore, it is elevated to the position of a vision quest, also a culturally specific notion. If "ritual is a language construct that contains the power to transform something (or someone) from one state or condition to another" (Allen 103), the experience of the personal and its individualistic presentation suggests the ritualistic mode of the plot. Similarly, the journey from Washington to Mexico is a quest for identity for the narrator of "One Good Man." Having decided to leave the reservation, the unnamed narrator establishes an independent life off tribal grounds, but his father's approaching death brings him back to venture upon yet another journey in the course of which he recurrently poses the question of "what is an Indian." Thus, a part-time Indian is a commuting, if not transitory Indian whose adolescent instability is enhanced by his voluntary shifting between two locales.

MOVEMENT AND TRAVELLING

The motif of movement and travelling has always been central to American Indian literatures, and in view of white Indian relations it is not by accident. While 19th century autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works are replete with images of trains taking the individual into a fearful unknown, these images are also testimonies to the loss of tribal and Indian cultures. Accordingly, many Indian authors of the 19th century designed their works to be educational for the mainstream, white society, and in some cases to serve as an explanation of the plight of the Indian (see Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins' *Life Among the Piute* or Charles Alexander Eastman's *The Soul of the Indian*). It is important to note that most of these authors were one way or another associated with white culture, many of them mix-bloods, and genealogy distanced them from both cultures. This distance, however gains a novel significance in Alexie's *Diary*.

As a travelling character, Junior lacks such a genetic motivation: his Indian identity is unquestionable, yet problematic. He feels trapped by the reservation boundaries and is seeking a new terrain in an initially antagonistic environment. His decision to transfer schools contradicts the myth of the "restless young men with nothing to do" (Parker 5), which Parker considers a cornerstone of Indian fiction. Junior, and, as a matter of fact, the narrator of "One Good Man" tend to "so little value their doing that they misread it as nothing" (5), as Parker would argue. They both counteract the compulsory silence by reflecting on their everyday personal experiences, and the plot is also a manifestation of

this active presence. "I had never wanted to contribute to the brain drain, to be yet another of the best and brightest Indians to abandon his or her tribe to the Indian leaders who could not spell the word sovereignty" (Alexie, *Toughest* 220) says the unnamed narrator of "One Good Man." As for Junior, he feels suffocated by the reservation. While like Parker, the reader is preconditioned to suppose a typically Indian lack of motivation, *The Diary* in a more or less chronological order recounts an experience very strongly rooted in Indian culture. Thus, despite the first person narrative voice, it becomes representative Indian text.

ORAL, CYCLIC, AND DIALOGIC DIMENSIONS OF THE SACRED

The genre of the diary in itself would suggest a rewriting of contemporary Indian literature in the face of the oral tradition. The sacred power of words is derived from their active presence in "the dimension between the ordinary and the extraordinary" (Momaday 16). While their sacred power serves a healing function, they are also capable of bridging the distance between the sacred and the mundane. Early in the opening pages Junior says, "I draw because words are too unpredictable. I draw because words are too limited... 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 have a look at it and say, 'That's a flower'" (Alexie, *Diary* 5). Here, the sacred power of words is seemingly replaced by universal visual images the storyteller considers more functional than the written story. Paradoxically, however, the choice of genre becomes ambiguous because just before the justification of drawing Junior claims that cartoons never speak for themselves. The sanctity of words is further employed in the clarification of cartoons, or rather the latter serve as simplified and generalized visual supplement to the ritualistic employment of language.

Alexie further highlights the ambiguity of the sanctity of language by the exclusive use of English. In *The Diary* Junior never claims to have any relation with the Spokane language, while in *The Toughest Indian in the World* mother-tongue communication of the elders is transcribed into English, indicated by italics. Junior's interest in language is evoked by his new friend, Gordy (a fellow stranger, estranged by his intellect in small town Washington), who constantly teaches him seemingly irrelevant English lessons in vocabulary. For Junior, drawing, whereas for Gordy, linguistic lectures on words such as "tautology, singular wit, Anglophile," provide a means of escape from their position as the Other.

Although Junior's narrative sticks to a linear concept of time in his organization of entries, universalizing the personal is resonant of the traditional cyclical time of American Indian literature. Its predictable generic characteristics notwithstanding, *The Diary* is not bound either by time or by place. Similarly, "One Good Man" is a chronological road story on the surface, beginning with the construction of the ramp to the HUD house on the reservation after the character's return from town and ending in the possible border crossing to Mexico. Yet it evokes a train of associations surpassing the personal plot. Such an implied conversation between the personal and the universal is akin with the dialogical nature of American Indian literature that has often been stressed as a characteristic feature. The notion presupposes an interaction between the text and the reader analogous to the relationship between storyteller and listener. The genre of the diary, however, blocks all attempts to participate actively in the plot. The reader will always be an outsider who may identify with and feel compassion for the characters, but will never actively participate in the everyday events of the storyteller's life. "Culture, as a concept, as an idea promoted by the characters, culture as a subject" (Treuer 56) is presented, but never does it allow the outsider to trespass.

CLOSING NOTE

With fictional conversations between the sacred and the mundane remaining ever implied, Sherman Alexie's fiction continues to serve as a "cultural manual" both for those living in reservation-Indian realities and for those in non-Indian worlds—and for the many positions in transition. Characteristic features of American Indian culture(s), such as notions of Indianness, rituals, travelling, orality, and time, become fictionalized in order to problematize personal and communal identification via quests in geographic and temporal spaces. Thus, the critically acclaimed function of contemporary Indian literatures to discuss questions of belonging, distancing and balancing is aptly served by Alexie's works, which prove that writing a "cultural manual" about Indian realities today actually involves a "simulation of survivance."

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