

Trickster Maneuvers or Minimum Morality in *The Toughest Indian in the World*

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There is a long littleness to life. But there is also a magnificence when life is connected to all other lives and storytelling grown out of a strong oral tradition contextualizes tense, creates a transformational realism that surrounds even the limited present tense to give largeness to the littleness.

I started with the words of W. S. Penn (176) to lay the groundwork for a confession I must divulge. Namely, formatted as a reader by postcolonial criticism that emphasizes how, being culturally determined, we can never really know the other but as a projection of ourselves, for a long time I wondered how am I, coming from as a distinct culture as Montenegrin, able to become “an active reader, observing tricksters,” how do I enter “the written performance” (Hill 116) of a Native American narrative at all? Working on the controversial text of Sherman Alexie, whose intentional frivolousness and abject simplicity of tricksters have confused many a reader, I was not very encouraged. I comforted myself with the fact that criticism has stretched the concept of trickster so much that it easily involves any effort of metaphorical border crossing and laughter, as discourteous as it sometimes appears. Gradually, what seemed to be the least traditional feature in Alexie’s work, an abundance of markers of popular culture, struck me as a potent and discomfiting challenge, inviting me, as good storytelling always does, to participate in the construction of meaning of our mutual present.

Perhaps it will be strange to hear that I came to the present reading via a South African author of South Slavic (!) origin, Ivan Vladislavic, who, writing his short story “Journal of a Wall,”¹ minutely records the progression of a literal construction of a wall between his and his neighbor’s house, asserting, finally, that the very story that is being written becomes the wall. It is true that we all have imprisoned ourselves within the fictional walls we are building around ourselves, but it is also true that just as this narrator has decided to make his little secret imprint on a brick of the neighbor’s wall, we somehow manage to communicate through the small holes, even in the deconstructive parlance of today, giving our little kick at the emptiness of this seemingly godless universe.

Gazing into the colorful event on the front cover of Alexie’s book, I recognize the comic techniques he is adopting, and I think “so, he feels he is not taken seriously” and decides to give a cartoonish mirror to the “televisual” culture, as he described it once (Grassian 11). As I observe the cover and the play with images of Indian with braids, a salmon flying in the background that looks as if it were the Indian’s hat, and the inevitable John Wayne on the front of his T-shirt, I think, as Julian Barnes says in *England, England* (1998), one important thing of becoming a nation is taking its history wrong. As Wayne looks

¹ Ivan Vladislavic, *Portrait of Keys*, 2006.

to one side, the Indian looks to another side, proudly disposing his typical Indian profile as he turns his right cheek to me. I don't know what the three painted stripes on his cheek mean, but their color matches that of the salmon, as well as Wayne's scarf – and it is already hilarious: so, he is going to dismantle the whole Manifest Destiny mythology projected through the legendary trooper!² I understand that the glaring colors reinforce the message of contrasts. And this Indian certainly reminds me of Harry Fonseca's coyotes, especially of those found in Kenneth Lincoln's interpretation in *Indi'n Humor*.³ There, I've got so far in grasping Alexie's native "mystique."

Still, I cannot help thinking how ignorantly this Indian wears the imprint on his breast (along with the lone star in his right ear), and I want to protest. My reaction is also provoked by a discomfort in not recognizing clearly who is the ignorant (person or people) this ridicule is actually addressing. Besides, elaborating on the subverting humor of the contemporary coyote, Lincoln fears that

Coyote facing disaster ... may prove an opaque totemic mask removed from tribal context. One danger in cavalierly appropriating Trickster lies in slurring 'other' cultures, indulging the hurt of history fictively, milking the massacres, playing ethnic. There are issues of cultural taste, even among Coyotes. Indians observe an almost sacred witness of their past, particularly their suffering. Here a sense of permitted boundaries and tribal respects comes into play, as Coyote's inverse behavior turns on tribal encodings. In this regard, who grants Trickster permissions of disrespect? Are there artistic standards of trickery? Does anything go? (*Indi'n* 153)

Then, the pop art reproduction of this Indian introduces a sorrowful note on the cover. This "one little Indian," crucified between the salmon and John Wayne repeats four times (I will not go into exaggerations to interpret the sacred number), but it doesn't fade like the famous Warhol's diptych of Marilyn Monroe. I assume it means that the person is not degraded in replications – maybe he has suffered degradation on some other diptych, in some other replicas, but not here. Here this Indian asserts his indolent existence upon the wall of serious literature. And the quotation from the *Chicago Tribune* review by Carolyn Alessio copied on the front cover says that Alexie is here "at his most inventive and heart-rending." Heart-rending, indeed, but it is a parody of invention!

Reading the short story "South by Southwest" in my Native American literature class,⁴ we approached the text as a clowning full of sorrow, a replica of the famous movie *Easy Riders*, in which Alexie's two "riders on the storm," one white man who is, therefore, "allowed to be romantic" (Alexie 57), and a fat Indian, stereotypically named Salmon Boy, want to do their "nonviolent killing spree" and are in love with the idea of love, but somehow always fail to appear really dangerous and have to cope with themselves being just a replica of the above mentioned. As they make sure they do their simulation properly, they try to kiss

² I am indebted to Mr. Richard Holloway, director of Native American Library at the national Guard in Pineville, Louisiana, for pointing out the irony that the shirts most worn by Marion Michael Morrison a.k.a. John Wayne a.k.a. the "Duke" in his western movies are of a salmon color. Might it be that Wayne himself was conducting a pre-Alexie slight of Native Americans and some of their affinities, as is that for salmon?

³ "He does not discriminate. He is daring, comically overdone, garishly modish [...] Coyote meditates the 'old ways' and new fads. He improvises the new steps in the embattled dance of native life; he acculturates Indian resistance to and necessity of accommodating with Euroamerican 'invasion' over tribal soils, social ways, cultural mores, and tragic ecosystems" (Lincoln, *Indi'n*, 148).

⁴ I taught a one-semester course on contemporary Native American literature at the Department of Art, English, and Humanities of the Louisiana State University at Alexandria in autumn 2009.

to see if they could love one another, they are earnest, open, and gentle to one another, and they discourage every queer reading. They would make an image of beautiful friendship and love, if they were not in a cartoonish comedy, and not fictional characters at all, nor even marionettes, but “semiotic signs” that sadly mirror (not only ridicule) our virtual life. As “easy riders” fail to attend the Mardi Grass, Salmon boy has also failed to go to Disneyland, as well as failed to see the latest Batman movie. Instead he remembers watching a fragment of a movie in which a boy is gazing out of the window into a night and into a rider who is riding in circles, alas, around a statue. Although I still cannot remember what this movie is, to the dominant culture circles suggest the image of a merry-go-around that takes us back to the existentialist philosophy, the myth of Sisyphus, and, invoking the absurdity of life, always prolongs the nausea; while the snow that falls throughout this story can metaphorically represent the “white” culture,⁵ but it is also same snow that in Joyce’s “Dead” “falls [in the simple present] upon all the living and the dead,” reflecting an overall emotional paralysis and becoming an allegory of death.

Playing simulacra, Alexie’s “questers” blunder into an old woman’s house, whose mental disorder mirrors the surrounding carnival, and where they are told stories of our life, i.e. of war and loneliness. Then, as I was reading this story with the class, David, one of my students, in a truly perplexed manner asked, “What do you make of the grass?” We laughed at my ridiculously stretched interpretations. I also said I thought grass is/was just a matter of farce, but, to be honest, I came to terms with this farce after a lot of struggle. Thus, I am presenting this hilarious passage below, which perhaps functions as a violent passion surrogate (*Brave New World*), giving us as huge an amount of random violence as our corrupted imagination expects:

She said, He was a reluctant soldier. He shot a dozen men, a dozen of those Japs, on some island in 1943. He shot twelve of them, shot six of them in the head, four of them in the heart, and two of them in the belly. He shot twelve of them without thinking, didn’t stop to wonder what it meant, but then number thirteen came running over the hill, over the grassy hill.

What color was the grass, asked Seymour.

What do you mean? Asked the old woman. She asked, What do you mean what color was the grass? The grass is always green. Don’t you know that? Don’t you know the grass is always green.

But it was a different part of the world, said Seymour, I thought maybe the grass is a different color in a different part of the world.

The grass is green in every part of the world, said the old woman. She said, On Mars, the grass is green.

The grass is green on my reservation, said Salmon Boy. He was telling the truth.

There you go, said the old woman, there you go. Even the Indian knows the grass is green. (Alexie 66)

But it is always like that in Indian stories, the more hilarious they appear the more serious they really are! Although, technically, the grass is not always green, depending on the time of year (the state of Kentucky is known for its “bluegrass”), in this story the palimpsest and farce is an intentional subversion of sign in a reified world, in which even the idea of

⁵ As it does, for example, at the end of James Welch’s novel *Fools Crow* or Costner’s movie *Dances with Wolves*.

hyperreality no longer matters. The death of this snow has covered all the differences and it is white everywhere – up and down and all around, and the artist achieves a perfect *tabula rasa* on which he/she is free to write whatever they want. But Lincoln asks, “Free to what? To exploit Indian issues? To rip off Tricksters? To trip through intercultural insult?” (*Indi’n* 158). I wonder, who assumes responsibility for action in this crazy world? But I am afraid to ask who grants this responsibility.

And I read Alexie as my friend, a South African scholar, Jim Phelps, reads graffiti as sign-defacing expression upon walls as metaphorical conventions. A similar vandalism of self-repetition upon the seriousness of conventional books that we perceive in Alexie’s work comes from the recognition that being a man of letters, a writer must write, but addressing an *hypocrite lecteur* of a po-po-mo world in which the ludicrous conception everything has lost the value of meaning, is indeed “courting disaster.”⁶ The author must address us, therefore, either through establishment of an ironic brotherhood (– *mon semblable*, – *mon frère*, says Charles Baudelaire); or, poignantly feeling himself already fictionalized as an angry author (Lincoln calls him “Crazy Horse of the mass market”⁷), he dramatizes his rhetorical despair through this uproarious farce to show how, indeed, even the sacred four directions are sometimes not enough to contain all the paradox of life (Ballinger 31). I read Alexie’s text, therefore, not as a perfected sign but as *beginning intention*, a power to initiate projects in the real world (Said 82-84), which is an ephemeral performance that seemingly suggests degradation of high into pop art, and further on of comics into the scandalous graffiti, to surface up, finally, not as a word but as a gesture, a kick at the wall of our existential confusion. It becomes the “KOOL KILLER,” an act of insurrection, destruction of signs, yet not to degrade the sign to final absence, but exactly to give it room to resurrect⁸. However, as Phelps argues, relying on Baudrillard, “the vital dimension of the power and the ultimate freedom of this kick” lies in its ephemerality: “In the oppressive normality of capitalist consumption and possession [this kick] exemplifies the unconsumed and unpossessed, and as this becomes more evanescent the more appealing it is” (10).

Crucified indeed is he between a need to ridicule and an impulse to weep. And when I read the last page of this book, I see how this kick grows into a graceful flash upon our “species consciousness” – our sins, faithlessness, and fragility, but also our beauty, and divinity. When the narrator in “One Good Man” (prior to metaphorically carrying his invalid father across every border), as in a special holy trinity of his own life, meditates his identity, his relationship with his dying father on one hand, and his son who’s now under the care of one good white man on the other hand, wonders about the means that could help him cope with this unbearably intensifying feeling of love and fear of loss when they happen together and, indeed, cross each other, he says,

I wanted to ask my father about his regrets. I wanted to ask him what was the worst thing he’d ever done. His greatest sin. I wanted to ask him if there was any reason why the Catholic Church would consider him for sainthood. I wanted to open up his dictionary and find definitions for faith, hope, goodness, sadness, tomato, son, mother, husband, virginity. Jesus, wood, sacrifice, pain, foot, wife, thumb, hand, bread and sex.

⁶ Elaborating on the accretive method of traditional storytelling, in contrast to the linear structuring of Euroamerican form of short story, Paula Gunn Allen says that when Native Americans attempt to write a short story, which to them is a foreign form, they are always courting disaster (“American Indian Fiction”).

⁷ “On Sherman Alexie.”

⁸ After Baudrillard’s title “KOOL KILLER, or the Insurrection of Signs.”

‘Do you believe in God?’ I asked my father.
 ‘God has lots of potential,’ he said.
 ‘When you pray,’ I asked him. ‘What do you pray about?’
 ‘That’s none of your business,’ he said.
 We laughed. (Alexie 237-238)

What is the toughest Indian in the world? Is it that trickster who has the courage to laugh at death? What is an Indian? Someone who is “just as fucked up as everybody else,” Alexie says.⁹

And it is a proper farce as the last lines of the book take us back to the beginning, so that we can again observe the series of repeated images of an amounting grief hidden behind the laughter. Still gazing at this ignorant imprint, I remember Warhol’s diptych again; how it poignantly depicts degradation of an idol and reverses the original idea of diptychs which in Christian tradition served to express worship. But it is not only Monroe’s person, but also her persona in the oldest meaning of the world (that of a mask as a conventional means in a theater performance) that is degraded. Have we rendered ourselves devoid of our humanity, of our ability to sympathize, having turned all the stories into fiction, having ignorantly eaten the sins of our signs blindly falling into an ever deepening reification? And finally I realize how paradoxically Alexie’s book suggests a leap into the beyond, a return to the transcendence, asking us not only how we approach our mortality, or our death in life, but if we can assume that minimum morality in this post-religious world. With a similar regret in his book *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951), Theodor Adorno argues that “[t]he only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique.” From this perspective, the world will show “displace[d] and estrange[d] ... with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought” (Aphorism 153).

Alexie’s concern with his own writing could be considered to go parallel with the topics he exploits. When his urban Indians become accepted by the dominant culture, an important question arises that requires a lot of wisdom and patience. Namely, as the acceptance assumes certain invisibility, with this invisibility, as they walk around the text looking “like a Gap ad,” (Alexie, 50) do Alexie’s characters get freedom or they lose meaning – even that of a taboo? As cultural identity has significantly to do with representations, is it necessary to reinforce back the old stereotypes to be recognized and heard? To answer the question, Alexie exploits the city as a cognitive model for contemplating our cultural feelings. If a nation/reservation is a space of identification (as in the last short story in the collection, “One Good Man”), the city (as in its introductory short story, “Assimilation”) is experiential and existential space. While a nation keeps to the concepts of stability and continuity, the principle of urbanity goes together with the category of multitude: it is in the urban context that people can experience their existence as an existence of multitude, an open and changeable multiplicity (Dejvid i Robins 474-475). I believe that this notion informs Alexie’s narrative choice of this chaotic but reflexive genre.

⁹ In the “Torrez Interview, August 31, 1999”, Alexie says: “I think there are three stages of Indian-ness: The first stage is where you feel inferior because you’re Indian, and most people 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. No better no worse. I try to be in that stage” (Coulombe 108).

As the violence of the abrupt pace of contemporary life doesn't allow us time to grasp a set of standards in relation to which to measure our values, and as we are "receptive only to the extent we allow our situation to speak," Walter Benjamin says, "[i]t seems as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the surest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences" (12).¹⁰ Unavoidably, the storytelling crumbles into laughter and, sometimes, an incomprehensible cry. Yet, by "violating ruptures alternative to the blankness and ugliness of the normal," as Jim Phelps argues, this cry does "play a role in awakening dormant sympathy in the urbanized consciousness for, and identification with, the other" (10).

My Canadian friend Garry Watson (and that is how I establish my four directions and round up the paper with the little help of my friends) in his seminal book *Opening Doors: Thoughts From (and of) the Outside* (2008) investigates group identity, belief and the problem of belonging as important issues for rethinking religion. Drawing on Levinas' conception that God is the name for responsibility, Watson turns to Derrida's discussion of the importance of the acceptance of grief and the inevitability of guilt.¹¹ In a more recent essay, Derrida argues that there is no real difference between willing and unwilling (or reluctant) murder: we are responsible for the lack of attention and carelessness, for what we do intentionally and willingly, as well as for what we do unconsciously, and, finally, for what we do not do at all (*Adieu*, 1995). From here Watson goes to Slavoj Žižek's book *Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (2005), in which Žižek discusses one of Che Guevara's famous speeches about the merciless hate towards the enemy that transforms men into cold murderous machines, whereas on the other side, he describes the true revolutionary as a being led by a powerful feeling of love. Unlike Žižek, who concludes that revolutionary violence does not lead to a nonviolent harmony, but, on the contrary, the authentic revolutionary emancipation is more directly identified with violence itself, as it carries the quest of exclusion, establishment of difference, and defines the line of separation, I believe that Alexie's laughter at the end of the book, when he finally establishes his being, the identity of his character, of the narrator, the author, as well as of his writing at the frontier,¹² is an angelic violation at the wall of human empirical boundaries, "a kick at misery," (Boulton 47),¹³ not only a hole in the story of our historical pain, but the demolition of the wall – and a guest of inclusion!

As literature must situate itself in space, new books have always been provoking a lot of commotion among the old books (we have witnessed it even as far back in the past as 1704 in Swift's parable *The Battle of Books*). Therefore, if Alexie's book develops through the shameless ridicule of serious books, a farcical palimpsest of the images of our historical guilt, it is not to reinforce the misery back, but exactly to empty it of meaning. As the toughest Indian in the world suggests, maybe whites will disappear if they are ignored enough times (Alexie 22). I am just reminded of what Nietzsche was saying about the benefits and the detriments of history. He suggests that our ability to forget is of the same crucial importance for human well-

¹⁰ Benjamin further argues that "counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. (Quite apart from the fact that a man is receptive only to the extent that he allows his situation to speak.) Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" (14).

¹¹ *L'écriture et la différence*, 1966.

¹² Here I refer to Louis Owens' conception of frontier writing, as "unstable, multidirectional, hybridized, characterized by heteroglossia, and indeterminate" (Owens 26).

¹³ Arguing with critics and contemporary realist writing in defense of his novels that were mostly criticized for the lack of recognizable form, D. H. Lawrence claimed that a new vital literary voice must always be "a kick at misery," i.e. in pronounced argument against the conventional, ready-made forms (Boulton, 47).

being as is our ability to remember. However, this ability to forget is not cruelty or stupidity: but an ability to live and remember that to live means to be unrighteous at the same time.

I believe that it is exactly here that Alexie's tricksterish narrator takes the authority upon his text back home, humbly, unassumingly. He undertakes responsibility for our joint misery, indeed "the sacred responsibility of authority" (Lawrence 107), with an act of forgiveness, acceptance, and love. And, yes, there is a lot of the aboriginal cure in here if we don't fail to be attentive. The old native conception of story as a sacred event of mimesis in which creation constantly takes place is called back into Alexie's courageous performance in which he speaks to me. There are no boundaries, the storytelling still takes places, and I take place in it.

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