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TRANSCENDING THE RESERVATION BORDERS IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S WORK

Abstract. The article analyzes the theme of transcending borders in the selected works by Sherman Alexie. In my analysis the borders are understood literally, as geopolitical constructs, as well as symbolically, as social, cultural, and racial lines that separate individuals, communities, and nations. It is in the presence of these borders that individuals' world-view and self-perception are formed. The process of transcending the real and metaphorical reservation borders observable in Alexie's work reflects his gradual distancing from Indian-centric and racially charged themes. Explored extensively in his early writing, the reservation represents Indian homeland, and is portrayed as a place which, although embraced as home by his Indian characters, entails also geographical and mental confinement. Yet Alexie's post-2000 work demonstrates that he has expanded the borders of his fictional world. This change is manifested in the author's progressive detachment from the reservation-centered themes, and his growing interest in the multiethnic American setting. Accordingly, his recent work centers on "a mental and emotional landscape" of human relations in American society.

Key words: Sherman Alexie; reservation; Indian homeland; transcending borders; multicultural America; 9/11.

A writer, poet, filmmaker, stand-up comedian, and political commentator, Sherman Alexie is one of the most popular contemporary Native American¹ artists. Since the publication of *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992), Alexie's writing has been widely read by Indian and non-Indian audiences alike. Yet much as it is critically acclaimed, his work has also received criti-

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¹ Throughout the article I will use the terms "Native," "Indian," and "Indigenous" interchangeably.

cism, in large part from Native American scholars, who object to Alexie's "nontraditional" views on Indian identity, tribal loyalties, reservation experience, or contemporary Native American literature. Undoubtedly, due to his non-conformist attitude, Alexie has gained recognition as a provocative writer and spokesman, and, indubitably, an important voice on the present-day Native American literary scene.

Born and brought up on the Spokane Reservation, Washington, Alexie compares it to an enclosed island isolated from the larger urban centers (Teters 54). Since the reservation is inhabited mostly by Spokane Indians, it is, according to the writer, "more of a mono-culture" (54). Alexie spent the first eighteen years of his life there and, he admits, this particular fact greatly influenced the "reservation realism"² characteristic of his early writing. In *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992), *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993), *Reservation Blues* (1995), *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1997), the writer draws heavily on his personal experience: his Indian characters live on a fictional version of the Spokane Reservation which, like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, constitutes a microcosm of most of his poems and stories. Through the "interior landscapes" – that is the thoughts, emotions and visions of his Indian characters – Alexie explores the life of the reservation, which emerges in his fiction as an ambiguous place – home as well as confinement, simultaneously loved and hated by the people living there (Bellante 4). Yet, as Nancy Peterson observes, ever since Alexie left the reservation and settled down with his family in Seattle, his stories have migrated to the city as well ("Introduction" xii).

The subsequent study, based on the selected works by Alexie, will focus on the theme of transcending the reservation borders, which constitutes a leitmotif in the writer's artistic oeuvre. In my analysis the borders are understood literally, as geopolitical constructs, as well as symbolically, as "arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic" (Brah 198). It is in the presence of these borders that individuals' worldview and self-perception are formed. The process of transcending the real and metaphorical reservation borders observable in Alexie's work reflects his gradual distancing from Indian-centric and racially charged themes. Explored extensively in his early writing, the reservation represents Indian homeland, and is portrayed as a place which, although embraced as home by

² Alexie coined the term in the introduction to the 2005 expanded edition of his first short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Grove, 2005), xxi.

his Indian characters, entails also geographical and mental confinement. Yet Alexie's post-2000 work demonstrates that he has expanded the borders of his fictional world. This change is manifested in the author's progressive detachment from the reservation-centered themes, and his growing interest in the multiethnic American setting, albeit with urban Indian experience at the core of his narratives. Accordingly, his recent work centers on "a mental and emotional landscape" of human relations in American society (Nygren 151).

The reservation continues to be present in Alexie's more recent writing, yet the author expands its original meaning of land officially recognized as belonging to Indians and employs it as a symbol of confinement and borders that limit both Indian and non-Indian characters in their personal lives. The exploration of the characters' shared experience therefore becomes Alexie's strategy to move in his work beyond the borders of Indian homeland, in other words, beyond the reservation- and Indian-centered issues, to eventually address the questions of social relations and everyday experience in contemporary, multicultural American society. The writer's portrayal of individual characters who struggle to escape a variety of metaphorical reservations becomes a means of highlighting the borders that continue to divide America. Employing the metaphor of the reservation, Alexie offers his critique of modern America and challenges the racial and cultural foundations of American society. In his work America is imagined anew, as a community striving to overcome the borders that might hinder any form of human development; a community founded not so much on the basis of racial or ethnic distinctions but on individuals' capacity to understand and accept their shared human experience.

Throughout his career Alexie has been critical of the reservation system imposed on the Indigenous people, describing reservations as colonized areas set off "to disappear and murder Indians" (Davis and Stevenson 189). The reservation border, according to Alexie, became the colonizer's metaphor for the racial border that was to separate the "civilized" white man from the "primitive" Indian in the process of the nation-state building. In the author's early work the criticism concerning the reservation system is especially harsh; side by side with the theme of the reservation as a place of physical deprivation, the theme of "the reservation of the mind,"³ or, in other words, of "internalization of colonial oppression and alienation,"⁴ becomes

³ Throughout the chapter I will use "the reservation of the mind" and "the reservation frame of mind" interchangeably.

⁴ Jeff Berlung, "An Introduction to Sherman Alexie," xii.

central in Alexie's stories. The fictional Spokane Reservation he writes about appears as a site of ongoing genocide where, the writer claims, Indian people continue to be "culturally, psychologically, psychically, and emotionally killed" (Blewster 73). The reservation is overburdened with social problems that progressively weaken the community's physical health. Wrenching poverty, compared by the writer to the poverty in Third World countries, unemployment, and poor educational and health systems, lead the residents to despair, alcoholism, violence, drug addiction and family problems. After a century and a half of oppression, the reservation has become, to use the author's words, a "landfill [with] the debris of so many lives" (*Old Shirts* 3).

Isolated from the developing urban centers, the reservation is for Alexie's Indian characters a geographical place of confinement. Moreover, it is also a *state of mind*—that is, a specific world-view shaped by the history of oppression that Indian people have suffered. Adrian Louis' concept of "the reservation of the mind" is reflected in Alexie's characters' struggle for survival in the geographically specific location but also against all the internalized concepts and stereotypes that affect Indian people's every-day life and self-perception. Thus the Spokane Reservation is not only homeland but also a symbol of physical and mental confinement that separates Indian people from mainstream America.

Unemployment, poor living conditions, alcoholism, and lack of prospects for a better future are viewed by the writer as major destructive forces that affect the reservation community. These themes dominate Alexie's first collections of poetry and prose, *The Business of Fancydancing*, *Old Shirts & New Skins*, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and *Reservation Blues*, each book, as the author reflects, "soaked in alcohol" (quoted in West and West 66). The grim reality of reservation life arouses a feeling of powerlessness and humiliation among the residents, which, in turn, has a debilitating effect on family bonds. For many of Alexie's Indian characters the reservation experience means running away from an alcoholic and violent parent or partner, and then coming back, in the throes of guilt, to forgive and take care of him/her. Thus, much as it is home, the reservation also represents confinement (both physical and psychological) which most Indian characters are unable to escape.

In Alexie's reservation-centered stories poor living standards, unemployment, dwindling spiritual values, and domestic violence are only a few of the many problems that manifest the dysfunctional nature of the reserva-

tion system, which hinders the creation of a stable environment for the family and community. A decrepit HUD house becomes a symbol of the deplorable conditions in which Indians are forced to live. To bridge the gap separating the white man's America and the reservation seems hardly possible as, according to Alexie, these two worlds remain in the relation of the colonizer and the colonized (Highway 27). Conscious of their exclusion from mainstream society, Alexie's Indian characters fear the world beyond the borders of their reservation homeland. What complicates their situation even further is the fact that, because of their sociopolitical and cultural marginalization, many of them are confined by psychological borders as they do not believe Indians can "make it" outside the reservation.

Yet to read Alexie's early reservation-centric work only as a tragic portrayal of defeated Indians would be oversimplifying his message since, as the narrator of the story "Imagining the Reservation" claims, "The reservation doesn't sing anymore but the songs still hang in the air" (*The Lone Ranger* 150). A characteristic feature of Alexie's "reservation realism" is the use of imagination to address the hardships of the reservation experience or, to use Philip Heldrich's words, "to approach the unapproachable . . . to speak about the unspeakable" (29). Mixed with anger, imagination gives Alexie's Indian characters the strength to endure reservation life yet, most importantly, it offers them hope of survival.⁵ The story "Imagining the Reservation" seems therefore to be Alexie's answer to the question of how to struggle against "the reservation of the mind." The story's narrator addresses Adrian Louis, claiming that when "the language of the enemy keeps our dismembered tongues tied to his belt," it is imagination that Indian people must resort to for survival (*The Lone Ranger* 152). Imagination, the narrator continues, "is the politics of dreams; imagination turns every word into a bottle rocket" (*The Lone Ranger* 152). It is imagination that gives Indian characters hope and strength to believe that "every day is Independence Day," that there exists a story "that puts wood in the fireplace" (152–153). By the power of imagination, implies Alexie, Indian people are able to endure life on the reservation—a place of "power and rage, magic and loss, joys and jealousy," and, most of all, a place which has the capacity to forgive failures (*Reservation* 96–97). Therefore, in *The Business of Fancy-dancing*, Alexie's Wellpinit on the Spokane Reservation – a town of "torn

⁵ As Alexie writes in the story "Imagining the Reservation," "Survival = Anger x Imagination" (*The Lone Ranger* 150).

shacks and abandoned cars”—remains a destination for the Indian people traveling to take part in the local powwow, to celebrate the survival of Indian culture (21).

TOWARDS A NEW VISION OF HOME

Alexie's personal, increasingly cosmopolitan life has undoubtedly affected his understanding and portrayal of contemporary Indian experience. This major change is visible in the writer's two early 21st century collections of short stories, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) and *Ten Little Indians* (2003). Central in the two collections are narratives of second and third generation urban Indian characters, most of whom are middle and upper-middle class American citizens who have already entered mainstream American society. Alexie explains that his focus on urban Indian life represents his critical response to the enduring misrepresentations of Native Americans in popular culture as well as in several 20th century Native American canonical texts. According to Alexie, many of these texts represent the tradition of “four directions and corn pollen” writing which continues to concentrate on the issues of reservation homelands and the importance of Indigenous traditions (Fraser 87). Alexie argues that the exploration of reservation-based, “nature-loving” Native cultures, favored by many Indian and non-Indian writers and critics, also contributes to perpetuating a distorted image of contemporary Native American experience. His response to this gap between contemporary Indian experience and its representation in fiction has been to introduce into his urban narratives Native American blue-collar workers, businessmen, academics, lawyers, architects, artists, and sportsmen, as well as homeless beggars. Since the publication of *The Toughest Indian*, they have been among his main characters whose stories add up to a mosaic of urban Indian life in the multicultural and urban American milieu.

The corollary process of Alexie's liberating himself from “the reservation of the mind” is manifested in his progressive distancing from the racially charged questions of white-Indian relations, as well as in his radical critique of the fundamentalist concepts of tribalism and “Indian experience.” These themes become distinctive in the two collections. Moreover, as Jessica Chapel accurately observes, it is not anger, victimization, or despair but happiness and hopefulness that Alexie dwells on in his recent work (96). Alexie explains that this change was dictated by his urban experience of liv-

ing in Seattle but also, more importantly, and paradoxically, by the tragic event that took place on September 11, 2001. In a 2003 interview with Timothy Harris, Alexie assesses critically his early writing and the ways in which he explored white-Indian relations, to subsequently elucidate the changes in his more recent work:

I've become less and less Indian-centric as the years have gone by. After September 11th I barely talk about it. I talk about poor people; I talk about disadvantaged people, and that sort of covers everything I need to cover. It becomes not about race, region, or country, but about a particular group of people sharing the same circumstances. I talk about the universal condition of the poor, and thinking and talking about it that way helps eliminate the negativity of tribalism. That's been my response: to see people by their power or lack thereof, rather than the color of their skin. (129–130)

Accordingly, what becomes a leitmotif in Alexie's recent stories is the exploration of "the inner and intimate landscape[s]" of human relations in multiethnic American society (Nygren 155). That, in turn, forms a direct challenge to the post-9/11 American politics of the war against terrorism founded, according to Alexie, on the mistaken notions of nationalism and tribalism (Harris 129).

As regards the reservation, it does not altogether disappear in the two collections but it is given much less attention as a physical place and, instead, becomes primarily a symbol of confinement in various stories about the Indian and non-Indian characters' personal lives. While in the writer's earlier work it would be portrayed as "a geographical space of borders and confinement" (Nygren 142), in the two post-2000 collections, the reservation appears only as a *metaphor* for borders (ideological, religious, or emotional) that the characters grapple with. Alexie says that even though the reservation does not figure prominently in the two books, "the idea of the reservation is always there . . . my new characters carry that idea of borders into their love lives and into their new lives. Even if they can be successful, the idea of borders goes beyond their ethnicity and into their personal decisions, and they limit themselves in other ways" (Nygren 155). Therefore, in the ethnically and culturally diverse urban America of the 21st century, Alexie's characters struggle not so much to escape from a physical place of confinement but to transcend the borders of the metaphorical mental reservations that confine them.

The subsequent analysis of Alexie's selected stories will demonstrate that in his latest work the writer challenges the notions of "authentic" Indian identity and experience. In so doing he argues that, instead of debating "authentic" Indianness, we need to focus on the question of, to use Joy Harjo's words, "what it means to be human" (123). Therefore, Alexie's affirmation of his Indian and non-Indian characters' shared humanity becomes a symbolic act of transcending the borders that, in various ways, separate individuals, communities and, ultimately, nations. The author claims that regardless of their racial, social, or cultural background, all his characters struggle with the same moral and ethical prejudices—the metaphorical reservations that constrain them.

Although Alexie's habit of acknowledging the tribal affiliation of most Indian characters in the stories may at first be seen as his persistent preoccupation with tribal politics, it is rather, as Joanna Durczak states, the writer's provocative strategy to address the issue of tribal identity which is crucial to understanding contemporary Indian experience. The issue is how to categorize "an individual who is unmistakably genealogically Indian and fully aware of his racial identity, yet at the same time has had an experience from which many if not most of the elements traditionally associated with Indian livelihood are missing" (106). This particular issue is addressed in stories such as, "The Search Engine," "Assimilation," "Lawyer's League," "Flight Patterns," or "One Good Man" to list just a few, in which Indian characters try to come to terms with the fact that tribal affiliation is no longer the most important factor in their self-identification and the relations they build. Alexie has said that, as they grow in self-awareness, his characters realize that "being Indian is just part of who we are" (Chapel 99). This particular change in Alexie's portrayal of contemporary, often urban, Indian experience has been affected by Alexie's understanding of tribalism which, the writer admits, has also changed over the course of years. Yet what has had the greatest impact on his distancing himself from the theme of tribal identity was, Alexie claims, September 11, 2001. As the writer states:

For many years, I've said that my two strongest tribal affiliations are not racially based. My strongest tribes are book nerds and basketball players, and those tribes are . . . racially, culturally, economically, and spiritually diverse . . . I also belong to a hundred other tribes, based on the things I love to read, watch, do. Ever since 9/11, I have worked hard to be very public about my multi-tribal identity. I think fundamentalism is the mistaken belief that one belongs to only one tribe, I'm the opposite of that. (Davis and Stevenson 190)

This change in Alexie's attitude to tribalism as well as nationalism can be read as another symbolic step in the process of liberating himself from "the reservation frame of mind." In so doing Alexie denounces not only the tribal borders but also the racial borders which continue to cut across American society. Challenging the notions of tribalism and nationalism, Alexie offers a new vision of American society in which kinship relations become more meaningful than racial background.

This particular vision is explored in "Flight Patterns"—a story from *Ten Little Indians*. William Loman—a Spokane Indian—is an affluent Seattle businessman who, together with his family, represents "Native American gentry . . . the very first Indian family to ever move into a neighborhood and bring up property values" (*Ten* 111). Members of the upper middle class, the Lomans, like many other characters in Alexie's stories, are fully aware that their social position allows them to reap all the benefits of mainstream America. Alexie's portrayal of the Indian family living in a white dominated urban district implies that the privacy, individuality, and the economic profits the city offers have become crucial in the Lomans' and other Indian characters' lives; that is why many of them have loosened their ties with the reservation communities.

While it is not clearly stated whether the Lomans are in touch with any tribal community either on the reservation or in the city, William does realize that, though full blood Spokane Indians, his family are American citizens who, due to their economic success, have become members of a privileged social class. For William, the community he feels he belongs to is one of businessmen working together and traveling around the world. When he reflects on his life, he realizes that "he [is] an enrolled member of the Spokane Indian tribe, but he [is] also a fully recognized member of the notebook-computer tribe and the rental-car tribe and the hotel-shuttle-bus tribe and the cell-phone-roaming-charge tribe" (*Ten* 109). Therefore, Alexie stresses, what is fundamental for William's sense of self is not only his tribal affiliation but his social position, and his individual aspirations. William assures himself that being a member of American society, he does not "want to choose between Ernest Hemingway and the Spokane tribal elders, between Mia Hamm and Crazy Horse, between *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and Chief Dan George. [He] want[s] all of it" (*Ten* 102).

Considering Alexie's personal urban experience, we can interpret the character of William Loman as representing the writer himself, who for years has struggled with the popular view that excluded Indian people from mainstream American society. This destructive stereotype, writes Alexie,

once trapped him in a metaphorical reservation and for years hindered his own self-understanding and personal growth. This confinement also affected his earlier work, dominated as it was by the theme of white-Indian conflicts. Yet, having matured, the writer contends, “I have these two amazing cultures to choose from—this sort of world culture/American culture and then my own tribal background. They’re both filled with magic, and I’m angry at the people who taught me that I had to choose between them” (Allan 165).

Thus, what becomes most important for Alexie’s characters in his recent fiction is the ability to build relations across racial and cultural borders. In other words, in the ethnically diverse America, it is the understanding of the shared human experience that helps the characters to develop their own sense of self. In “Flight Patterns” an encounter with Fekadu—an Ethiopian taxi driver—forces William to reevaluate his own life. Their conversation in the taxi starts as a series of questions about their ethnic backgrounds, and about how racial prejudice has again flared up after September 11. Yet the casual talk soon turns into an intimate conversation about Fekadu’s dramatic escape from Ethiopia and his forced and painful separation from his family. Through the intimacy that slowly builds up between the two men as Fekadu tells his story Alexie communicates that one needs to ignore racial, social and cultural differences to truly see and understand the other as a human being. The two men are bound together not so much by the non-white color of their skin or the history of oppression of their people but the ability to feel compassion and the willingness to listen to and respect each other’s personal stories. Although Fekadu’s story may not be true, William eventually realizes that the taxi driver “might have been accidentally describing the pain of a real and lonely man” (*Ten* 121).

Compassion, Alexie claims, is precisely what allows his characters to understand the human experience that they share. In fact, compassion for suffering is what Alexie refers to when describing his own path to becoming less Indian-centric and less fundamentalist. Commenting on how he learned to avoid the topic of victimization in his recent work, the writer states, “I try not to measure people’s pain . . . nothing in my life [as a modern-day American Indian] can measure up to the kids in that school [in Beslan]. Nothing! Nothing! And nothing in my life can measure up to losing somebody in the World Trade towers. Everybody’s pain is important” (Nygren 146–147). By analogy, for Alexie, everybody’s story is important. Therefore respect shown by listening to other people’s personal histories is what leads Alexie’s characters to better self-understanding.

As Jennifer Ladino aptly observes, the encounter with the Ethiopian refugee becomes a cathartic moment in William's life (48). This meeting not only sensitizes William to the prejudices (racial or class) that affect human relationships, but also forces him to reevaluate his own life. William's phone call from the airport to assure his wife that "I'm here" expresses his realization of how much his family means to him; it also becomes a symbolic act of fostering the relationship he has with his loved ones (*Ten* 123). The shared human experience is therefore the prism through which Alexie perceives America as a community whose identity should, according to the writer, be defined not so much by the color of people's skin but by what they share together as humans.

An interesting account of the process of transcending the mental reservation borders in order to understand "how to be human" is presented in "The Search Engine"—the story that opens *Ten Little Indians*. Corliss—the main protagonist of the story—is a bright aspiring student at Washington State University, embarking on a career that will allow her to enjoy an "original aboriginal life" (*Ten* 5). Being "a poor kid, and a middle-class Indian," Corliss realizes that her only chance to get a proper academic education is by reaping the benefits of the white Indiophiles' financial generosity: "[i]f white folks assumed she was serene and spiritual and wise simply because she was an Indian, and thought she was special based on those mistaken assumptions, then Corliss saw no reason to contradict them" (*Ten* 11). Ambitious and determined to pursue an academic career, she soon learns that her individualism and academic aspirations clash with her family's hopes for her future. Questioning her responsibilities towards her Spokane tribe (who continue to occasionally support her education by sending her twenty-dollar bills), she feels pressured to come back home in order to work on the reservation and support her family. While her relatives expect her to become a lawyer to *serve her tribe* on the reservation, she feels that the tribal loyalties she is asked to fulfill are a form of confinement, limiting her personal development. As her tribal community expects her to "save her people," Corliss gradually realizes that "she d[oes]n't belong with them, that she [i]s destined for something larger, that she believe[s] she [i]s supposed to be eccentric and powerful and great and all alone in the world" (*Ten* 14–15).

By portraying Corliss's confrontations with her father's ignorance of poetry and his sarcastic opinions about his daughter's literary ambitions, Alexie's challenges the traditional, fundamentalist tribal loyalties and the ideas of "authentic" Native American experience. Faced with her father's

racist comments about the dangers and the worthlessness of “the white man’s education,” Corliss begins to question the values of her tribal upbringing. She realizes that one of the lessons she was taught in the home was “to fear and hate white people” (*Ten* 14). Critical of her father’s and uncles’ resentment for “all things white,” she perceives their attitude as a means to justify “their individual fears and collective lack of ambition” (*Ten* 13). The question of the role of tribal bonds and Corliss’s responsibilities towards the tribe should be seen in the larger context of the clash of political ideologies and worldviews that Alexie explores in his recent work:

It was easy to hate white vanity and white rage and white ignorance, but what about white compassion and white genius and white poetry? Maybe it wasn’t about whiteness or redness or any other color. Corliss wasn’t naïve. She new racism, tribalism, and nationalism were encoded in human DNA, and we’d all save our own child from a burning building, even if it meant a thousand strangers would die, and we’d all kill in defense of our wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, parents, and children. However, she also wanted to believe in human goodness and mortal grace. (*Ten* 14)

Corliss’s choice to value human goodness over loyalty to her tribe resonates with Alexie’s open rejection of the fundamentalist notions of nationalism and tribalism which, according to the writer, reinforce the borders in the form of racial prejudice and cultural separation. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Corliss’s passion for poetry and literature with her father’s ideas about her responsibilities as a tribal prodigy may be interpreted as a reflection of Alexie’s own refusal to write about and celebrate tribal/national values, especially in the context of the post-9/11 circumstances.

A remarkable turn in Corliss’s life is a meeting with a Spokane poet Harlan Atwater, whose book, *In the Reservation of My Mind*, she finds in the university library. Embarking on “a vision quest,” Corliss leaves for Seattle to meet the Indian who, like herself, struggled against tribal loyalties – he chose to write sonnets when “other Indians occupied Alcatraz and Wounded Knee” (*Ten* 34, 12). However, her fantasy of meeting an artistic soul-mate and a possible career mentor are shattered once she meets “the reservation bard” (*Ten* 34). The manner in which Atwater describes his tribal and cultural roots to Corliss problematizes the issue of self-identification. Although Atwater’s parents are Spokane Indians, he tells the young woman that he is “not really a Spokane Indian” since he was not raised Spokane but brought up in Seattle as an adopted son of a white couple (*Ten* 40). Atwater’s story

of his identity quest addresses explicitly the problem which Alexie himself centered on in his earlier work, namely the obsessive interest in exploring, defining, and protecting "authentic" Indian experience. Alexie claimed in a 2003 interview that this interest, on the part of both many Indians and non-Indians, very often leads to nothing but an essentialist debate over "fake and real purity" (Dellinger 122).

Alienated in the urban environment, the young Atwater turns to poetry which, as he hopes, will help him understand and shape his Indian identity. Yet, what he in fact does is fashion himself into a reservation Spokane Indian – a figure he believes to be authentic and traditional while in fact it is created out of his romanticized fantasies about Indian life on the reservation. The title of Atwater's collection, *In the Reservation of My Mind*, suggests that the self-proclaimed "traditional Indian poet" fell victim to the illusions of what he believed to be "real" Indian experience; as Atwater explains to Corliss, the book is in reality a collection of his fantasies about "what it felt like to grow up on the reservation, to grow up like an Indian is supposed to grow up" (*Ten* 41). The opening poem, "The Naming Ceremony," is Atwater's first step in the process of making the fantasy real and creating for himself the persona of a poetic prophet living on the Spokane Reservation. In an interview for *Radical Seattle Weekly* Atwater presents himself as a traditionalist and a voice of his tribe, whose writing is "most influenced by the natural rhythms of the world" (*Ten* 23). He sees himself as a guru on a mission "to help people understand Indians" through his work – "the most authentic Indian poems that have ever been written" (*Ten* 22).

Giving onstage performances for white hippie peace (and Indian) lovers, Atwater becomes for them a prophet sharing "traditional Indian knowledge." Yet, soon bored with the role of "the white man's Indian," he next tries to bond and share his "tribal wisdom" with other Indians, whom he joins at a local bar. When in the morning, after a very successful night of "bonding," he wakes up in a ditch with no "Indian kin" around him, with his books scattered on the street, he realizes that his poetic quest has not brought him any closer to the people he had imagined were "his people." As he confesses to Corliss, after that night he abandoned his identity quest and chose to live "an ordinary life" with his white parents who, he has realized over the course of years, have been "the two best, the two most honorable and loyal people" in his life (*Ten* 52).

Atwater's eventual realization of the fictitiousness of his Indian identity marks his escape from the confining reservation of his mind. Consequently it

leads Atwater to a better understanding of the value of human relations, manifested by his acceptance and appreciation of his foster parents' love and support. Atwater's story, in turn, forces Corliss to rethink her own understanding of Indianness. She realizes "[s]he knew the name of her tribe, and the name of her archaic clan, and her public Indian name, and her secret Indian name, but everything else she knew about Indians was ambiguous and transitory" (*Ten* 52). The portrayal of both protagonists' learning to accept the fact that they understand what it means to be Indian differently may therefore be interpreted as Alexie's critical statement on Indian identity politics. He implies that by persistently engaging in the debate over what it means to be "real" Indian, we may lose sight of a much more important issue, namely, what it means to be human. According to Alexie, one's identity should be defined not only through one's adherence to tribal/national traditions but also through one's individual "moral and ethical choice[s]" (Campbell 117).

The question of "how to be human" is also explored in "One Good Man" – the final story of *The Toughest Indian* collection. The narrative of a son, named Atticus, who is taking care of his dying, diabetic father on the Spokane Reservation, it consists of a series of ruminations about the narrator's relation with his dying parent as well as with his own teenage son Paul. Although the ruminations are prompted by the question "What is an Indian?" repeated provocatively sixteen times in the story, it is, in fact, not his own or his father's Indianness that Atticus reflects upon, but their capacity to love, understand, and respect others. Meditating on his relation with his dying father, Atticus confronts himself with questions such as, "*What is an Indian? Is it a son who can stand in a doorway and watch his father sleep?*" (*Toughest* 222), "*Is it a son who had always known where his father kept his clothes in neat order?*" (*Toughest* 230), "*Is it 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?*" (*Toughest* 235–236). The unanswered questions seem at first absurd and confusing, since they do not refer to the concept of Indianness as defined by blood quantum, tribal affiliation, adherence to tribal traditions, or reservation experience. What the questions in fact point to is that Atticus does not want to know whether he is a "real" Indian but whether he is a good human being.

Atticus learns the lesson of "how to be human" from his father who, throughout his life, has shaped his son's sense of self not by proving his own Indianness to others, but by being a loyal family man. The argument between the young Atticus's father and the white wannabe-Indian teacher becomes Alexie's polemic with the popular concepts of Indianness, represented by the

teacher's fantasies, and juxtaposed with the Indian father's personal experience. While for the teacher it is his participation in the occupation of Alcatraz and Wounded Knee that gives him the right to call himself an Indian, for the Spokane Indian father it is his being a loyal father and husband that defines his Indian identity. Via this simple yet provocative lesson about humanity, Alexie not only implies that one's faithfulness to and support for those who rely on one are as important and heroic as the occupation of Alcatraz or Wounded Knee, but also claims that there is no way to determine the relative value of the two characters' Indianness. When asked by the teacher "What kind of Indian are you?" the father replies "I am a man who keeps promises" (*Toughest* 229). The fact that the father uses the word "man" instead of "Indian" implies that for Alexie, the Indianness defined by blood quantum, tribal affiliation or residence, instead of moral and ethical values, becomes meaningless.

Such an understanding of Indianness is also manifested in Atticus's relations with his son Paul, his own ex-wife, and her second husband. The narrator's strength to accept the fact that his son lives with his Indian mother and a white stepfather stems from Atticus's love and respect for the loved ones. Thus the question posed by the narrator: "*What is an Indian?* Is it a man who can share his son and his wife?" becomes again Alexie's means of challenging the ways in which Indian identity continues to be measured and (re)defined by Indians and non-Indians alike (*Toughest* 236). He again implies again is that the "Indianness" embraced in the story means in fact the human capacity to love, manifested in the moral and ethical choices one makes to shape one's life. Posed for the 16th time at the end of the story, the question "*What is an Indian?*" is answered again indirectly in Atticus's statement: "I lifted my father and carried him across every border" (*Toughest* 238). If treated as the narrator's answer, this final statement suggests that, for Alexie, the core of Indian experience is the goodness of heart expressing itself as the ability to show love and sympathy to others, as in the symbolic act of the son lifting the dying father.

In *War Dances* (2009)—a collection of prose and poetry—Alexie continues to explore the landscape of human emotions and moral struggles. Although the themes addressed in the book range from modern-day family crises, fatherhood, politics versus religion, and American popular culture, to the myth of American nation-building, and the aftermath of 9/11, it is the characters' battles with moral and ethical dilemmas that form the heart of the collection. Alexie's focus is on the intricate ways in which his protagonists learn to un-

derstand the value of love, friendship, and family bonds. This again stresses the writer's decision not to center in his work on identity politics and racially charged themes. As the main protagonist of the story titled "The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless" observes, "[d]espite all the talk of diversity and division – of red and blue states, of black and white and brown people, of rich and poor, gay and straight . . . Americans were shockingly similar" (*War Dances* 118). The characters' moral dilemmas become threads weaving together the stories in the collection. In "Breaking and Entering" the main protagonist ruminates over the moral consequences of his act of self-defense in which he killed a young burglar. "The Senator's Son" and "The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless" explore the moral consequences of the main characters' efforts to be loyal to their relatives and friends. "War Dances" deals with the father-son relation and can therefore be read as a continuation of "One Good Man," which focuses on the complex implications of fatherhood and family bonds. The story "Salt" concentrates on people's struggles to understand their lives by learning to accept and honor those who pass away.

Yet dominating the stories and poems in *War Dances* is the celebration of love and hope; in one story after another Alexie's characters learn to show kindness, support and respect for their friends, lovers, family members, and strangers. Alexie has pointed out that exploring the emotional landscape of love in his recent work can be as political as dealing with racial issues, especially in the aftermath of 9/11 and the racial conflicts that it triggered (Nygren 2009, 156). The writer's focus on love and hope can therefore be seen as another way of exploding the borders of the metaphorical reservations in which Americans continue to live. The poem "Food Chain," which closes this eclectic collection, is praise for love in the speaker's life and can be read as Alexie's artistic manifesto and his decision to celebrate the survival of humanity in times when racial conflicts continue to separate individuals, communities, and nations.

In his artistic career Alexie has transcended several real and imaginary borders; although his early writing focused primarily on the exploration of Indian experience on the isolated, poverty-stricken reservation, the writer has distanced himself from the Indian-centric themes in his later work, weaving Indian stories into a larger narrative about contemporary multiethnic America. Accordingly, the landscape of intimate human relations built across racial and cultural borders has become the major theme explored in the author's recent work. Since the tragic event of 9/11, Alexie has deliberately focused in his writing on the celebration of life through the stories of people's struggles to

overcome various borders to eventually understand “what it means to be human” (Harjo 123). His artistic endeavor can therefore be seen as a process of liberating himself and his readers from “the reservations of the mind,” of transcending borders, to eventually envision a world that will celebrate “the essential goodness of human beings” (*Ten* 23).

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PRZEKRACZANIE GRANIC REZERWATU
W TWÓRCZOŚCI SHERMANA ALEXIE

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest analizie wybranych utworów literackich Shermana Alexie. W jego utworach proces redefiniowania pojęcia „domu” można przedstawić metaforycznie jako proces przekraczania granic rezerwatu. We wczesnej prozie Alexiego rezerwat to przestrzeń będąca jednocześnie domem i „więzieniem”, odseparowującym ludność indiańską od białej Ameryki. Natomiast utwory publikowane od roku 2000 dokumentują już istotną zmianę w tematyce twórczości pisarza. Podejmowane w nich tematy to przede wszystkim miejskie doświadczenie współczesnych, zasymilowanych Indian, poszukiwanie tożsamości i nowe określenie własnego miejsca w Ameryce. Doświadczenie wielokulturowej Ameryki prowadzi do kwestionowania własnej tożsamości przez bohaterów indiańskich i tym samym prowokuje pytania o „indiańskość” w XXI wieku. Słabnące (w późniejszej twórczości) zainteresowanie Alexiego problematyką rezerwatu można traktować symbolicznie jako początek procesu przekraczania granic, odrzucania kolonialnej idei rezerwatu jako ograniczającej wolność i rozwój kultur indiańskich. Alexie przedstawia wielokulturową, miejską Amerykę jako dom dla zasymilowanej, panindiańskiej społeczności, tym samym poszerzając granice swego powieściowego świata. Kwestionując rasowe, klasowe i kulturowe podziały we współczesnych społeczeństwach, Alexie wzywa do globalnej solidarności, niezbędnej dla przetrwania i rozwoju ludzkości.

Słowa kluczowe: Sherman Alexie; rezerwat; ziemia indiańska; przekraczanie granic; wielokulturowa Ameryka; 9/11.