

Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*: Amalgamating the Oral and the Written Traditions¹

Aitor IBARROLA ARMENDARIZ

Universidad de Deusto
Departamento de Lenguas Modernas y Estudios Vascos
aitor.ibarrola@deusto.es

ABSTRACT

This article argues that *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) by Native-American author Sherman Alexie combines elements of his tribal (oral) tradition with others coming from the Western (literary) short-story form. Like other Native writers — such as Momaday, Silko or Vizenor —, Alexie is seen to bring into his short fiction characteristics of his people's oral storytelling that make it much more dialogical and participatory. Among the author's narrative techniques reminiscent of the oral tradition, aggregative repetitions of patterned thoughts and strategically-placed indeterminacies play a major role in encouraging his readers to engage in intellectual and emotional exchanges with the stories. Assisted by the ideas of theorists such as Ong (1988), Evers and Toelken (2001), and Teuton (2008), this article shows how Alexie's short fiction is enriched and revitalized by the incorporation of oral elements. The essay also claims that new methods of analysis and assessment may be needed for this type of bicultural artistic forms. Despite the differences between the two modes of communication, Alexie succeeds in blending features and techniques from both traditions, thus creating a new hybrid short-story form that suitably conveys the trying experiences faced by his characters.

Keywords: Oral tradition, Native Americans, Hybrid Forms of Fiction, Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*.

The momentum built by the creative efforts of American Indian writers is helping Indians and non-Indians alike to appreciate the intense vitality of individual tribal traditions whose many oral genres have kept alive compact, highly charged modes of communicating and linking the past with the present, generating energy that infuses both the oral and the written genres of today.

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Elaine Jahner, "A Critical Approach to American Indian Literature"

Language, when it is regarded not only as expression but is realized as experience as well, works in and *is* of that manner. Language is perception of experience as well as expression.

Simon Ortiz, "Song, Poetry and Language — Expression and Perception"

1. INTRODUCTION: ORAL VS. PRINT CULTURES

Elaine Jahner, Craig Womack, and Sidner Larson, among others, have pointed out that contemporary Native American authors often merge in their literary works elements of their tribal (oral) traditions, which rely on distinct formal and epistemological devices, and Western modes of composition that give priority to the fixity and stability of the written word. Of course, Native American cultures are not the only cultures that have depended on orature for the transmission of their myths, values and key collective experiences. As is well known, other ancient cultures such as the Arab, the Greek, the Celtic, and several Sub-Saharan peoples built a considerable part of their traditions and worldviews by resorting to the oral transference of their knowledge and beliefs. Still, as Levine and others have remarked, we, contemporary scholars, are "all too ready to forget" that "texts" such as *The Arabian Nights* or *The Iliad* had first an original life of their own as oral works (2013: 219). Walter J. Ong has gone so far as to maintain that literate people are no longer able to make much sense of the verbal and cognitive patterns governing the oral expression of ideas and affects:

Persons who have interiorized writing not only write but also speak literally, which is to say that they organize, to varying degrees, even their oral expression in thought patterns and verbal patterns that they would not know of unless they could write. Because it does not follow these patterns, literates have considered oral organization of thought naïve. (1988: 56-57)

Both Ong and Levine are highly aware of the difficulties faced by people who have been raised in either of the two traditions when they try to understand and appreciate works outside their primary mode of perception. And yet, the fact that we are more used to the thought and linguistic devices of written literature should not lead us to conclude that oral thinking and expression are necessarily less sophisticated or

effective. In Ong's words, "oral cultures can produce amazingly complex and intelligent and beautiful organizations of thought and experience" (1988: 57).

Starting in the mid-19th century, when missionaries and ethnographers began to transcribe in their notebooks some of the oral stories of the Native American peoples, the attempts to blend the two forms of expression and perception flourished remarkably in the New World. Jahner notes that, despite "the fundamental distinction between the oral and the written modes of composition and sharing" (1983: 66), Indian writers — such as John M. Oskison, N. Scott Momaday or Leslie M. Silko — have made great efforts to combine in original ways elements of both traditions. Of course, given the variety of the underlying aesthetic/ethical principles and epistemological assumptions across the different tribes and nations, one encounters very diverse ways in which the oral features are incorporated into their written texts. Moreover, since the genres exploiting oral and performative skills — ritual songs, origin myths, trickster tales, hero legends, and so on — are multifarious in nature and pursue specific goals, they often require different techniques to be properly integrated (see Allen 1983 and Warrior 2005). But what seems undeniable is that many Native American writers have tried and are still trying not only to bring echoes of their traditional stories into their works, but also to transform the way in which the reader perceives the literary text and its place in the world. As Jahner puts it, "In American Indian literature the two modes [oral and written] exist side by side, the one nourishing the other" (1983: 66), so that it may be argued that what is unique to their art is these constant interactions that revamp the means of communicating in both traditions. Native poet Simon Ortiz observes in one of the epigraphs above that realizing that language is not merely an instrument to express thoughts but also a way of experiencing reality is critical for the understanding of these works (cf. Ortiz 1977: 3).

It needs to be admitted, though, that the amalgamation and interaction of these two modes of communication in particular works is not so peaceful and amenable as some critics have suggested. Ong has expounded upon the radically different psychodynamic processes governing communication in primary oral cultures and in literate ones. As he explains, in oral cultures words "do give human beings power over what they name," but "oral folk have no sense of a name as a tag, for they have no idea of a name as something that can be seen. Written or printed representations of words can be labels; real, spoken words cannot be" (1988: 33). Because orally-based thought and expression cannot count on the presence and stability of the written sign, they need to resort to mnemonic devices and formulaic repetitions to make their stories memorable. Not only that, but as Ong and others have argued, oral storytelling must necessarily rely on the additive (rather than subordinative), the aggregative (rather than the analytical), repetition (rather than sparse linearity), and a set of mind that is conservative (rather than an experimental). But perhaps what sets these two forms of communication apart is that while the written text may distance itself more easily from the human lifeworld and become more abstract, oral renditions must

remain attached to particular situations and involve the audience somehow in the action (see Ong 1988: 42-50). No wonder, then, that several critics should think that specific methods of analysis and criteria of judgment need to be developed in order to assess and appreciate the kind of art resulting from the blending of the two modes. In order to do so, as Levine sees it, one needs to get rid of “the tendency to take literacy for granted” and “to recognize the rich life of the world’s great unwritten” (2013: 234), which can still change the way we view and are affected by literary pieces.

In the first epigraph to this article, Jahner speaks of the vitalizing energy that Native American artists are infusing into the written genres by incorporating qualities typical of the oral tradition. In her opinion, these orally-infused texts share with drama and sheet music the fact that they become fully and truly “alive through continued performance and direct participation” (1983: 212) of the audience. Authors such as Silko and Vizenor have recognized that even if translating all the aspects of the oral mode into writing is quite impossible, yet some of them may be preserved if properly “reimagined and reexpressed” (see Bowers and Silet 1981). In most instances, what Native writers retrieve from their tribal tradition is the idea that, as storytellers, they still enjoy the power that their ancestors accorded to “wordmakers” and are able to get audiences engaged in taking an active role in the dialogic creation of narrative. Laying aside the monologic and one-directional nature that characterizes the written word, these artists bring into their work the inspiring and participatory elements of their dream songs, visions, and ceremonies:

[...] language is more than just a group of words and more than just the technical relationship between sounds and the words. Language is more than just a functional mechanism. It is a spiritual energy that is available to all. It includes all of us and is not exclusively the power of human beings — we are part of that power as human beings. (Ortiz 1977: 6)

Although most Native American artists and critics have emphasized the central role played by oral tradition and personal memories in their works, it is important to recognize, too, that they have “also used the written word to extend the boundaries of their own creativity into nontraditional genres” (Brown Ruoff 1983: 168). It would be difficult to appreciate the strategies and techniques used by Indian writers such as Linda Hogan, Thomas King or Sherman Alexie without keeping in mind the theoretical contributions of 20th-century scholars such as Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser or Gerald Vizenor, himself. Unfortunately, I do not have the space in this article to delve too deeply into this second influence on the short fiction of a particularly controversial contemporary American Indian writer, but its presence, as will be noticed below, seems uncontested.

2. HOW TO INTEGRATE ORAL ELEMENTS INTO WRITTEN TEXTS

Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) has become one of the most widely-read Native American writers in the past two decades because, among other reasons, he adroitly manages to blend elements of his peoples' oral tradition with others deriving from the modern and postmodern short-story form in English. Alexie has repeatedly stated in interviews that he prefers poems and short stories to express his thoughts and visions, since they provide a more natural and compact form: "Every novel could be a hundred pages shorter. I think short stories are a greater challenge. You can make fewer mistakes. With poems, you can't make any. It's more of a tightrope. I think novels are the white man's world" (Cline 2000-01: 201-2). Like many other Native authors, Alexie is of the opinion that the tropes and features characterizing oral storytelling are more easily 'integrable' into written artifacts when the latter show the kind of open-ended and agonistic nature usually accorded to the former. As will be seen below, if this writer's short stories appear to make the demands and produce the effects on the audience that are common in the oral mode, it is mainly because of the inclusion of those empathetic and participatory elements (see Coulombe 2011: 6). This article will examine several stories in Alexie's collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) in order to establish the kind of impact produced in each case by the incorporation of features and tropes from the oral tradition.

Alexie is often described as an extremely witty and provocative writer and his tight prose is also seen to contain elements — such as fierce anger and wicked humor — that are reminiscent of Indian warfare tales and trickster stories. Because those tales are highly dialogical and performative in character, it is not surprising that many critics should agree that, in order to get the best out of his works, it is always recommendable to attend — or to see recordings of — his readings and impersonations of the stories, in which the importance of voice, tone, and gesture becomes clear in his dramatizations. In a conversation with Doug Marx over a decade ago, Alexie confessed that: "Today, I get high, I get drunk off of public readings. I'm good at it. It comes from being a debater in high school, but also, crucially, it comes from the oral tradition of my own culture. It's in performance that the two cultures become one" (Marx 1996: 39). Jeff Berglund has insisted that Alexie "has created interest in his work" through these kinds of embodied portrayals in which "his style borrows heavily from Margaret Cho, John Leguizamo, or George Carlin and Richard Pryor" (2010: xii), all stand-up comedians from an earlier generation. But Alexie also underlines the significance of recognizing that most people relied for centuries on these oral forms of communication to establish connections — to interpret and understand reality — and to control them by means of speech-acts. Furthermore, he is convinced, like Vizenor, that only the spoken word can truly help us to preserve shared memories and to enact close relationships: "Words are rituals in the oral tradition, from the sound of creation, the wisps of visions on the wind [...] not cold

pages or electronic beats that separate the tellers from the listeners” (Vizenor qtd. in Bleaser 1996: 21). Despite this radical distinction between the two modes, it is also essential to change the pervasive assumption that printed works of literature can only very rarely enter into fruitful dialogues — and contentions — with their readers. In fact, several Native writers — Alexie, among them — have dug into and exploited strategies and techniques for engaging readers in their works and making them aware of their own responsibilities as well. Some may prompt that dialogue by showing deliberate transgressions of cultural and/or moral codes, others may decide to challenge widely-held myths and stereotypes, still others may insert information lacunae and silences to be filled in by the audience; but in all instances, the final aim seems to be to entice the reader — whether Native or non-Native — to take part in the construction of the work’s meaning: “Exploring the relationship of author to audience is an interpretative method that transfers from one time to another, from one text to another, and from one type of writer to another” (Coulombe 2011: 8). As will be seen below, Alexie’s *The Toughest Indian in the World* is a collection that can hugely benefit from this kind of critical approach since, as Berglund has noted, his incorporation of oral-tradition patterns allows him to tap constantly “into the energy of the audience” (2010: xxi).

My analysis of several stories in *Toughest Indian* aims to show that a great deal of the acclaimed “singularity” and “vitality” of Alexie’s short fiction derives precisely from his ability to blend the resources offered by the two traditions — oral and written —, thus creating a new hybrid form that proves particularly appropriate for conveying the trying experiences faced by many of his characters. Like them, the author is seen to be straddling two different worlds — that of his Indian roots on the reservation and the more auspicious, yet also hostile, life in the mainstream society — that often come across as antagonistic. Donald Fixico has written about the difficult transition experienced by Natives when they move from their own homelands to larger urban centers where signs of “social alienation” and “cultural disorientation” were likely to appear as a result of prejudice and, even, racism (2000: 5). Nevertheless, as this scholar also notes, over two generations after the first American Indians began to settle in cities in the post-World-War II period, it is not unusual to come across success stories in which tribal individuals have managed to find an unstable balance between the demands made by their own culture and value system and those coming from the mainstream society. As a reviewer stated about Alexie’s collection, “In these stories, we meet the kind of American Indians we rarely see in literature — the kind who pay their bills, hold down jobs, fall in and out of love” (Grove Atlantic 2001). It will soon become evident that this imperfect balance between the two cultures is one of the key thematic threads in the stories under scrutiny here; but, more importantly perhaps, the writer himself can be observed to struggle to hit a formal equilibrium between his peoples’ oral-storytelling patterns and those to be found in the Western literate tradition: “Alexie does not merely fight back against the white world but embraces and reshapes it so that Western traditions

are remade as Indian ones and Western individualism yields to Indian tribalism” (Peterson 2010: 139). One of Alexie’s greatest achievements is, then, to be able to integrate into his art some basic ingredients of the oral tradition such as the incantatory repetitions, lively dialogues, and therapeutic tones in order to transform and revitalize some others that we would associate with the (post)modern short story.

Many experts in the study of oral traditions (Tedlock 1983; Evers and Toelken 2001; Teuton 2008) have described the difficulties faced by contemporary readers who are not familiar with the kind of interaction that “texts” belonging to those traditions require. Foley rightly notes that when readers extrude “an acceptably inert, bookish object from the once-living, recorded experience, [they] forever [eliminate] much of the meaning that had managed to survive that far” (2001: vii). Indeed, a substantial part of the estrangement experienced by readers vis-à-vis stories that bring to the foreground their oral qualities is due to their tendency to rip the event/performance out of context and to try to examine it according to the parameters favored by literate cultures (see Teuton 2008: 195). In this regard, it is not unusual to come across reviews of Alexie’s fiction that describe it as both unconventional and compelling at the same time, for it is packed with stories that play with the reader’s expectations and consistently shock us by twisting the plots in unpredictable directions. Hoffert claims that his muscular prose and thrilling voices “can deliver a shock like a good, hard punch” because we are repeatedly “caught off guard” by his ability to use language and images in ways that recall the gambits of his storytelling ancestors (2000: 120). This quality becomes most clear when one considers a number of formal patterns and performative devices that seem unusual outside that framework of reference. Interestingly, Alexie inserts into his narratives elements of the oral tradition that appear to generate a surplus of signification that would not seem all that necessary in conventional short stories, while, other times, the opposite appears to be the case, as he encourages the reader to complete indeterminacies and lacunae in the text, without which it is difficult to grasp the final meaning. In spite of the apparently antithetical effects pursued by the inclusion of these different oral strategies, we will see below that in fact both of them contribute to the author’s aim to evolve new ‘ceremonies’ that may help his people and others to find convenient ways of being and relating in the contemporary world. To do so, as Grassian has maintained, he often uses the accretionary power of satire and conceptual dislocations to undermine certain assumptions that are widely held by both the majority group and American Indians alike (2005: 7). It is evident anyhow that part of his intention is to refashion some of the staple techniques that are distinctive of the verbal exchanges and storytelling tradition in his culture to make them serve new “pedagogical purposes” in his transcultural and intercultural narratives (cf. Evans 2010: 205).

3. AGGREGATIVE REPETITIONS AND MNEUMONIC FORMULAE

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, because oral cultures cannot rely on the stability of written records to preserve their knowledge and beliefs, they often need to resort to mnemonic aids — in the form of repeated, patterned thoughts — to make that heritage memorable and to retain its full significance. Ong rightly notes that formulaic expressions that would seem “cumbersome and tiresomely redundant” in a literate culture are quite natural in an oral culture (1988: 38), in which linearity and continuity are very much dependent on a certain degree of repetition and cumulative aggregation. For the story to move forward in a cohesive way, some phrases, statements or images need to be recurrently retrieved, so that the reader can use them as markers in his/her progress through the otherwise garbled representation of experience. In the story “Saint Junior,” for example, we are privy to a Native couple’s endeavors to bring back some of the excitement of their previous life as basketball star and runaway American Indian intellectual in Europe before they decided to return to a squalid Spokane Reservation, he to coach a high school basketball team and she to teach primary school, and both to grow increasingly fat. At several points in the story, we overhear, as some sort of refrain or chorus, basketball icon Michael Jordan stating that he is coming back to play the game again after one of his premature-retirement announcements:

On the morning after the first snow, Grace Atwater could hear the television playing out in the living room, could hear the replay of Michael Jordan’s famous press conference.

I’m back.

Grace knew that her husband had fallen asleep out there again. He often fell asleep on the couch, leaving her alone in the bed. She didn’t mind. He snored loudly and usually stole the covers. She smiled at the thought of her sloppy husband. He’d once been thin and beautiful. (Alexie 2000: 160-61)

Roman Gabriel Fury and his wife, Grace, a Chinese-Mohawk woman, who had obtained higher scores than any other Native American before on the CAT — a test designed to keep Indians out of college! —, find in Jordan’s short statement the kind of strength and inspiration that they need to go on with their life together, despite their “failed dreams” (176). Roman, in particular, is highly aware of how his ambitions as a young man have gradually vanished and his masculinity is now being tested in new ways:

He couldn’t be an indigenous warrior or a Los Angeles Laker. He was an Indian man who’d invented a new tradition for himself, a manhood ceremony that had provided him with equal amounts of joy and pain, but his ceremony had slowly and surely become archaic. (175)

The burden of knowing that, at different points in their earlier lives, both Roman and Grace had shown great potential to overcome the barriers that the dominant culture had planted on their way is something they find hard to live with in the shabby atmosphere of the reservation. Despite the momentary comforts they get from attending Native ceremonies, sending signals of mutual respect or enjoying Grandmother Fury's salmon mush for breakfast, their life together is by no means easy: "Damn, marriage was hard work, was manual labor, and *unpaid* manual labor at that. Yet, year after year, Grace and Roman pressed their shoulder against the stone and rolled it up the hill together" (178). But, in spite of the difficulties they encounter in keeping the flame of their love alight, there are those recurrent references to the basketball court hero that help them put up with conditions that, to an outsider, would have seemed unbearable:

[...] She was convinced the Spokanes survived out of spite. After a nuclear war, the only things left standing would be Spokane Indians, cockroaches, farmers, and Michael Jordan.

I'm back.

Inside their small house, Grace listened as Roman stood from the couch and walked into the bathroom. He sat down to piss. She thought that Roman's sit-down pisses were one of the most romantic and caring things that any man had ever done for any woman. (162-63)

Jonathan Levi wrote in a review of *Toughest Indian* that "Saint Junior" is "the loveliest story in the collection" because the author manages to halo the experience of an ordinary Indian couple "with a gorgeous moment of grace" (Levi 2000). Although this reviewer bases his judgment primarily on the closing scene of the story — in which Roman shoots a ball toward the hoop and it catches fire in midair before hitting the backboard and going through the rim, thus earning the prize that his wife had offered —, there is no doubt that this finale would not have been half as effective if those reminders of Jordan's unexpected return had not been inserted into the narrative. Ong observes that this "backlooping" to particular sentences or memories is typical of oral cultures that need to use repetition and redundancy to imprint on the human mind what is not fixed on paper (see 1988: 39-40). Apart from the importance of repetition as a means to reinforce particular meanings, there are two further reasons that justify its incorporation into stories that want to retain some oral parameters. On the one hand, as Dauterich has noted regarding several novels by Toni Morrison, "repetition creates a hybrid form of expression" which "provides the reader with a text that can be 'heard' as well as read" (2005: 32). No doubt, a substantial part of the eloquence and emotional resonance that many reviewers have discovered in Alexie's prose derives directly from the inclusion of these refrain-like lines that keep the reader on track in a narrative that is otherwise characterized by its broken and seemingly mystifying structure. Jordan's "*I'm back*" generates a certain

rhythm in the story that somehow compensates for the absence of the kind of continuity that we are used to in written narratives. On the other hand, it is also important to note that, although the recurrent statement remains the same throughout the story, its emergence in different contexts contributes to slight variations in the message it comes to convey:

To make Grace happy, Roman sat down to piss, did the dishes at least three times a week, vacuumed every day, and occasionally threw a load of laundry into the washer, though he'd often forgotten to transfer the wet clothes into the dryer. No matter. Grace didn't sweat the small stuff, and with each passing day she loved him more and more.

I'm back. (177)

The aggregative nature of oral storytelling becomes evident in "Saint Junior," since each new presence of the famous statement will artfully embellish the connotations that keep clustering around it — here, the immense respect Roman shows toward his wife. It is in this regard that, as Ortiz has argued, the substance of language begins to turn emotional and spiritual, thus transcending its functional properties and becoming a transforming experience itself: "The act of the song which you are experiencing is real, and the reality is its substance" (Ortiz 1977: 6). By the time the reader gets to the closing scene of the story, in which Roman is cleaning a snow-covered basketball court with kerosene and Grace opens her coat "to flash her nudity" at him before making her bet, we are ready to witness that "gorgeous moment of grace" that Levi referred to in his perceptive review.

While it is a fact that repetition and patterned formulae clearly help to stabilize and expand some of the key meanings in the stories, it is also true that sometimes they may become excessively stylized and interfere with the 'natural flow' of the narrative. In this regard, Jonathan Penner, a writer himself, has stated about Alexie's collection that "Sometimes style seems the only object. The repeated enumeration of things whose count doesn't matter is an example. Another example: the repetition of puzzling phrases, which break into the narrative like someone shouting in the apartment next door" (Penner 2000). This author may be right when he says that Alexie's writing often displaces our attention from the purely plot-oriented aims of the language towards its auditory and visual qualities; yet, to claim that our reading skills and interpretative conventions should center only on the former seems rather narrow-minded. Respected scholars such as Tedlock (1983) and Warrior (2005) have claimed that, in fact,

The ideal text would permit the reader to choose between the objectifying eye of stares and glances, which declares its independence from the temporality of sound, and the participating eye that musicians call 'sight-reading' in which the reader coordinates vision with the properly timed reenactment of sound. (Tedlock 1983: 5)

The story "South by Southwest" presents us with an interesting instance of how an author may promote these two types of reading simultaneously by combining elements of the text-centered, short-story tradition with a few others that retain a "massive oral residue" (Ong 1988: 41). Interestingly, the tale brings together two estranged characters (and peoples), one a middle-aged, lonely white man named Seymour, and the other a fat Indian man whom Seymour names Salmon Boy, and who also "believe[s] in love" (59). The two go on a highly farcical journey southward during which they try to follow the unwritten rules of "a nonviolent killing spree" (58), while they investigate the possible sources of all sorts of love. The story appears to respond to a well-known pattern in American movies in which an odd couple of male characters find in robbery and escape the building blocks to consolidate their unconventional friendship. However, it is interesting to note how Alexie intersperses a few scenes from Salmon Boy's past that bring into the narrative some formulae typical of Native orature and which are seen to supplement some of the messages in the story. For example, after 'stealing' the strange love stories of an old woman and a tourist family, Salmon Boy finds himself "lying in a motel room in Flagstaff, Arizona" (68), sharing a bed with sleeping Seymour and recalling an episode from his childhood:

Can you drive faster? Salmon Boy asked his father. He wanted to watch the movie.

We'll never make it in time, said his father. But he loved his son and so he drove as fast as he could, through the tunnel of his son's dreams, through a tunnel crowded with all his son's dreams.

They drove by a coyote nailed to a speed-limit sign.

They drove by a coyote howling from an overpass.

They drove by a coyote drinking a cup of coffee in a truck-stop diner. (69)

Although father and son never make it to the Batman movie that the Indian boy wanted to see, the memories connect in indirect and satirical ways with some other incidents in the story and bring them under a more Native light — or under parameters of vision and communication characteristic of Native cultures. It is curious to note that even if it is Seymour's anxieties and aspirations that seem to dominate the journey southward of these contemporary 'questers,' by the end of the story, when they see themselves compelled yet one more time to steal from the mixed crowd gathered in a McDonald's, the narrative has become much more dialogical and performative, with the two main characters taking part in the critical decisions. As Bleaser has argued, these dialogic exchanges in Native American fiction are good examples of "the possibilities that exist for sustaining aspects of orality in the written tradition" (1996: 11):

How much money do we have left? asked Seymour.

Counting the money the old woman gave us?

Of course.

Ten dollars.
 That means we're in some definite financial trouble.
 Appears that way.
 And we've just run out of Arizona, too.
 And almost of the south this country has.
 And most of the southwest, as well.
 Seymour looked around the McDonald's. He saw an Indian woman arguing with an Indian man. They spoke in some strange language. (71)

Ong (1988) and Foley (2001) maintain that this dialogical and additive quality of oral traditions, although perceived by some as "archaic or quaint," shows the advantage of pulling the "reader-listener" into the collaborative fold, thus "adding another participant to the team" (Foley 2001: xiv).

Perhaps the narrative that best illustrates both the centrality and the imaginative contribution of the oral residue to the collection is the closing story, "One Good Man," in which the narrator is preparing to bid his slowly-dying, diabetic father a last farewell, after his two feet have been amputated. Here too, the tale is strewn with flashbacks showing the reader some momentous episodes in the narrator's earlier life and the critical role played by his progenitor in many of them. Despite the apparently jumpy and fractured structure of the narrative, a degree of continuity is achieved in the teller's evocation of his city/reservation experiences as he keeps posing the question "*What is an Indian?*" and trying to provide tentative answers. For example, when the narrator thinks of his son, Paul, now living in Seattle with his Lummi Indian mother and white stepfather, he muses: "The nontraditional arrangement, this extended family, was strange when measured by white standards, but was very traditional by Indian standards. *What is an Indian?* Is it a child who can stroll unannounced through the front doors of seventeen different houses?" (217). The quasi-ritual question becomes in most instances a rhetorical gesture, since the generally ironic answers are very much implied by the context in which the query is formulated. Joyce Carol Oates describes this question that "runs through Sherman Alexie's second collection of short stories" as a kind of "demented, demanding mantra," with irony sounding in the rejoinders "like the tribal drums" of ghost musicians and haunting the lives of the characters (2000). Again, several critics and reviewers have complained that the "emotional strength and humor" gained by these repetitions and mnemonic aids may suffer when the stories lack any "plot or even clear narration" (Doenges 2000). One could admit that the reader may feel a bit puzzled by the juxtaposition of episodes from the narrator's childhood — when he lost his mother or when a bear sat on the roof of their church — and the caring work he needs to provide for his dying father now; however, the rhythmic reemergence of the question becomes an alternative thread in the story that gives it coherence and harmony.

Probably, one of the climactic moments in the story occurs when the narrator, in his freshman year, decides to bring his father into one of his classes at Washington State University to face down a professor, Dr. Lawrence Crowell, who “thought he was entitled to tell other Indians what it meant to be Indian” (227). The metaphorical shootout between these two characters takes the shape of a trickster engagement during which the lecturer feels proud of his participation in historical events such as the Native occupation of Alcatraz or the Wounded Knee massacre, while the narrator’s father humbly refers to how he has been mostly attending to his family responsibilities, giving an ironic twist to his opponent’s challenges: “But you ain’t an Indian. No. You might be a Native American but sure as hell ain’t an Indian” (228). Near the end of the episode, the narrator wonders again: “*What is an Indian?* Is it a man with a spear in his hands?” (229). His father’s response to the professor’s provocation is fairly clear by then:

“What kind of Indian are you? You weren’t part of the revolution.”

“I’m a man who keeps promises.”

It was mostly true. My father had kept most of his promises, or had tried to keep all of his promises, except this one: he never stopped eating sugar. (229).

The highly-episodic and unconventional story closes with a number of tender and often darkly humorous exchanges between father and son, in which they show their mutual influence and devotion in the trying circumstances, and a trip southward that allows them to rediscover their “collective balance” (234): “*What is an Indian?* I lifted my father and carried him across every border” (238). Although some readers may argue that the refrain-like, core/choral question in the text has not been fully answered, both this story and the collection as a whole do offer imaginative ways in which present-day American Indians can deal with some of their identity issues and their conflict-ridden relations with the mainstream society (cf. Doenges 2000).

4. THE KEY ROLE OF INDETERMINACIES AND SILENCES

If I have been arguing so far that, in *Toughest Indian*, Alexie is seen to rely regularly on redundant and ritualistic formulae that compensate for the absence of a clear plotline in some of the stories, something similar could be stated about his use of open-ended structures and informational lacunae that invite readers to draw their own conclusions from the events. In this regard, it could be said that as in the poems and narratives of other Native American contemporary authors, “His writing seeks to function as both the presentation of an idea and an invitation to discover where that idea might lead, an invitation to engage in dialogue” (Bleaser 1996: 4). This is definitely the case in some of the initial stories of the collection, such as “Assimilation” or “Class,” in which new variations of the key question “What is an

Indian?" come up, but, in being reframed within the context of mixed marriages and social classes in big cities, the possible answers become much more contingent and problematical.

In "Assimilation," Mary Lynn is an upper-middle-class, Coeur d'Alene Indian woman married to a white man who is suddenly overcome with an urgent need to cheat on her husband. Although she is not too clear about the reason for this urge, she does explain that it may have something to do with her feeling trapped in a conventional marriage and a new desire to find her deepest Indian roots: "Why not practice a carnal form of affirmative action? By God, her infidelity was a political act! Rebellion, resistance, revolution!" (4). Despite the protagonist's determination to turn over a leaf in her life and to relieve her guilty feelings about not having experienced her 'Indianness' meaningfully in the past, the reader still feels that the motivation for her "rebellious behavior" is rather weak: "White men were neutral, she thought, just like Belgium! And when has Belgium ever been sexy? When has Belgium caused a grown woman to shake with fear and guilt? She didn't want to feel Belgian; she wanted to feel dangerous" (5). Although Mary Lynn does have sex with a flabby Lummi Indian worker in a cheap motel room and her emotional distance from her rational, and mostly unsuspecting, husband increases, the story takes an unexpected turn near the end when they are caught in a huge traffic jam on a bridge, where a woman is about to commit suicide. When Jeremiah, Mary Lynn's husband, leaves their Ford Taurus to find out what is going on, the main character is invaded by new fears that she did not know she would ever harbor:

Mary Lynn watched Jeremiah walk farther down the bridge. He was just a shadow, a silhouette. She was slapped by the brief, irrational fear that he would never return.

Husband, come back to me, she thought, and I will confess.

Impatient drivers honked their horns. Mary Lynn joined them. She hoped Jeremiah would recognize the specific sound of their horn and return to the car. (17)

Naturally, readers may feel quite perplexed by the upsurge of irrational fears that Mary Lynn — as well as her husband — experiences in the short time they are away from each other, especially after having seen them embroiled in fierce quarrels earlier on. The closing lines of the story leave the reader suspended between different interpretations since, while it is clear that a profound attachment exists between the mixed couple, it is also indisputable that their marriage will still be troubled by their obvious differences: "Jeremiah pushed through the crowd, as he ran away from the place where the woman had jumped. Jeremiah ran across the bridge until he could see Mary Lynn. She and he loved each other across the distance" (20).

Robert Peluso claims that, although the themes surfacing in these initial stories of the collection are "potentially gripping," their uneven development and inconclusive denouements may make the author sound a bit pedantic (2000). However, we should recall that Native storytelling is not habitually interested in the symbolic resolution of

conflicts or in providing definite answers. Teuton argues that “knowledge production and social responsibility are intimately connected” in the American Indian tradition and, in fact, “critical thought” can only come out of the intense discordance developed via dialogic exchanges (2008: 214). Alexie conceives the literary work not so much as something complete and self-contained, intending to provide mainly satisfaction but, rather, as an opportunity for authors and readers to respond to the social exigencies of the moment. As he has declared in several interviews, “as an artist, it is not my job to fit in; it’s not to belong. I’m not a social worker; I’m not a therapist. It’s my job to beat the shit out of the world. I’m not here to make people feel good” (Capriccioso 2003). Stories such as “Assimilation” and “Class” do not provide tailor-made answers to the tribulations faced by Native Americans when they try to integrate into the mainstream society. On the contrary, they invite readers to adopt discerning positions regarding behaviors and situations that, although recognizably human, cannot be easily classified as fair or unfair, sensible or illogical.

The main character in “Class” shares some of the existential problems we found in the “assimilated” Indian woman in the above-analyzed story: he is a well-off lawyer who has married a white Catholic woman, and whose marriage enters into a rocky phase after the couple lose their first son “ten minutes after leaving Susan’s body” (46). In hindsight, Edgar Eagle Runner comes to realize that his reasons for marrying Susan McDermott — related to his mother’s preference for white women and his own dreams of becoming a regular member of the urban upper-middle ‘tribe’ — were perhaps not the best pillars to buttress a solid marriage. Nevertheless, as the story advances, the reader begins to suspect that the protagonist’s problems may derive more directly from his odd understanding of the real potential of his ‘Indianness’ — he seems to be as much a prisoner of the stereotypes of Native Americans as the circle of white people he knows:

As for me, I’d told any number of white women that I was part Aztec and I’d told a few that I was completely Aztec. That gave me some mystery, some ethnic weight, a history of glorious color and mass executions. Strangely enough, there were aphrodisiacal benefits to claiming to be descended from ritual cannibals. (40)

Like Mary Lynn, Edgar also feels that going to bed with an Indian prostitute may bear some positive results on his mixed marriage; but, of course, the torrid affair with a white woman in disguise only shows how prone he is to deceiving himself with false hopes. The real revelation does not dawn upon the protagonist until one day when he discovers that his wife had “been faking her orgasms all along” (46), and he unexpectedly decides to run away to a local Indian dive in search of consolation. However, his fancy clothes, polite manners, and the fact that he drinks only water predictably do not win him the favor of the other patrons present in the shoddy establishment. The reader cannot decide why he gets into an edgy argument with a muscular Indian man named Junior, who swiftly pummels him out of consciousness.

Edgar wakes up with his head in the lap of the Native barmaid who asks him why on earth he had chosen to go there, to which he naively replies: "I wanted to be with my people" (55). But the barmaid explains to him that, although they are all Indians, they live in very different worlds:

"Junior and me," she said. "We have to worry about having enough to eat. What do you have to worry about? That you're lonely? That you have a mortgage? That your wife doesn't love you? Fuck you, fuck you. *I have to worry about having enough to eat.*" (56)

The protagonist's shortsightedness regarding the condition of many other Indians in the city turns him into an easy prey for those who seem to possess that knowledge. Yet, it also becomes clear to the reader that those others are not free from prejudice and easy assumptions that prevent them from seeing the human side of their 'opponent.' While it is evident that, when the protagonist tells his wife the next morning: "I was gone [...] But now I'm back," he is admitting his own miscalculation concerning the power of ethnic brotherhood, it is not so obvious that those who victimized him have managed to see beyond their reverse class animosity. Again, the reader is left with the impression that although the protagonist may have learnt a lesson the hard way, there is still much room to debate whether most of the other characters do not also suffer from similar social delusions and misapprehensions.

Most critics and reviewers seem to agree that it is precisely in those stories "that refuse easy answers" and present characters as real, hesitant "people rather than as mere vehicles for his thematic concerns" that we enjoy Alexie at his best (Peluso 2000). The signs of the oral residue become particularly evident in stories — such as the title story or "Indian Country" — in which the author manages to make his readership identify and sympathize with characters enmeshed in circumstances that show both their need to remember that they are Native Americans and the ensuing dangers involved. Evers and Toelken, following Ong, have remarked that oral storytelling usually has this effect of engaging listeners in the process of meaning production and affective sharing that is only very rare in literate cultures (2001: 9-10). In reading Alexie's short fiction, the reader also gets the impression that he is constantly being invited to take part in that process by reconnecting episodes and interpreting behaviors that, in themselves, do not seem to carry a definite meaning.

In the story "The Toughest Indian in the World," for example, the narrator, a Spokane Indian journalist who works for a newspaper in Seattle where he gets little recognition, tells us about this habit he inherited from his father of stopping for 20th-century aboriginal hitchhikers only. The opening pages of the tale comprise a number of flashbacks in which the narrator's current situation is seen under the light of his memories of those 'crowded rides' with his father, the rest of the family, and various itinerant Indians:

That was how I learnt to be silent in the presence of white people.

The silence is not about hate or pain or fear. Indians just like to believe that white people will vanish, perhaps explode into smoke, if they are ignored enough times. Perhaps a thousand white families are still waiting for their sons and daughters to return home, and can't recognize them when they float back as morning fog. (22)

Once we have learnt about his father's and many of his peoples' attitude toward whites, it becomes easier to understand the narrator's relationship with his coworkers and his need to reunite with his nostalgic, Native past via the hitchhikers he picks up every week. But things appear to get a bit out of hand one day when he invites a tough Lummi fighter, a man covered with all kinds of scars, to climb into his Camry. After some conversation about their respective professions and their disappointments with them, the two characters end up having a homosexual experience — the first for the narrator — in a motel, and the next morning each of them goes his own way. Although the reader suspects that the narrator's acquiescence to have sex with the fighter is related to his desperate hope to somehow reconnect with his roots, he is not really able to explain what drove him to such outrageous behavior, neither does the reader see any immediate justification. However, as we near the end of the narrative, it becomes clear that something has been deeply transformed in the narrator: "I stood in the doorway and watched him continue his walk down the highway, past the city limits. I watched him rise from earth to sky and become a new constellation. I closed the door and wondered what was going to happen next" (33). We may conclude that the narrator has discovered something about himself and his close kinship with all his Indian brothers that he was not aware of before, but other than seeing how it affects his short-term reactions the next morning, we cannot foresee what direction his life in Seattle will take in the future:

I walked past my car. I stepped onto the pavement, still warm from the previous day's sun. I started walking. In bare feet, I traveled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die. And that moment, if you had broken open my heart you could have looked inside and seen the thin white skeletons of one thousand salmon. (34)

The protagonist of "Indian Country" is also caught in the double bind of having abandoned his indigent Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation and having joined the more affluent mainstream society as a successful mystery writer, but still being uncertain as to where he stands in the world. Low Man Smith, however, is very different from the reporter in the previous story, since he has cut all his ties with his father's family and the Indian community, which he sees plagued with brief bouts of violence and a general tedium:

Low Man believed the Coeur d'Alene Reservation to be a monotonous place — a wet kind of monotony that white tourists saw as spiritual and magic. Tourists snapped off

dozens of photographs and tried to capture it — the wet, spiritual monotony — before they climbed back into their rental cars and drove away to the next reservation on their itineraries. (122)

Despite his repudiation of his peoples' culture and way of life, Low Man seems doomed to be perceived by others as a Native American, with all the burdens and rewards that this habitually implies. While on a trip to Missoula to visit a Navajo girlfriend, the writer discovers that an old-time white sweetheart of his, Tracy Johnson, is living there, and he calls her to comfort him after he learns that he has been stood up by the Navajo woman. But Tracy is now training to become a writer herself and she is engaged to Sara Polatkin, a very bright Spokane Indian woman. With Low Man still having a crush on Tracy and Sara apparently resenting their earlier relation, the quandary becomes quite unpredictable and explosive; to top it all, the newly-engaged couple are supposed to take Sara's homophobic parents out for dinner to try to explain to them their mutual feelings. Of course, the situation grows increasingly high-strung, for the two men, Low Man and Sid Polatkin, seem determined to give each other a serious thrashing in their verbal battles. After stating his thoughts regarding lesbian marriage, Sara's father begins to deride the writer's views and talents: "“You're one of the funny Indians, enit? Sid asked Low Man. 'Always making the jokes, never taking it seriously'” (144). Soon the five dinner guests are involved in a magniloquent verbal dispute resembling 'the dozens game' typical of African-American communities or 'the trickster brawls,' which are common among Native cultures. In Ong's opinion, “By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle [and] reciprocal name-calling [that pursues the aim] to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat” (1988: 44).

The second half of “Indian Country” makes effective use of these rhetorical tactics in order to pull the readers into those quarrels too, as they will find themselves siding up with the positions staked out by the participants at different points. By the end of the story, and after Sid and Low Man have literally fought each other over their rights to decide on the couple's future, it seems that it is the two young women who will finally hold the reins of their lives: “The two Indian men sat on the ground as the white woman stood above them. / Tracy turned away from the men and ran after Sara” (148-49). As Vizenor has explained about trickster disputes, what is crucial in them is not so much “the romantic elimination of human contradictions and evil” (1984: 4) but, rather, that the audience is encouraged to take part in the hostile exchanges and to define their own positions regarding the different viewpoints. In a way, the ultimate winner in these dialectical engagements is the reader her/himself, who has the advantage of witnessing the cognitive and verbal arts of the contestants in action and the freedom to weigh out their respective worth, as the writer does not fully monitor his/her interpretations (cf. Coulombe 2011: 31).

Before bringing this section to an end, I would like to refer briefly to the central role played by silences in Alexie's short fiction and how 'the unsaid' frequently becomes as meaningful as the words uttered by characters. Most likely, the story that best illustrates the influential role of silences is "Dear John Wayne," in which a cultural anthropologist, Dr. Spencer Cox, interviews an extremely old Indian woman in her Retirement Home in Spokane well into the 21st century. In fact, a significant part of the narrative is a verbatim transcription of the dialogue between the Harvard scholar and the one-hundred-and-eighteen-year-old Indian who, after a ludicrous initial exchange in which she mocks the academic's motives for being there, confides to him that: "I lost my virginity to John Wayne" (195). Once again, the reader is faced with an immensely fiery and agonistic dialogue, in which it becomes apparent that the purposes and lifeworlds — or frames of reference — of the two parties are notably at odds. On the one hand, the anthropologist seems to be interested only in his research topic — how powwows have changed under the influence of European ballroom dancing —, which is a theme of little concern for Etta Joseph, his elderly Indian informant:

A: You have a lot to learn. You should listen more and talk less.

Q: Pardon me. I think I'll leave now.

A: I'm not lonely. Have a good day.

(ten seconds of silence)

Q: Okay, wait, I think I understand. We were participating in a tribal dialogue, weren't we? That sort of confrontational banter which solidifies familial and tribal ties, weren't we? Oh, how fascinating, and I failed to recognize it.

A: What are you talking about? (193)

On the other hand, the Indian woman seems more concerned with the kind of effects that their current conversation may have on both speakers. She is extremely deprecatory about both the books that have tried to 'capture' the key elements of Native cultures and their sources: "No, there is nothing definitive in them. They're just your oral tradition. And they're filled with the same lies, exaggerations, mistakes, and ignorance as our oral traditions" (194). Yet, the main difference between the two modes of transmission, as mentioned earlier on, is that while written texts often resort to a high degree of abstraction, since they rely on certain analytical categories, oral modes must remain closer to the human lifeworld by making the themes relevant to human interactions. In Ong's opinion, oral societies are much more "homeostatic" because they prioritize only knowledge that is valuable for present conditions, discarding any meanings that do not contribute to establishing balance and order in the real-life situations:

Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections,

facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs. (1988: 47)

Although there are no references to these other performative cues most likely present in the dialogue, it is clear that the constant inclusion of those silences in their exchanges evinces that other, more immediate forms of communication occur. This is especially important for at least two reasons. First, Alexie is clearly incorporating elements of the oral tradition that displace the reader's attention from the topics of the conversation to the dialectical battle itself, as a special event in which meanings are brought into being (cf. Bleaser 1996: 16). Secondly, we also observe how the author plays — and somehow reverses — the fictional frame he has chosen, i.e. that of the research interview, to turn the narrative as a whole into something radically different from what the reader had originally expected, considering that particular frame:

A: Enough with that academic crap. Listen to me. Listen carefully. In 1952, in Kayenta, Arizona, while John Wayne was playing Ethan Edwards [in *The Searchers*], and I was playing a Navajo extra, we fell in love. Him, for the first and only time with an Indian. Me, for the first time with anybody. (195)

What follows throughout the rest of the narrative is the incredible romance between the film star and the young Indian woman, only eighteen years old at that time, which unveils aspects of the Western hero — such as his fear of horses, his preoccupation with gender issues, and, primarily, his intense love for this red-skinned girl — that undercut all our assumptions about the Duke. More important, perhaps, is the fact that the scholar learns to listen and to see beyond the clear divisions between truth claims and fictional artifacts that usually characterize his trade. As Jahner remarks, one of the defining traits of orally-infused narratives is the belief “that the visionary strength inherent in the oral images has the power to order the perplexing and sometimes destructive aspects of a world radically different [...]” (1983: 67). Spencer Cox feels compelled to reconsider his practice as an anthropologist because he has been exposed to a completely different mode of communication in which silences and more mundane occurrences remind him of the real significance of his daily affairs:

Sitting alone in his car outside of the retirement home, Spencer ejected the cassette tape from his recorder. He could destroy the tape or keep it; he could erase Etta's voice or transcribe it. It didn't matter what he chose to do with her story because the story would continue to exist with or without him. Was the story true or false? Was that the question Spencer needed to ask? (207-8)

Like many other white characters in Alexie's fiction, this anthropologist initially fails to see that the dialectical and antagonistic nature of his conversation with the old Indian is full of opportunities for “innovative, iconoclastic, and reflective thought”

(Teuton 2008: 196). It is only as we near the end of the narrative that the awareness of the immense transformative power that Etta's strange story has had over the scholar dawns upon us: "[he] closed his eyes and prayed to the ghosts of John Wayne, Ethan Edwards, and Marion Morrison, that Holy Trinity. / Somebody said nothing and somebody said amen, amen, amen" (208).

5. CLOSING REMARKS

Several specialists in Native American literature have expressed their concern that the move of many young American Indians to the big cities and their disconnection from their tribal traditions may have devastating effects on the survival of their cultures. Yet, as Jahner has noted, it is not unusual either to find individuals and groups among these younger generations who "turn again to the traditions of the first world and find in them more answers than they would have dared to seek originally" (1983: 73-74). This may well have been the case of Sherman Alexie, whose fiction seems to be deeply marked by the conviction — quite common in oral cultures — that as an individual passes through his/her life experiences and learns to interpret them in the light of what s/he has heard from his/her elders, s/he gradually becomes a storyteller. Evidently, this transformation may prove quite challenging when the mainstream culture into which one is enclosed seems to favor forms of communication that value specific types of knowledge and aesthetic principles — not particularly congenial with those one has been reared in. This article has shown, however, that there are ways in which Native authors may become participants in the Western, literate tradition, without for that reason having to give up all the strategies and techniques they have inherited from their tribal tradition. Foley (2001), Womack (1999), and others have advocated for innovative, intermediate forms of artistic expression in which the oral and the written, the Native and the Euro-American traditions can coexist. Alexie's collection of short stories *Toughest Indian* provides us with a convenient example of a text in which, as Evans argues, the "accretionary power" of oral storytelling (2010: 201) is perfectly integrated into other formal structures more typical of the Western literary tradition.

My analysis of several stories from the collection reveals that the coexistence of both modes of expression within a single text is never easy, since the epistemological processes on which they are based and the kind of interactions they promote are often radically different. In this regard, we have found much divergence in how the stories were received, with some commentators complaining about the inconceivable demands they make on the reader, while others complimented them on their capacity to engage the audience in ambitious interpretative activity (see Coulombe 2011: 10). Alexie's use of aggregative repetitions of questions or patterned thoughts and his inclusion of silences and indeterminacies are narrative strategies that derive directly from the oral tradition and provide his stories with a distinctive rhythm and purpose

that is not always easy to appreciate on a first reading. Nevertheless, as Ortiz (1977) and Levine (2013) have argued, the fault is not so much with texts that try to explore the potential of hybrid forms of artistic expression, but rather with our lack of familiarity with the kind of involvement required by orally-infused modes of communication. In this sense, like Vizenor's, Alexie's fiction should be approached as a ceremonial event of mimetic performance in which creation takes place with the collaboration of the reader. It is no coincidence that his masterful use of 'oral' wit and humor should, in most instances, manage to pull us into stories that, although initially odd and unfamiliar, prove to resonate with issues of love and conflict, acceptance and resistance that seem relevant to all human beings — whichever minority they happen to belong to. As William S. Penn put it in his award-winning novel *All My Sins Are Relatives*:

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. (1995: 175)

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