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Deconstructing Cultural Icons – Sherman Alexie and Junot Díaz

This paper addresses the problem of the representation of Native American and Latino/a identity in Sherman Alexie's collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), and Junot Díaz's, *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012). Both authors try to the deconstruct popular ethnic stereotypes of the Indian Warrior and the Macho by creating characters such as Victor Joseph and or Yunior, who learn to reject the violence-based legacies of their respective cultures and try to substitute them with new hybrid identities, thus proving that it is possible to transform one's ethnic heritage without getting completely acculturated. This paper also attempts to demonstrate that Alexie and Díaz play a very important role in the discussion of **postethnic** space by emphasizing the dangers of perceiving the Other through the prism of mass-fabricated images. They continue the long tradition established by authors such as Gerald Vizenor, Louis Owens, Arnold Krupat, Octavio Paz, Mario Vargas Llosa, and others. Additionally, Alexie and Díaz incorporate survival humor into their narratives, which makes their characters more credible and universal.

Key words: ethnic identity, Native American literature, Latino/a literature, ethnic stereotypes, Alexie, Díaz, survival humor

> The *indian* is a simulation, the absence of natives;
> the *indian* transposes the real, and the simulation
> of the real has no referent, memory, or native stories.
> The *postindian* must waver over the aesthetic ruins of *indian* simulations.
> Gerald Vizenor *Fugitive Poses* (1998)

We all know that there are language forms that are considered impolite and out of order, no matter what truths these languages might be carrying. If you talk with a harsh, urbanized accent and you use too many profanities, that will often get you barred from many arenas, no matter what you're trying to say. On the other hand, polite, formal language is allowed almost anywhere even when all it is communicating is hatred and violence. Power always privileges its own discourse while marginalizing those who would challenge it or that are the victims of its power.

Junot Díaz (1999)

The theme of U.S. cultural imperialism endangering representatives of different ethnic groups has been present in American literature for many decades. There is no denying that for all ethnic authors, the starting point has always been to count the losses; or,more specifically, to estimate the degree to which the image of a given culture has been distorted by mainstream American stereotypes. The next step has been to counteract the distortion by proposing a new, more authentic definition for literary representatives of that culture. One of the most popular and harmful stereotypes of Native Americans and Latinos in the U.S. is that of the Indian Warrior and Macho – easily recognizable and ready for immediate mass consumption, a guarantee of box-office success, both immortal and extremely difficult to eradicate.

Sherman Alexie and Junot Díaz seem to agree that literature can be a weapon of defense against pop culture's favorite stars. All of their works feature true commitment to the deconstruction of stereotypes they consider harmful. In particular, they are more interested in showing how these stereotypes affect their Native American and Latino/a characters, respectively, rather than just criticizing the mainstream public for its behavior. Instead of simply writing another ideologically charged fiction, the authors attempt to answer the more important question of what it means to be Native American or Latino/a in contemporary America, a country that often appears to be multicultural on the surface, but deep down is boiling with unresolved **ethnic** conflicts. The answer to the question is crucial, because although deconstruction may be easy (and not only that of stereotypes), it requires a great mind and imagination to fill the void after deconstruction with a new idea. The true merit of their art is that they do not only mock or complain, but instead formulate interesting interpretations and solutions.

Alexie and Díaz are not alone in their pursuit. Indeed, they are part of a long tradition in attempting to free their characters from the costumes imposed by American cultural imperialism. In Native American literature Gerald Vizenor has repeatedly called for a redefinition of the term the need to coin a new definition of "Native American" in the 20th and 21st century. In his classical *Manifest Manners,* he stated, "…we are all invented as Indians…The inventions have become disguises. This occurs in invented Indians because we're invented and we're invented from traditional static standards and we're stuck in coins and words like artifacts" (Owens 5-6). Vizenor coined the term "post-Indian" for the new representation of Native Americans, who should represent not a static museum artifact but contemporary dynamic Mestizo culture. Other Native American writers such as N. Scott Momaday have joined him in this quest by suggesting the need to concentrate on new articulation like N. Scott Momaday ("We are what we imagine," in Owens 5-6), as well as on reconstruction of falsified or silenced history, like in the works of Paula Gunn Allen, who concentrated on re-remembering a dismembered history (Owens 5-6). The summary was provided by canonical today *Other Destinies, Other Plots* by Louis Owens. The dialogspute on the modern conception of Native Americans has been long and difficult, particularly due to the fact that many Native American thinkers remain in conflict, a phenomenon which is jokingly referred to by some literary critics as "contemporary tribal wars." These thinkers are divided into two camps. The first advocates separatism, understood as writing primarily for the Indian audience, and rejecting all imitation of colonial discourse through establishment of Native

American literature as a field reserved only for specialists on Native Americans. The second advocates incorporation of Native American literature into American or world literature, and emphasizes its hybrid status (Krupat 1998). Sherman Alexie seems to belong to the second camp, as he devotes much of his fiction and poetry to contemporary urban Indians who do not speak indigenous languages and identify with mainstream American culture, next to their Spokane legacy so interpreting his fiction in the exclusively Indian context is impossible.

Junot Díaz is also part of the long dispute on the presence of stereotypes in Latino/a culture. In fact, the Pan-American context here cannot be ignored, as Latino culture is not only a part of American culture, but that of Latin America. One of the most important authors of the debate on the burden of stereotypes in Latin American culture was Octavio Paz. In "Mexican Masks," a chapter of his *Labyrinth of Solitude*, he indicated the colonial origin of machismo and *malinchismo*. Paz observed that violence, which is one the main characteristics of machismo, can be observed in the relationships between Ninguno and Don Nadie, who we might interpret as slave and master. Additionally, the stereotype of Malinche – the mother of the Mestizo bastard and a source of shame because she had been raped and had become a traitor – reinforced and justified violence. The logic was that the daughters of Malinche deserved the treatment they received from the Machos. Many other Latin American authors who have showed their characters suffering from this cultural legacy have also joined the discussion. These include Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Rulfo, Rosario Castellanos, José María Arguedas, and Gabriel García Márquez. All of these writers have created memorable fictional worlds inhabited by powerful Macho and Malinche figures. Stereotypes have been further addressed in Latino/Latina literature by authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Denise Cháves, Oscar Hijuelos, and Julia Álvarez. Junot Díaz's interests are therefore is definitely not original, but his presentation thereof has earned him the Pulitzer Prize for his *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and a nomination of his *This Is How You Lose Her* for the U.S. National Book Award.

What do Alexie and Díaz have in common? What is it about their treatment of stereotypes that has earned them the appreciation of not only readers, but critics as well? In an effort to answer this question, this paper will compare two works: Alexie's first collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993); and Díaz's last collection, *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012). However, it is worth nothing that this topic can be examined using many other, if not all, works by these authors. I will concentrate predominantly on male characters, as I've chosen to examine the stereotype of the Indian Warrior in Alexie's work, and the Macho in Díaz's.

The first similarity between the works of Alexie and Díaz is their titles, which both imply deliberate subversion. In the title of his collection, Alexie refers to the popular TV series on the Lone Ranger (a civilized white hero) and Tonto (an ignorant Indian; the name means "Stupid"). The work is full of obvious paternalism, so it is not surprising that Tonto does not want to serve in the role traditionally set out for him, and instead chooses to challenge the Ranger to a fistfight. However, because Alexie is faithful to what he calls "reservation realism," he decides that such a fight is only possible in heaven. When reading the stories, it quickly becomes clear that Alexie's main goal is a figurative "fistfight," wherein literature is the weapon. Thus

the fight in the title of the book becomes authentic. Further, its climax is not the story from which the whole collection takes its title, but "Imagining the reservation," written as a manifesto where Alexie becomes the narrator. There he writes, "Survival = Anger X Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation" (Alexie 1993, 150). The rest of the stories in the collection confirm this belief.

Before I move on to a discussion of the characters in both works, I would like to concentrate for a moment on the title of Díaz's collection. Similarly to Alexie, Díaz uses deliberate subversion. Although the most prominent characters of his stories suffer from "Macho syndrome," the titles of his stories are mostly women's names. The work is not a manual for the mistreatment of women, but rather a story of the maturation of the main male character, who tries to learn how not to ruin relationships.

Another aspect of subversion has to do with the construction of Alexie's and Díaz's most conspicuous characters, Victor and Yunior, who are stereotypical only on the surface level. When we get to know them better, we learn that they are deeply conflicted and hard to define. It is true that Victor is aggressive and seems indifferent, just like the stereotypical Indian from Western movies. It is also true that Yunior does not respect women and easily gets involved in superficial sexual experiences like a traditional Dominican (which he admits quite often). But when we learn the backgrounds of these characters, we immediately begin to see them in a different light.

Victor was born into an alcoholic family in which violence was, as Alexie calls it, "genetic." Left by his father, he had to face poverty in his reservation community, where there were no chances for a better education or job. For him, violence was a substitute for self-respect, rebellion against inertia and passivity and he took revenge out on others for the injustice he has suffered. Yunior was brought up in a family of Dominican immigrants who, similarly to Alexie's Indian characters, felt marginalized and alienated. Young Yunior saw the helplessness of his submissive mother and the desperation of his tyrant father. Later in life, Yunior had to cope with the lifestyle of his brother Rafa (who seems to be a caricature of the Macho due to his extreme behavior), and his subsequent death by cancer. Yunior also narrates some of the stories. As a narrator, he is a sensitive observer of reality, even though the stories he tells about his relationships with women also portray him as macho.

Both Victor and Yunior suffer from the absence of their fathers, whom they consider traitors. In fact, the only chance for Victor to get out of the vicious circle of violence is to forgive his father, which he does when Thomas-Builds-the-Fire portrays him in a different light; namely, as the only one who was able to act as the father of Thomas Builds the Fire. Since Thomas was an orphan, and at the same time the only person who deliberately helped Victor to bring his father's ashes from Arizona, Victor decided to "share" his father with him by giving him half of the ashes. What is also important here is the Native American perspective of interpretation, as Thomas saves Victor through story-telling (a traditional ritual), thus Victor not only matures as an individual person, but undergoes communal healing in accordance with tribal tradition. The idea of sharing the father here takes on a new dimension, i.e. Victor and Thomas start to participate in the same tradition (though they do not become friends).

Critics such as Daniel Grassian and Jerome Denuccio point out that Victor is not the only character who has to overcome harmful stereotypes. Just as Victor has to understand that being a contemporary Indian warrior is not about displaying violent

behavior whenever he becomes frustrated and victimized, Thomas-Builds-the-Fire has to acknowledge that there is no place on a contemporary reservation for the traditional role of a medicine man who heals through story-telling. Just as a traditional Indian warrior, a traditional story-teller cannot succeed if he does not modify his attitude. His stories must fit the context of the day. If tradition is understood in a limited way, as something static and inflexible, the roles that the characters take simply hamper their contact with reality. Without a wise transformation of attitude, Victor and Thomas indeed risk, as Vizenor puts it, getting "stuck in words like artifacts."

Alexie himself was aware of this when he said about his characters, "there is always something that only (they themselves) can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition" (Alexie, quoted by Denuccio 89). Critics such as Denuccio have noted that Thomas represents a personal narrative which challenges its culture's master narrative. Thomas's words confirm this: "We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are the stories that can change or not change the world. It doesn't matter which as long as I continue to tell the stories…I have only my stories which came to me before I even had the words to speak. I learned a thousand stories before I took my first thousand steps. They are all I have. It's all I can do" (Alexie 1993, 72-73).

Therefore, the true quest of Alexie's characters is, in the words of Adrian C. Louis (quoted by Denuccio), "to overcome the haunting sense of cultural loss that generates a sense of ineffectuality and heal the pain that turns into self-pity and the anger that turns into self-loathing" (Denuccio 86). Denuccio also notes that Alexie's characters are trapped between cultural rejection and cultural connection, a situation which is best described by the metaphor of dancing with skeletons. As Thomas says, "Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you…These skeletons are made of memories, dreams and voices…Your skeletons will talk to you, tell you to sit down and take a rest… make you promises, tell you all things you want to hear…No matter what they do keep walking, keep moving" (Alexie 1993, 72, 73). The critic rightly observes that that image suggests that the characters' subjectivity is dialogic as Bakhtin described it ("a plurality of unmerged consciousness", Denuccio 86). Victor and Thomas, in fighting the mass-media stereotype of the Indian warrior, must reconstruct their identities as Indians, which they do when dealing with Victor's father's ashes. Thus the power of Spokane storytelling lies in the synthesis of private and tribal experiences, and what Thomas represents is "the persistence and adaptability of Spokane signifying practices" (Denuccio 89).

To elaborate on this interpretation, we can turn to the ideas of Vizenor from his *Fugitive Poses,* where he refers to Bakhtin as a thinker who helps us understand what is hidden behind "Indian simulations" (Vizenor). Similarly, Krupat sees interpretation of Native American literature within Western paradigms as a necessary opportunity for creating meaningful dialogue between traditions. I agree with this argument, especially since Alexie's characters are Mestizos and thus represent two different cultures.

Critic Daniel Grassian states that, for Alexie, "constant awareness of his ethnicity is both a blessing and a curse" (Grassian 54). He also points out that the exclusion of Alexie's characters from mainstream America leads to conflict. Grassian continues,

"Conflict, therefore catalyzes the narrator's struggle to achieve a perceived sense of equality. This perspective affects the narrator to the extent that if conflict does not immediately exist, he often creates it." (ibid. 66) Another important remark from Grassian is his conclusion that reservation can be empowered through imagination and humor, the latter having both transformative and destructive qualities. He refers here to the story "The Approximate Size of My Favourite Tumor," where Jimmy Many Horses is joking about his terminal cancer and defines humor as "an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds" (Alexie 1993, 164) This brings to mind the survival humor that was defined by critics (e.g. Kenneth Lincoln, 1993) as enabling survivors of the genocide to laugh through their tears.

Much of what has been stated above is very useful in the interpretation of Junot Díaz's stories as well. Yunior and Rafa also suffer from exclusion, and are in conflict with the world around them (and each other). This is particularly discernible in their relationships with women, starting with their mother, and ending with numerous girlfriends. Yunior, similarly to Victor, is aware that his ethnicity is both a blessing and a curse. Proof thereof can be found in the story "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," where Yunior vividly describes his mixed feelings for the Dominican Republic; or in "Miss Lora," where he bitterly acknowledges his macho heritage: "Both your father and your brother were *sucios*. Shit, your father used to take you on his pussy runs, leave you in the car while he ran up into cribs to bone his girlfriends. Your brother was no better, boning girls in the bed next to yours. *Sucios* of the worst kind and now it's official: you are one, too. You had hoped the gene missed you, skipped a generation, but clearly you were kidding yourself" (Díaz 2012, 161). However, what's worth noticing is that Yunior does not give up by following the example of his male relatives, and in the last story, "The Cheater's Guide to Love," manages to draw conclusions and face the problem He says that "The half-life of love is forever" (ibid., 213), and realizes that getting out of the macho legacy will require hard work. He therefore decides to write a book: "In the month you follow you bend to the work, because it feels like hope, like grace – and because you know in your cheater's heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get." (ibid.)

After all, Yunior does not act like a true macho, and uses literature as his weapon. We can make the conjecture that story-telling might save him just as it saved Victor. Despite him being a difficult partner (cheating, reckless, unreliability), he is capable of self-reflection and empathy towards others. Just because he is able to tell the story of his failure and express his never ending longing for love, we do not judge his actions (even though they are often sexist), but instead become interested in his internal conflict, which is characterized by several traditions fighting for supremacy. Due to this internal clash that he experiences, the character can clearly be interpreted using Bakhtin's dialogic subjectivity. (I.e. his dilemma of feeling **exiled** at home, his trying to separate himself from his background, but with the awareness that he cannot survive the split. This is a continuation of the motive from *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, where the main character is also torn between mainstream American life and Dominican *fuku*). Also useful in the analysis of Yunior might be Zygmunt Bauman's concept of fluid identity, characterized by the impossibility of choosing one (Bauman 2004).

We are also attracted to his honesty, which Díaz manages to convince us of through the language the character uses; namely, a dialect, which is at times rude and primitive, and at times lyrical and funny. This mixture makes Yunior's testimony

irresistible. It is worth noting that Alexie's characters use similar straightforward language, wherein the poetic is combined with the ordinary. However, in *The Lone Ranger*, the narrative is not written from the first person view of the characters. Díaz and Alexie both share a sense of humor which helps them to achieve a "laughing through the tears" effect, especially in the stories about cancer. Striking is the contrast between Yunior's seeming indifference to other people's feelings (a result of his being embedded in macho culture), and the deep affection he feels towards his dying brother, who is difficult to love because of his selfishness. The use of humour in the description of Rafa's last months might be shocking, but it helps Díaz avoid sentimentality and, paradoxically, lessens the pain of Yunior who, even in this difficult time, does not lose his sharp wit. (This is especially true when he is describing his mother's upsurge of religious devotion after she learned of Rafa's diagnosis. The text reads, "She'd never been big on church before, but as soon as we landed on cancer planet she went so over-the-top Jesucristo that I think she would have nailed herself to a cross if she'd had one handy. That last year she was especially Ave Maria" (Díaz 2012, 91-92)). This language corresponds with that used by Alexie in his story of Jimmy Many Horses, who cannot stop joking about his cancer, so his wife decides to leave him. As he is dying, she returns to tell him that she has been living with another man. In the conversation that follows is a peculiar sense of humour that resembles Díaz's sarcasm:

> "Well," I asked her again after a while. "Why'd you come back?"
> She turned stoic, gave me that beautiful Tonto face, and said, "Because he was so fucking serious about everything."
> We laughed a little more and then I asked her one more time, "Really why'd you come back?"
> "Because someone needs to help you die the right way," she said. "And we both know that dying ain't something you ever done before."
> I had to agree with that.
> "And maybe," she said, "because making fry bread and helping people die are the last two things Indians are good at."
> "Well," I said. "At least you're good at one of them."
> And we laughed. (Alexie 170)

To conclude, Alexie and Díaz purposefully portray their characters as cultural jesters who must function as both exiles from and members of Spokane/Latino and American culture. All the characters – namely, Victor, Thomas, Jimmy, Yunior, and Rafa – are, in contrast to the stereotypes which inspired them, multidimensional and intriguing. All of them inhabit the post-ethnic space beyond race. Indeed, they are not looking for their lost identity, because they painfully live it every day. Instead, they are negotiating their transcultural position, oscillating between getting lost in their troubled ethnic background, and having their identities annihilated by the unifying power of American mass culture. As Homi K. Bhabha observed in "Interrogating Identity" and "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," colonial and postcolonial identity is always negotiated, and the fantasies of colonizers have little in common with the true identity of the colonized (Bhabha). This is clear in the works of Alexie and Díaz who, apart from exposing this tragic dimension of neocolonial practices, endow their characters with a sense of humor

that enables them to persevere and escape marginalization. Their position can be summarized by the words of Max Frisch (whom Zygmunt Bauman refers to in his reflections on problems with contemporary identities): "Identity is the rejection of what we should be according to others" (Bauman 39). Additionally, we, the readers, must always be wary, because even if we have good intentions to read without prejudice, we constantly fall into traps of generalizations. Alexie describes this in a memorable poem that combines the Native American and Latino perspectives:

GO, GHOST, GO

At this university upon a hill,
I meet a tenured professor
Who's strangely thrilled
To list all of the oppressors –
Past, present, and future – who have killed,
Are killing, and will kill the indigenous.
O, he names the standard suspects –
Rich, white, and unjust –
And I, a red man, think he's correct,
But why does he have to be so humorless?
And how can he, a white man, fondly speak
Of the Ghost Dance, the strange and cruel
Ceremony
That, if performed well, would have doomed
All white men to hell, destroyed their colonies,
And brought every dead Indian back to life?
The professor says,"Brown people
From all brown tribes
Will burn skyscrapers and steeples.
They'll speak Spanish and carry guns and knives.
Sherman, can't you see that immigration
Is the new and improved Ghost Dance?"
All I can do is laugh and laugh
And say, "Damn, you've got some imagination.
You should write a screenplay about this shit –
About some fictional city,
Grown fat and pale and pretty,
That's destroyed by a Chicano apocalypse."
The professor doesn't speak. He shakes his head
And assaults me with his pity.
I wonder how he can believe
In a ceremony that requires his death.
I think that he thinks he's the new Jesus.
He's eager to get on that cross
And pay the ultimate cost
Because he's addicted to the indigenous.

Sherman Alexie, *War Dances*, 2010

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