

**Orality and the Art of Survivance:
The Trickster Figure in Sherman Alexie's
The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven**

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2006

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Exaggeration, like humor, is one of the many features used in Native American oral stories and "trickster" tales. Lois J. Einhorn, in her book, *The Native American Oral Tradition: Voices of the Spirit and Soul*, states, "Native American stories are rich with commonplace details, vivid imagery and short, straightforward thought units. They often use the techniques of exaggeration, distortion and caricature"(86). These are the hallmarks of Sherman Alexie's style, which often is labeled "postmodern." Beyond the text's verbal pyrotechnics and postmodern play lies the oral tradition upon which Alexie draws in his short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Alexie uses cross-cultural references, stereotypes and humor in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*; in doing so, he creates a trickster narrative. While Alexie's characters often play trickster roles and the narrative itself can be seen as an oral form, Alexie, often misunderstood, also fashions himself in interviews, speeches, poetry, and fiction as a trickster. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie defies language conventions, draws upon the Native American oral tradition, and creates comic, ironical characters who defy Native American stereotypes, all the while representing and playing the role of a trickster: the figure of the survivor, the one who confronts change and through art affects modern reality.

The trickster is quite possibly one of the oldest mythological figures in the Native American oral tradition and serves many purposes (Radin 164). The trickster can function as the narrator of a story or as the primary character in a story. The trickster figure and his stories help "serve individual and societal needs of tribal people, contribute to cultural survival, act as teaching tools, tools of liberation and repositories of tribal history and tradition" (Blaeser 55). In the Native American oral tradition the

"trickster" is a figure whose "excesses serve as cautionary tales that are instructive as well as being entertaining" (Nilsen 30). Paul Radin, in his book, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, gives the following description of a trickster, "He dupes others and is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. He is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He is at the mercy of his passions and appetites.. .(ix)." Like the trickster in the traditional Native oral stories, Alexie uses humor as a method of approaching difficult subjects. His fiction writing, especially his humorous treatment of subjects like alcoholism and poverty, underscores the social and economic problems facing Native Americans, and Alexie considers humor both an "effective political tool" and a way to "question the status quo" (West 22). Native American oral stories are also known for being comic; humor, often in the form of irony, teaches a lesson in oral stories (Einhorn 86). Of course, pinning down precisely what lesson Alexie is teaching is difficult, but in *The Lone Ranger and Fistfight in Heaven* what is at risk is survival itself, the game of the trickster.

Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is a collection of twenty-two short stories whose Native American characters struggle to cope with modern life. Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, uses the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington as the primary setting for his stories. Raised on the reservation, Alexie experienced grim poverty, felt seemingly endless hunger, lived in the cheap HUD housing, and witnessed the damage created by rampant alcoholism. Alexie was born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in the town of Wellpinit, Washington where his mother raised him and his five siblings, sewing and working as a clerk to support her children (Grassian i). Alexie's father was a truck driver and alcoholic who would disappear for long periods of time (Grassian i). Alexie's works deal

with absent fathers, alcoholism, poverty, the stark realities of being Indian and trying to maintain a tribal identity while living in a predominately white culture. With this background of despair, depravation and racial discrimination, a reader might expect Alexie's stories to be depressing and without hope. Yet his readers often find themselves smiling and even laughing as his characters tell tales of drunken parents, describe refrigerators and kitchen cabinets devoid of food and fight with themselves and each other. These are not subjects normally associated with humor, yet Alexie's direct narration, carefully wrought imagery and dark irony vibrates with a sense of life's absurdities, of hope, of laughter.

In "Every Little Hurricane," a story in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the main character, Victor, is a nine-year old boy awakened as his uncles fight during a party given by his parents. This story describes the inherent problems within Native culture, as one would expect to find in the Native American oral tradition. Thus, the following paragraph, in both form and content, illustrates Alexie's reliance on orality:

The two Indians raged across the room at each other. One was tall and heavy, the other was short, muscular. High pressure and low-pressure fronts. The music was so loud that Victor could barely hear the voices as the two Indians escalated the argument into a fistfight. Soon there were no voices to be heard, only guttural noises that could have been curses or wood breaking. (2)

The sentences are simple, direct and the comparison of Victor's uncles' physical statures to high and low pressure fronts is an image easily understood by anyone who has watched a television weather report. Alexie draws upon the reader's knowledge of what a

hurricane is and the damage it can cause and leave behind in the same way an oral storyteller uses a symbol common in that culture. In fact the title, "Every Little Hurricane/" symbolizes the pressures of life on the reservation and the resulting chaos caused by that pressure.

As a representative of the current generation of reservation children, Victor experiences both external pressure and internal struggle. In the following paragraph, as with typical trickster narratives, Alexie uses exaggeration as a tool to illustrate Victor's emotional distress:

Victor was back in his bed, lying flat and still, watching the ceiling lower with each step above. The ceiling lowered with the weight of each Indian's pain, until it was just inches from Victor's nose. He wanted to scream, wanted to pretend it was just a nightmare or a game invented by his parents to help him sleep. (8)

Victor imagines the ceiling of his bedroom descending as if to crush him. The ceiling, like Victor, is unable to withstand the strain of the physical and emotional pain passed on through the generations and also enacted by the adults of the tribe. Such a hyperbolic image, according to Einhorn's description of a traditional oral story, is filled with exaggeration and distortion. But this hyperbole is grounded in reality. As she states, "Native Americans do not shield themselves or their children from the stark realities of life. Their stories deal with the hungry and homeless and with the despair and desolation of the downtrodden" (86).

Nine-year-old Victor is not protected from the unpleasant side of life. He grows up in poverty and watches his uncles argue and fight. He knows that his uncles when they were children used to hide crackers in their bedroom so they would have something

to eat (8). He knows about his parents' dependency on alcohol and often finds them "passed out on their bed in the back bedroom"(9). As Suzy Song, a caring woman on the reservation notes, "nobody on the reservation is ever a kid and that we're all born grown up anyway" (121). Such realism is characteristic of the traditional oral stories. When listening to such tales, which are not "sugar coated," Native American children come to know the history of suffering and the realities of modern life.

Alexie's child characters, as in the tradition of the oral story, hear, see and feel free to discuss events non-Native children might not have experienced. At the age of five, while attending a powwow, Victor saw a drunken old Indian man pass out, fall facedown in a mud puddle and drown (*Lone Ranger and Tonto* 7). He later dreams that whiskey, vodka and tequila will swallow and destroy him (7). Being swallowed by alcohol isn't an image most five-year-olds would have. Alexie doesn't shy away from sexual references, and his child characters also talk freely about alcoholism and sex. As a teenager, Victor says:

Some nights I lay awake and listened to my parents' lovemaking. I know white people keep it quiet, pretend they don't ever make love. My white friends tell me they can't even imagine their own parents getting it on. I know exactly what it sounds like when my parents are touching each other.
(30)

Open discussions of sexuality are also common in the oral tradition. Einhorn states, "Native Americans deal with sexual acts much more directly and explicitly than do their non-Native counterparts" (82). Alexie's characters discuss sexual topics without the level of reticence common in the non-Native cultures. In the story, "Crazy Horse Dreams," Victor attends a powwow where he spends the night with a woman who asks

him to be her "powwow paradise"(38). He leaves angry and disappointed because he is unable to live up to her expectations of a warrior. He wishes he were Crazy Horse (42). As with many of Alexie's other works, Crazy Horse stands as a mythic, trickster figure, the Native American who never gives in, who never assimilates and always remains faithful to Native culture.

Alexie's ability to blend contemporary culture with historical figures using language in a poetic manner has won him many awards. His first book of poetry published in 1991 *The Business of Fancy Dancing* won the New York Times Notable Book of the Year Award. In his review of *The Business of Fancy Dancing*, James R. Kincaid states " Mr. Alexie's is one of the major lyric voices of our time." Alexie's second and third books of poetry / *Would Steal Horses* (1991) and *First Indian on the Moon* (1993) earned him not only critical praise but also a National Endowment for the Arts poetry fellowship. Even though he has received such accolades, his fiction has garnered mixed reviews.

Winner of the Pen/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction, Alexie's novel, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* received positive critical acclaim. However that is not the case with his subsequent novels, *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, where his choice of subject matter or use of humor became the focus of an ongoing academic conversation. Critics have several points of contention including Alexie's use of stereotypes, his characterization and his narrative style. The major point of dispute among critics is Alexie's characterization of Indians. Spokane writer and poet Gloria Bird denounces Alexie for his use of negative stereotypes. Bird argues that while alcoholism is a serious problem on reservations, Alexie "capitalizes upon the stereotypical image of the "drunken Indian" (4). Stephen F. Evans agrees with Bird that

Alexie uses the "drunken Indian" stereotype but that he does so as a means of making a social commentary. Evans writes in his article, "Open Containers": Sherman Alexie's Drunken Indians":

In fact, a close examination of Alexie's work to date shows that he uses the ... social and moral values inherent in irony and satire, as well as the certain conventional character types (including the prejudicial stereotype of the "drunken Indian") as materials for constructing a realistic literary document for contemporary Indian survival. (48)

Evans challenges those critics, including Bird, who condemn Alexie's use of stereotypes to reconsider how humor and satire can affect a social change.

Bird believes that Alexie's use of humor fails to address the "social problems of economic instability, poverty or cultural oppression" (4). For Gloria Bird, Alexie's alcoholic characters perpetuate negative stereotypes and give non-Native readers an inaccurate picture of life on the reservation. As a Native American woman, Gloria Bird's concerns about racial stereotypes and the psychological, social and economic damage wrought by those stereotypes are justifiable. Yet in not considering the role of irony and satire in Alexie's novels, Bird negates the role that humor plays within the oral tradition. Bird fails to see that the Native American writers she does approve of, such as Leslie Marmon Silko, also employ stereotypes in an ironic vein.

This irony also appears in traditional Native American oral stories where death, rebirth and sex are discussed in a succinct and clear language not usually found within the confines of American folklore. As Lois J. Einhorn states in her book, *The Native American Oral Tradition: Voices of the Spirit and Soul*:

Although many stories employ humor few are uproariously funny; rather, they seek to make listeners smile while understanding a serious point. The language of Native American stories is usually concrete and colorful, and, according to American standards, is often off-color (66).

The daily experiences of tribal life became the background for the oral story, and Alexie incorporates his experiences of his life on the reservation into his stories and poems. His writing is based on his real-life experiences growing up on the reservation, drinking, playing basketball and watching family and friends succumb to poverty and alcoholism (Grassian 6). As he employs humor, exaggeration and stereotypes to make reality more palatable, he creates a social commentary, one whose comic perspective and harsh depiction of reality place him squarely in the tradition of the trickster. The stark realities portrayed in his writing are recognized by some Native American writers not as stereotypes but as a form of comic relief, a safety valve that helps to defuse the pressure of life on the reservation.

In addition to his stories and novels, Alexie's poetry portrays the hardships of reservation life and underscores many of the themes in his fiction. By examining all of his works we can see that Alexie is very much concerned with the nature of Native American representation. In the poem, "Fire as Verb and Noun," from his poetry collection, *The Summer of Black Widows*, Alexie considers his sister and brother-in-law's deaths. Unable to awaken from their drunken stupor, they died in a house fire and Alexie wonders, "What color are the flames that rise off a burning body? / What colors were the flames that rose off my sister's and brother-in-law's bodies? / If they were the same color does that mean they loved each other? / If they were different does that mean they were soon to be divorced?" (52-53). Alexie's willingness to broach difficult

subjects such as his sister's death, in both poetry and prose, contradicts Bird's statement that he sensationalizes drinking and alcoholism and that he is unable to put them into a serious perspective (Bird 5).

Other Native American writers disagree with Bird's negative opinions about Alexie's subject matter and his sense of humor. In his forward to Alexie's book *Old Shirts & New Skins* Adrian Louis (Lovelock Paiute) declares that "He is the real deal... a gifted poet who knows the fine joys and the madness brought on by cheap wine and commodity foods, poverty and alienation, our irrepressible sense of humor"(viii-ix). Louis, an English professor who taught at the Oglala Lakota College located on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, used Alexie's poetry in his classroom. Louis reports that his students relate to Alexie because he "knows what he's talking about. He knows the real Indian world"(Foreword to *Old Shirts & New Skins* x). P. Jane Hafen (Taos Pueblo) agrees with Louis. In her article, "Rock and Roll, Redskins, and Blues in Sherman Alexie's Work," she observes that, "The writings of Sherman Alexie present a fusion of historical sensibilities and grim realisms of contemporary Indian life on the Spokane Reservation"(i). Hafen dismisses Bird's comment that Alexie's fictional characters are "misfits" and "social anomalies"(Bird 2). When Junior, a character in *Reservation Blues*, commits suicide or when Victor alternates between drunkenness and sobriety, Hafen recognizes Alexie's fictional characters as being representative of the "Indians of her youth"(Hafen 6). Hafen grew up on a reservation and recognizes Alexie's "gritty realities" of reservation life (6). Rather than being offended by Alexie's portrayal of reservation life, Hafen admits that she likes his writings because "In the face of dismal reservation life, urban crisis of self, community and identity, he can make me laugh, often by inverting imagery and turning inside jokes. He helps make the pain bearable"

(8). Adrian Louis and P. Jane Hafen appreciate Alexie's skill in his depiction of reservation life. They also assert that humor is one of the tools used by his characters as a means of survival. James Welch (Blackfoot) considers Alexie a rising star whose use of humor takes contemporary Native American literature in a "slightly different direction" (Lupton 202). He approves of the fact that Alexie presents Indians in a well-rounded manner instead of "representing one side of the Indian personality" (Lupton 202).

Gloria Bird is not alone, however, in her criticism of Alexie's fiction. Neither Louis Owens nor Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, also Native American writers, find Alexie's characterization of Indians to be uncomplimentary. While Owens (Choctaw, Cherokee) did praise *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, he feels that Alexie's other fiction, "too often simply reinforces all of the stereotypes desired by white readers" that of "aimless Indians imploding in a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing" (79-80). His viewpoint is relevant because *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Reservation Blues* have not only identical themes but also the same characters.

Cook-Lynn worries that novels by Alexie and other Native writers such as Adrian Louis could appeal to an audience that may not be able to discern fact from fiction. Her claim that Alexie is not a "responsible social critic" because she does not approve of his portrayal of life on the Spokane reservation does him an injustice (68). If Cook-Lynn desires an ethical or honest depiction of Spokane Indian reservation life, then Alexie delivers that in his poetry and prose. The foundation of his writing, both in prose and poetry, is firmly based on his experiences of contemporary life on the Spokane reservation. The fact that he uses humor, exaggeration and stereotypes to make reality more palatable while making a social statement is, in fact, taking an ethical stance.

Ase Nygen interviewed Alexie about his use of humor and its purpose in his writing. Alexie maintains that "Making fun of things or being satirical... is a tool that enables me to talk about anything. It makes dialogue possible" (Nygen 5). Several of Alexie's characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* use humor as a coping mechanism. His character James Many Horses in one of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven's* short stories states, "...you have to realize that laughter saved Norma and me from pain..." (Alexie 164). In the story "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona," Victor sees Thomas in the Trading Post store. Thomas tells Victor that he is sorry to hear about the death of his father. When Victor asks him how he knew, Thomas says, "I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt it in the sunlight. Also, your mother was just in here crying" (61). Alexie takes the stereotype of an Indian's mystical connection with nature and subverts it as Thomas' admits that his knowledge came from Victor's mother and not the earth. Victor, in the next scene of this story, sits at his kitchen table remembering a Fourth of July when he and Thomas were ten years old. Thomas makes the comment, "It's strange how us Indians celebrate the Fourth of July. It ain't like it was *our* independence everybody was fighting for"(6s). In the following scene, Victor is once again sitting in his kitchen. Like many stories in the book, this one is comprised of a series of individual scenes that shift from past to present. Paul Radin in his oft quoted book, *The Trickster*, states that in traditional oral stories there is "not a fixed sequence in the order in which the episodes" of a story can occur (125). Alexie often employs such traditional oral narrative techniques as flashbacks, historical references, time shifts, reoccurring characters and alternating narrators, techniques that have drawn a mixed reaction from critics.

His innovative narrative techniques combined with his satirical vision and darkly ironic humor causes some critics to not only question his writing style but also the depth of his characters' portrayals. Gloria Bird argues that in *Reservation Blues* Alexie's "character development is inconsistent" and that causes the narrator to be unreliable (4). She states that his female characters are "weak and contradictory" and because the characters make contradictory statements that the "relationships between Indian men and women are not invested with any seriousness" (4-5). Patrice E. M. Hollarh disagrees with Bird's claim that Alexie's female characters are weak. In her book, *The Old Lady Trill, the Victory Yell: The Power of Women in Native American Literature*, she asserts that Alexie's female characters are strong, well-rounded "autonomous" women (14). Norma Many Horses, a character in "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona," is described as "a warrior" and as such she is "powerful" (199). She also appears in another *Lone Ranger and Tonto* story, "Somebody Kept Saying Powwow," where Junior, another character in the story, refers to her as a "cultural lifeguard" of the tribe because she holds the traditions and strives to maintain the integrity of the tribe (199). Norma attempts to maintain tribal customs in an effort prevent them from dying out. Another strong female character mentioned by Hollarh is Marie Polatkin. A primary character in *Indian Killer*, Marie challenges her college professor when she realizes that none of the books selected for the Native American literature class were written by Indians (Hollarh 143). Both Norma and Marie are strong women whose identities are rooted in their tribal heritage and who could never be called weak.

According to Einhorn, strong female characters that exhibit courage or strength are well represented within the Native American oral tradition. In "Speela and Wood-Tick," a Spokane story, the female character, Wood-Tick, is "strong and knowledgeable"

(Einhorn 83). Alexie's hard-working mother supported her six children, and he credits his grandmother for his knowledge of traditional tribal stories (West 21). Alexie grew up surrounded by strong women in his life and heard about strong female characters in his tribe's oral stories. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that he constructs strong female characters.

Other critics argue about the purpose and integrity of Alexie's narrative form and structure. These critics are firmly divided into two camps: the first group who feel his work is fractured, simplistic and boring; the second group who considers his work ironic, powerful, grounded in the issues of contemporary life and an example of postmodern writing. Frederick Bush declares that Alexie uses "repetition as a substitute for narrative structure"(9). He believes that Alexie repeats phrases because he doesn't "trust that his readers will understand the significance" of the phrase (9). Michael Gorra, another critic, in his review of *Reservation Blues* agrees that the "repetition of phrases" makes the book "monotonous" and boring (1). However, other critics view Alexie's use of language and repetition very differently.

The use of repeated phrases found in Alexie's fiction and poetry may, at first, give his writing the appearance of being unimaginative and lacking in depth of meaning. Yet simple phrasing and repetition are features found in traditional Native American songs and stories. Other critics view Alexie's use of language and repetition as a tribute to Alexie's Native heritage. In her review for *Western American Literature* Andrea Bess Baxter praises Alexie's writing as "deceptively minimalist and lucid in its simplicity" (277). However, simple phrasing in conjunction with repetition is one of the features found in traditional Native American songs and stories. For example here is part of a stanza from the *Navajo Nightway* ceremony:

House made of dawn.
House made of evening light,
House made of dark cloud,
House made of male rain,
House made of dark cloud,
House made of male rain,
House made of female mist,
House made of female rain,
House made of pollen,
House made of grasshopper,
Dark cloud is at the door. (Evers 44).

Larry Evers uses this stanza in his article "Continuity and Change in American Indian Oral Literature" to illustrate the pattern and rhythm found in a traditional song (45-46). When this Navajo song stanza is compared to the last paragraph of "Imagining the Reservation," a short story in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, the connection between Alexie's writing and the oral tradition becomes clear:

Imagine an escape. Imagine that your own shadow on the wall is a perfect door. Imagine a spring with water that mends broken bones. Imagine a drum which wraps itself around your heart.

Imagine a story that puts wood in the fireplace (152-153).

The repetition of the word "imagine" gives this final paragraph the rhythm of a chant similar to the *Navajo Nightway* stanza. In addition to repetition another feature of the oral tradition that Alexie uses is familiar and reoccurring characters such as Victor,

Junior, Norma and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. As Alexie's characters continue to make their appearances this "cycle of repetition is reflective of traditional Indian storytelling" where trickster figures like Coyote and Raven reappear at different points in the narrative (Vickers 149).

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven also borrows from traditional oral forms for its structure. Unlike a novel written in the classically conventional linear form, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is episodic in structure.

Interlinked characters and events that form lengthy stories are characteristic of oral narratives (Silko 856). When viewed from the classic Western literary standard, the narrative in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* appears to be fractured, when in fact it mirrors Native American tales. In her review of *Reservation Blues*, Abigail Davis states the "narrative contains traditional dialogue along with songs and poems"(i6). The traditional narrative dialogue Davis refers to is the historical tribal references used by Big Mom, a character in *Reservation Blues* and the songs written by Thomas Builds-the-Fire. An oral story in the Native American tradition passes on tribal history, cultural practices and community norms (Einhorn 1). By connecting past events to the present in order to make a point or teach a lesson, the resulting new story becomes part of the oral tradition. Alexie's writing style blends historical events, pop culture figures, tribal history, satire, and darkly ironic humor into what has been called "a casebook of postmodernist theory" (Low 123). Low argues that Alexie's use of "ruptured narratives" and that his "[play] with allusions" are clear indications of postmodern writing (125). Joyce Carol Gates also asserts that Alexie has an "irreverent, sardonic but sentimental rebellious post modernist voice" (20). Yet even the definition of postmodern writing and how it affects a Native American novel is up for debate.

Gloria Bird asserts that postmodernism and irony can lead to "undermining native aesthetic values," which in turn reinforces negative stereotypes of native peoples (3). Yet Bird reads Alexie's works on a literal level and neglects the ironic nature of his narratives and the playful persona he has created as an author. On the other hand, Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa) maintains, "postmodernism liberates the imagination and widens the audiences for tribal literature"(6). Postmodernism permits an author to utilize "language games," create a "comic world view" and to stimulate conversation about the narrative (Vizenor 6). Alexie's fiction writing, especially his humorous treatment of subjects like alcoholism and poverty, provokes widely diverse responses from his critics. However it is the humor and satire found in his fiction that underscores the social and economic problems facing Native Americans regardless of whether or not they live on or off the reservation. Alexie considers the humor in his writing both an "effective political tool" and a way to "question the status quo" (West 22). In this respect, he mirrors the mythological figure of the trickster found in the oral tradition.

Several of Alexie's characters, most notably Victor's father and James Many Horses, demonstrate the qualities of uncontrollable impulses, passions and appetites found in the traditional trickster narrative. In the story, "Because My Father Always Said He Was The Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' At Woodstock," Victor's father is a trickster because his peaceful intentions are at war with his actions. The following paragraph illustrates how Victor's father permits his impulses to override good judgment:

In the photograph, my father is dressed in bell-bottoms and flowered shirt, his hair in braids, with red peace symbols splashed across his face like war paint. In his hands my father holds a rifle above his head, captured in that

moment just before he proceeded to beat the shit out of the National Guard private lying prone on the ground. A fellow demonstrator holds a sign that is just barely visible over my father's left shoulder. It read MAKE LOVE NOT WAR. (25)

Victor's father, wearing peace symbols painted on his face while participating in an anti-war demonstration, is photographed just before he commits an act of violence. Like the trickster in an oral story, he allows a passionate impulse to overrule his common sense. The juxtaposition of the phrases "red peace symbols" and "war paint" illustrates the duality of Victor's father's personality. With his inability to remain non-violent during a demonstration, he, like the trickster, deceives himself and other demonstrators.

The sign, MAKE LOVE NOT WAR, seen behind Victor's father as he gets ready to strike the soldier, is darkly ironic. In fact, Alexie uses irony throughout the entire story as the primary means of explaining Victor's father and his actions. This use of irony gives Alexie's stories their humor while also eliciting smiles and laughter from his readers. Irony and the trickster are inseparable. "Laughter, humour and irony permeate everything Trickster does" (Radin x).

Released from prison in time to hitchhike to Woodstock, Victor's father explains to him that Jimi must have known how he felt and understood "all I the shit I'd been through" when he played the "Star-Spangled Banner" (26). Equating his freedom from prison with the national anthem of the country that placed his ancestors on reservations and enslaved Jimi's ancestors is ironic and funny. Victor's father and Jimi Hendrix are trickster figures who realize that the subjugation of their cultures stands in direct contrast to the "land of the free" located in the last verse of the "Star-Spangled Banner" (26). If as Nilsen states, a trickster is identifiable by his excesses, then both Hendrix,

who died of a drug overdose, and Victor's father, who claimed a dead rock star as his drinking buddy, qualify as Tricksters.

Similarly, James Many Horses is another trickster who finds irony and humor in life. Informed by his doctor that he is dying of cancer, James Many Horses reacts with a dark humor, which his wife, Norma, finds unacceptable. She storms out of the house because James refuses to be serious. James tells his friend Simon what he told his wife: Well, I told her the doctor showed me my X-rays and my favorite tumor was just about the size of a baseball, shaped like one, too. Even had stitch marks. I told her to call me Babe Ruth. Or Roger Marris. Maybe even Hank Aaron 'cause there must have been about 755 damn tumors inside me.

(157)

James compares the appearance of a tumor with a baseball and equates the number of his tumors with the same number of home runs batted by Hank Aaron. Alexie carries the exaggeration a step further when James states that the baseball-shaped tumor is his "favorite." Although James doesn't drink like Victor's father or use drugs like Jimi, he can still be considered a trickster figure that responds to life's adversities with laughter. In fact, James could be said to suffer from an excessive sense of humor. Like the mythological trickster, James cannot control his impulse to be funny even after the hospital sends him home to die. He has stationery engraved with FROM THE DEATHBED OF JAMES MANY HORSES, III because even though he is writing his final letters to friends and family while sitting at his kitchen table, he believes that Death Table doesn't have the same level of importance as a deathbed (168). When James states that "Humor was an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds" and since

laughter, irony and humor are present in everything that James does, he, too, is a trickster.

The opening of wounds is a theme in "Witnesses, Secret and Not," the final story in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*; it is a story of family, community and survival. A thirteen-year-old boy accompanies his father to the police station where a detective wishes to question his father about the possible murder and disappearance ten years earlier of a friend. At least once a year, his father goes to the police station and answers their questions the same way: he doesn't know who shot his friend, Jerry Vincent, or where his body is buried. Even under this stressful situation the boy, his father and the detective leave the meeting laughing. Father and son return home in time for dinner. The boy recalls:

It was dark by the time we got home. Mom had fry bread and chili waiting for us. My sisters and brothers were all home, watching television. Believe me. When we got home everybody was there, everybody. My father sat at the table and nearly cried into his food.

Then, of course, he did cry into his food and we all watched him.

All of us (223).

Alexie closes the book with this final scene of a family gathered together for a bittersweet meal of chili and fry bread (223). When Alexie's characters deal with the difficulties of modern life through family, community or humor they demonstrate what Gerald Vizenor calls, "survivance not victimry" (96). The Native American characters in Alexie's fiction survive with their sense of humor, family and community.

Alexie's use of humor, irony, sentence structure, and subject matter make him a modern-day incarnation of the mythological Indian figure as the "trickster." In his

writing, Alexie employs humor, narrative style, exaggeration—the everyday life details and contemporary representations of the trickster figure prevalent in the Native American oral tradition. As a postmodern author who often writes to a broad audience, Alexie himself is also a kind of trickster who challenges the stereotypes of Native Americans as silent, stoic and serious by using irony, exaggeration and humor in the written form that mirrors the oral story. In the Native American oral story the trickster figure in the functions as a comic trope whose humorous antics and adventures permit unpleasant subjects to be presented, discussed, and processed. Laughing at the absurdities and irony in life, the trickster survives despite his affinity for finding himself in difficult situations created by his own uncontrollable appetites and desires. The trickster becomes a metaphor for survival by laughing through his tears. As a trickster and a creator of tricksters, Alexie practices the art of survivance, the difficult yet necessary process effacing the past, laughing in the present, and imagining a better future, one that draws life from the source of life, memory, and identity: the Native American oral tradition.

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