

Searching for Lost Sovereignty with Sherman Alexie

C. S. Schreiner

The self lives where it exposes itself and where it receives
similar exposure from others.—Silvan Tomkins

From one end to the other of this human life which is our lot, the
consciousness of the paucity of stability, even of the profound lack of
all true stability, liberates the enchantment of laughter. —Georges
Bataille

The Battle Against Indifference

It is regrettable evidence of how little resistance to trans-cultural conformity or cultural hegemony (expressed by most critics no longer as colonialism but global consumerism) actually occurs from year to year, from day to day, when an ethnic constituency protests an annual holiday. Yet this choice delivers high symbolic yield when the Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez, protests Columbus Day. He says the discovery of the Americas by Columbus initiated a 150-year genocide of the Latin American and American Indian peoples, and that the foreign conquerors behaved “worse than Hitler.” “Long live Sitting Bull!” Chavez recently said to an audience in Caracas, Venezuela. To Chavez, Sitting Bull is a symbol of effective resistance due to his defeat of General Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876 (*Yahoo! News, October 11, 2003*).

Today the pressure to conform in America at work and in social life, everywhere reinforced by media-foisted paradigms of identity and style, is felt all the more ferociously by minority groups such as Native Americans

who stand out by virtue of whatever residual cultural difference still accrues to them. The 118-year-old Spokane Indian in Sherman Alexie's story "Dear John Wayne," says to a white interviewer, "In order to survive, I literally have to be white for fifty-seven minutes of every hour." This answer invites the question "How about the other three minutes?" to which the Spokane Indian replies, "That, sir, is when I get to be Indian, and you have no idea, no concept, no possible way of knowing what happens in those three minutes...Those three minutes belong to us. They are very secret" (*The Toughest Indian in the World* 194).

The secret time of the three minutes could be the time of what Leszek Kolakowski would call "meaning creating energy" or "mythopoetic activity" (*The Presence of Myth* 130-32). This is something that the Native Americans would resist being dispossessed of more than land. It is a specifically human praxis that constitutes myth and thereby satisfies a mythological longing to transcend the pervasive indifference of the mundane world. In his recent story, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," Sherman Alexie's narrator confesses, "we Indians are great storytellers and liars and mythmakers" (*Ten Little Indians* 170). Kolakowski says that myth is used as a weapon in a "constant battle against indifference," and that "we know that we live only thanks to various kinds of nonindifference in our encounters with people; thanks to solidarity, trust, love, and friendship" (74). Sherman Alexie will show us that for the Native Americans, those three minutes of battle are sovereign in their impetus and content. Sovereignty is something to which the indigenous have special claim, but from which they have been alienated. Of the Native Americans Alexie says, "No other ethnic group in this country is interested in the concept of sovereignty" (*Atlantic Unbound* Interview). But the sovereignty we will examine in the present study is nothing territorial, claims no land or power. It is rather exactly what was stated above: it reclaims the solidarity, trust, love, and friendship to which tribal spirit can be traced back.

The Secret Experience of Sovereignty

Sherman Alexie's title story "The Toughest Indian in the World" from the collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* was published in a special

issue of *The New Yorker* magazine that prophesized Alexie will become one of the foremost writers of the 21st-Century. This hyperbole must have pleased Alexie, who espouses the goal to become a "famous writer." (There is in Alexie's work and life the sincere desire but also the rhetoric of becoming a star, of stardom—success story, heroism, mythography. But he is ironically aware that one becomes a success story as much because one is a member of a failed tribe and race as because one is different than the members of one's Indian tribe.) The hyperbole is also concordant with the grandiose yet sincere mythologization that takes place in his story, wherein a burned-out hitchhiking Native American becomes a hero in the eyes of the driver-narrator who picks him up. Only in the story it is not promotional hype that inflates the hitchhiker to superstardom, but the burning desire of the Native American driver for a hero. He is searching for lost sovereignty. This desire of his is apparently selfless and capable of sustaining the greatest illusion for the sake of its goal, which is a certain feeling. He wants to feel respect and, daresay, against his father's wishes, he wants to feel hope. But this compound desire is too sincere for the glib postmodern culture to which the driver belongs. The tribal feeling he desires to feel is frankly anachronistic, which befits the fate of individual sovereignty in the age of mass cultural hegemony. It is also secret. It is the secret experience that characterizes the three minutes when Native Americans are not busy conforming to white culture.

The audacious story "The Toughest Indian in the World" is replete with the intercultural antinomies and emotional turbulence that characterize the psychology of an assimilated Native American in the United States today. The story is narrated out of a mode of conflicted becoming. This is to say that the archaic stirrings that invite reversion to a traditional identity are mixed with contemporary habits and desires, resulting in postmodern pastiche. Postmodernism is another mythical construction, a discourse and simulacrum that cannot hide the world's indifference but only rephrase it and make it palatable as cool cynicism. But cool has its uses. For Sherman Alexie, one way to countering his cultural-historical gravity of tragic orientation is through comical relief. Postmodernism is a shallow but ubiquitous material resolution of traditional questions of identity and belonging. It is not the least radical, but as the philosopher

Cornelius Castoriadis says, a mode of generalized conformism that merely follows present trends and behaviors (*World in Fragments* 32).

Sherman Alexie is aware of this tendency. If we are what we buy or consume, as the theory of postmodern consumer capitalism would imply, the question of Native American identity is straightforward: Toyotas, country western music, "those cross-cultural songs that combined Indian lyrics and rhythms with country-and-western and blues melodies. It seemed that every Indian knew all the lyrics to every Hank Williams song ever recorded" ("Toughest Indian" 23). And yet, as "The Toughest Indian in the World" shows, something unsatisfactory remains hidden in the postmodern profile. Is there a secret desire missing from this consumerist profile?

Sherman Alexie's narrators are often left cold by their material possessions from white culture and seek something wild. But as we will see in his fiction, when they seek the wild side and "go native," whatever satisfaction they get is from the joy of performance and not because they are closer to their "true identity." Their historical identity would only be a burden; in this regard Alexie has said "I wouldn't want to be an Indian a hundred years ago—somebody would be shooting at me" (*Atlantic Unbound* Interview). In light of such existential pronouncements, it is absurd to ask Sherman Alexie the identity question—What is a Native American? We cannot assume that because he was born a Native American our question would not be problematical. When we go to the horse's mouth for the truth, so to speak, can we always expect lucidity of self-understanding? To the contrary, rather than have us seek an identification that would risk racial essentialism, that he cannot and is unwilling to provide, Alexie wants us to phrase our question in an intimate manner: What does it *feel like* to be a Native American living and working in the United States today? How, exactly, do we find the Native American *world of affects* reproduced or presented in the discourse of Sherman Alexie?

The Danger of Nostalgia

A young Native American is cruising the gigantic vistas of the Pacific Northwest, looking for lost sovereignty. He drives a 1998 Toyota Camry, works as a journalist for a white newspaper in Spokane. For the longest

time he has been aware that the salmon, traditional symbol of noble effort and sacrifice, is no longer sufficiently inspirational. The magic is gone, the myths dead. So he drives, looking for a source of inspiration. He is amenable to picking up a hitchhiker. This undertaking is hazardous not for the hitchhikers but for the driver, who is propelled by a desire that may pervert his ongoing and thus far successful transformation into an upwardly mobile American citizen. The driver has run away from being an Indian, but he has run so far that he longs for what he lost and has to recover his Indianhood: he has to become an Indian again by falling in love with the idea of being an Indian.

What is the danger of such nostalgia? The danger of instability resides in the partly unconscious archaism of his particular desire, which is for remythologization. The driver seeks a hero to respect, someone for whom to sacrifice himself. His desire complicates his identity and risks regression to a more traditional way of being. But in the larger scheme of things, isn't his assimilated white identity as temporary or unstable as the tribal identity the narrator has left behind? The driver himself acknowledges this state of affairs when he muses, "Things can change so quickly. So many emergencies and disasters that we can barely keep track" (30).

In his effort to ensure his son's chances of survival, the driver's father has already forewarned him about the danger. First of all, he has done so by avoiding the issue of hope. Hope is the affect most analogous to the driver's desire. The narrator confesses "My father never taught me about hope" (21). Hope, when fatuous or blind, unsupported by concrete initiatives, can be a hindrance to progress and success. Hope is analogous to traditional belief—in this context, concretely symbolized in the run of the salmon. Merely hoping, that is, merely believing in the destiny myths of one's ancestors, will only disarm one of the cynical survival tactics necessary for survival in American culture. "Love you or hate you, white people will shoot you in the heart. Even after all these years, they'll still smell the salmon on you, the dead salmon, and that will make the white people dangerous" (21). Salmon symbolizes failure and archaic beliefs, and hence incites disrespect and treachery on the part of white people who quickly perceive an opportunity to take advantage of weakness, of anachronism.

The narrator early understood that myth as tribal anachronism is no substitute for a college education and a practical approach to life that would mandate assimilation with the white people, for he has been away from the reservation for twelve years and works as a journalist for a white newspaper. As we said, he drives a Toyota and has recently dated a white woman from his workplace. His father and mother, no doubt like Sherman Alexie's father and mother, have been negative role models: they show how not to be if one wishes to succeed.

Not Hope, But Hospitality

Let us repeat the elder Native American's warning to his son: "They'll kill you if they get the chance. Love you or hate you, white people will shoot you in the heart." The lesson is clear, be tough, be careful, but it is backed by the basically trusting and gregarious nature of the elder, and this double emanation of an ethos is not lost on the listener. The son knows what his father says, he understands the hard-earned lesson of betrayal, but he must at the same time believe otherwise—in engagement, trust, intimate exposure. He cannot just become a shell and hide away; success depends on becoming, not stagnation. For today's youth the alternative to exposure, which would be to collapse inwards in a protective shell of anachronism because early indigenous peoples perished from their exposure to white invaders, would seem to forfeit the chance of becoming that accompanies exposure as much as the risk of betrayal. Every Native American knows the mortal conflict has always been with the white man, but for Sherman Alexie there is also an ongoing struggle—conflict of interpretations—between Native Americans and their assimilated personae, and between each Native American and his tribal anachrony, as well as between each Native American writer and literary tradition. The tremendous and by now historically diffused shame and sense of betrayal carried by Native Americans as an ethnic group has been individualized by their separate cross-generational experiences of assimilation and resistance, success and failure. Silvan Tomkins' definition of shame as an affective continuum or assemblage encompassing "shyness, defeat, alienation, and guilt" (137) is the primordial challenge of a *Stimmung* (basic disposition or way of being oriented emotionally in the world) challenging each Native

American's concrete existential trajectory. One can, like other minority Americans entering the competition of *laissez faire* or free-market capitalism, rise in self-transformation or fall back into the inertia of rancorous victimhood, self-pity and loathing—or some alternating fusion of these.

The existential impetus of "The Toughest Indian in the World" derives from a recursive movement by which an Indian, having abandoned myth as tribal anachronism, pivots to recover another order of myth, that of mythic heroism, or hope. This hope, as we will see, is the emotional state associated with longing and love. Assimilation is apparently inescapable, but subsequent loathing of one's former tribal ways is not an acceptable feeling to live with: one has to also sustain a respect for one's tribal selfhood, one has to be able to live with one's hybrid self. One then has to assemble an assemblage of affects to live with. This is the existential imperative that we discern in the "Toughest Indian in the World" in the form of hospitality offered to a hitchhiker. On the one hand, the narrator's father does not teach about hope, but on the other hand he practices the generous ceremony, which he inculcates in his son, of picking up Indian hitchhikers who "wear hope like a bright shirt." These hitchhikers are "those twentieth century aboriginal nomads who refused to believe the salmon were gone." Like his father, the narrator picks up Indian hitchhikers and thus indulges in the kind of romanticism that his own assimilated lifestyle among white folk would seem to have abandoned. His father doesn't *preach* hope but *practices* it as hospitality. The narrator doesn't live among his own kind, but he insists on giving them rides whenever he drives on the Western highways. The narrator has deliberately distinguished himself from his tribal heritage and paternal shadow, yet in the matter of hitchhiking he follows the precedent set by his father.

The Culture of Mistrust

Hitchhiking has become obsolete since the 1960s owing to a lack of trust in American culture, caused by media coverage of serial killers and the like. Indeed, the white people teach mistrust:

At the newspaper where I work, my fellow reporters think I'm crazy to pick up hitchhikers. They're all white and never stop to pick up

anybody, let alone an Indian. After all, we're the ones who write the stories and headlines: HITCHHIKER KILLS HUSBAND AND WIFE, MISSING GIRL'S BODY FOUND, RAPIST STRIKES AGAIN. If I really tried, maybe I could explain to them why I pick up any Indian, but who wants to try? Instead, if they ask I just give them a smile and turn back to my computer. My coworkers smile back and laugh loudly. They're always laughing loudly at me, at one another, at themselves, at goofy typos in the newspapers, at the idea of hitchhikers. (24)

The atmosphere at this workplace is ever so cool, postmodern hip, an emotional atmosphere that covers up a uniform assimilation among white people themselves to a culture of suspicion and mistrust. The irony here is although we expect the Native American to be the most distrustful of the group, it is the white themselves whose legacy of violence has taken a toll on their own tribal psychology. The narrator, meanwhile, carries his ethos of trust like a hidden treasure and has the intuitive wisdom not to expose this ethos and its justification—reasonable or not—to his coworkers' mockery. It is the story itself, "Toughest Indian in the World," that conveys the ethos and its inner logic, based on longing and hope—and on love.

After the loss of trust, is love lost to the white people who thrive within an ethos of protective coolness? The narrator shares an anecdote about his relationship with a white woman. There is an anatomical precision with which Cindy, his lover, goes about the project of achieving orgasm. Cindy specifies to the narrator the exact degrees of pressure and points of contact for her utmost stimulation, as well as atmospheric conditions such as mood music. Love making seems to be a self-centered, practical challenge, devoid of romanticism or sentimentality. The narrator, who discovers that Cindy collects "brown-skinned guys," assorted lovers whose only necessary qualification is that they be non-white, confesses: "I started to feel like a trophy" (25). His value as such is not based on his uniqueness, but on a reified status within a preexisting establishment of values, a system of "culturally enforced icons of white, economically dominant, heterosexual hyper-genderized identities" (Braidotti 247). The indiffer-

ence of this system leaves him cold.

Ceremonial Communication

The narrator's warm response to the hitchhiking Native American first of all demonstrates a conspicuous display of trust among Native Americans from different tribes. We can conform to the American success story, these Native Americans tell each other, but we need to sustain our sense of trust for each other even as we look out for the treachery that has historically infected our relations with the white man. Everything holy or charismatic has been reduced to a pastoral ceremony of hospitality in the picking up of hitchhikers and, as we will see, in the sharing of a "Pepsi moment." This Native American ceremony says, "In ourselves we trust." But in addition to a call for trust, we can see that Alexie's narrator, surveying the barren landscape of loveless relations in which he has participated as an assimilated refugee from the reservation, feels an absence of love. This is the implication of his anecdote about Cindy's practical and self-centered sexuality.

Trust and love, then, are the affective conditions or modalities of striving (wanting to trust, wanting to love) that determine the situation in which the narrator picks up the hitchhiker who is the toughest Indian in the world. The hitchhiker is a fighter who roams from one reservation to another, battling other Indians for cash, and his body shows the scars of his career:

"Long, straggly lack hair. Brown eyes and skin. Missing a couple of teeth. A bad complexion that used to be much worse. Crooked nose that had been broken more than once. Big, misshapen ears... Even before he climbed into my car I could tell he was tough. He had some serious muscles that threatened to rip through his blue jeans and denim jacket. When he was in the car, I could see his hands up close, and they told his whole story. His fingers were twisted and weird, permanent shapes, and his knuckles were covered with layers of scar tissue. ("Toughest Indian" 26)

The fighter's body is not an attractive body; it is a wounded body that

arouses respect and concern. The fighter is returning home to his reservation after many years. His allegory is that of the salmon, but also vaguely that of the classical *nostoi*, such as the epic homecoming of Odysseus. Hence Sherman Alexie's narrative further compounds its tension, already overloaded, between postmodern pastiche (Indians are Toyota driving fans of Hank Williams) and narrative reiteration of classical forms.

The hesitant gregariousness that emerges between the two Indians establishes, through certain ceremonial gestures, a fugitive community. First, the driver/narrator invokes the colloquialism "enit?" (*isn't that so?* or *ain't it so?* in English, or *desu ne?* in Japanese), a word he hasn't used for a long time, because he wants the fighter to know that he "had grown up on the rez, in the woods, with every Indian in the world" (26). In this manner a linguistic commonality is bridged, as well as a heritage, a world. The word is also a sign of allegiance, that is, of belonging, because that is the element most absent after love. Next, the hitchhiker shares his venison beef jerky with the driver, who has a rather Proustian experience of chewing. "It had been a long time since I'd eaten jerky. The salt, the gamy taste. I felt as Indian as Indian gets, driving down the road in a fast car, chewing on jerky, talking to an indigenous person" (27). In the next community-building gesture, the hitchhiker opens a can of Pepsi for the driver after the latter suggests they have a drink from his cooler. Speaking the same language, eating indigenous food, then drinking Pepsi together—a Pepsi moment become Native American alimentation. Our impression is not of a timeless reunion, but of a congenial moment disjointed in relation to what precedes and follows it. Isolated space and uneasiness pervade the furtive communion. Hence the occasional laughter between the Indians helps us forget who or what might *not* come along next, for the distances are almost as vast between assimilated tribal members as they are between each American.

The Intimacy of Tough Guys

The friendship between the hitchhiker and driver evolves from ceremonial communication into casual sex when they take a motel room. But is this event not also a ceremony, that of sacrifice? The Indian fighter presses himself against the narrator on the bed, and the act is consummat-

ed without violence. Indeed, a certain intimacy is noted by the narrator, who also remarks that "the fighter's penis... was surprisingly small" (31). Before the act can be completed, the fighter gets up to find a condom. This is a contemporary detail by the writer for comic relief, but it also allows a pause to occur in the sequence of events so that the narrator can offer the following observation about the fighter and his receptive relation to him.

I turned to look at him. He was beautiful and scarred. So much brown skin marked with bruises, badly healed wounds, and tattoos. His long black hair was unbraided and hung down to his thin waist. My slacks and dress shirt were folded and draped over the chair near the window. My shoes were sitting on the table. Blue light filled the room. The fighter bent down to his pack and searched for his condoms. For reasons I could not explain then and cannot explain now, I kicked off my underwear and rolled over on my stomach. (32)

What can explain the transformation that the ugly fighter undergoes in the eyes of the driver such that he comes to be regarded as "beautiful"? The ambiguity of the hitchhiker's character dimly fulgurates into view like a buried ember in the event of sodomy that transpires between the narrator and hitchhiker in the shoddy motel room. That Joyce Carol Oates brushes by this event with a quick nod of recognition only demonstrates her jaded viewpoint, based on saturation levels in her own work. The ambiguity that immediately arises, complicating the impression of faded glory that we attributed to the fighter, has to do with the type of person we typically associate with a hero. The hero is typically not homosexual; nor is he endowed with a small sexual member. When the narrator defensively asserts, "I am not gay," he is clearing the air and keeping things "straight" as much for the fighter as for himself. The purity of the scene, which we saw above is depicted like a Flemish still life painting, is preserved. Hero worship can continue unabated: the sex act that transpired between them was not sexual but ceremonial. The condom ironically symbolizes a certain protective ethos of "safe sex" here. Nevertheless, everything is not preserved intact, as we will discuss shortly. The narrator experiences

exposure, however brief the episode. He does not embody or uphold the indifference of his assimilated white identity. His professional identity is exposed to risk, to the powers of metamorphosis, even if a condom was used.

Postmodern Remythologization

Postmodern cynicism has dried out the emotional landscape, awakening a desire for new myths. Marvels have been lacking in real life, appearing only on film. Alexie is enough of an incredulous postmodernist to be wary that the process of remythologization, which sounds like a return to religion or primitive belief, cannot endure and cannot follow traditional norms. This explains the furtiveness of their encounter and his homosexual hero. But he is also showing us a certain reawakening of a cosmic sense of life redolent of ancient tribal consciousness. The sacrifice is not only for the hero. The narrator's tightly wound professional identity is also sacrificed in the motel room. He has experienced certain powerful feelings—feelings of intimacy and adoration. In this regard the heroism is reciprocal: after sex, the fighter says "Hey, tough guy, you were good." The scope of the narrator's feelings gains an objective correlative when the fighter suddenly ascends to the sky and becomes a constellation. "I watched him rise from the earth to sky and become a new constellation" (33).

The narrator is once more alone. What we witness through his feelings, as he walks along the highway with the fighter taking his place among the constellations, is something marvelous in the sense suggested by Georges Bataille in the following remark. "I am and you are, in the vast flow of things, only a stopping-point favoring a resurgence. Do not delay in becoming precisely aware of this anguishing position: if it was your experience to attach yourself to goals enclosed within those limits in which no one is at stake but you, your life would be that of the great majority; it would be 'deprived of the marvelous'" (*Inner Experience* 95).

The myth of the marvelous that has been delivered by Alexie is the narrator's experience of another energy field, another dreamer, another desiring Native American, and they form a bold community that tears open the yuppie existence he has been leading. Although this experience is

ephemeral, a three-minute window of opportunity, it produces a new constellation that is something eternal to share. "The lasting vortex that constitutes you runs up against similar vortexes with which it forms a vast figure, animated by a measured agitation" (Bataille 94).

The Performance of Sovereignty

Earlier we mentioned Alexie's comical performance as a way to overcome the gravity of historical identity. His writing is at times graphic and desultory, but it can also be joyful and hilarious, if not obscene. These are modes of performance, not identity. What the critic Scott Durham says of Pierre Klossowski is true for Alexie. "In contrast with Baudrillard and Ballard, the 'death of the subject' in Klossowski is not a source of anxiety or paranoid fantasy, but an occasion for euphoria: through the simulacrum, we discover ourselves as actors, and our very identities appear as joyful masquerade and performance" (*Phantom Communities* 23). In this regard the homosexual union that occurs at the end of "Toughest Indian" is, we repeat, staged for the inauguration of a new hero myth that remains ambiguous. Sherman Alexie's characters are performing new identities, not finding answers to life's riddles. His gay fighter, we noted, is not like the heroes of old. His body and that of the narrator together comprise a staging area for an exploration of the possibilities of Native American identity, which for Alexie is something nascent, even illusory, a state of conflicted becoming that he sees as joyful and lonely. "Lonely and laughing," says Alexie's narrator at the end of "Toughest Indian," "I fell asleep." Perishable phenomena such as light and warmth and communication are shared and then vanish into the night air. But almost as perishable these days are careers and identities. The metamorphosis of the narrator's sexual identity is empowered by spontaneity and trust, love and friendship, the sovereign feelings that arise in the three minutes available to his tribe. Sherman Alexie's writing is, at its best, a search to find and narrate these sovereign feelings.

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