

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Postindian Survivance and the Trickster Condition of In-Betweenness:

Reading Sherman Alexie and Gerald Vizenor in the World of Postmodernism

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Postmodern critical approaches to the literary refiguring of Native American identity in the post-Native American Renaissance period have started to redesign a new field of inquiry, namely that of non-traditionalist, de-anthropologized, poststructuralist criticism that seeks to explore the links between contemporary experience and the problem of “survivance” in the play of simulations. “Survivance,” a term coined by the Native American writer and literary critic Gerald Vizenor, indicates the combination of survival and resistance techniques by which Native Americans face the challenges of a world structured around simulations of Indian identity, but in which the native subjects can respond by re-shaping and re-appropriating these stories in order to create a Baudrillardian implosion of meaning. This thesis will attempt to investigate the contributions in fiction and film made by Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene author and director, as an instance of interstitial autoethnographic discourse of survivance, conceived as driven by trickster hermeneutics and involved in a process of re-visioning the textual dimension of a culturally hybrid world.

POSTINDIAN SURVIVANCE AND THE TRICKSTER CONDITION OF IN-  
BETWEENNESS:  
READING SHERMAN ALEXIE AND GERALD VIZENOR IN THE WORLD OF  
POSTMODERNISM

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Department of English  
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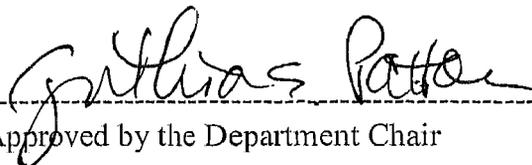
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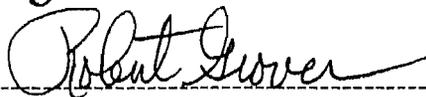
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Approved by the Department Chair

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Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

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## Chapter I

### Tiptoeing in the Field of Native American Literary Criticism

Postmodern critical approaches to the literary refiguring of Native American identity in the post-Native American Renaissance period have started to redesign a new field of inquiry, namely that of non-traditionalist, de-anthropologized, poststructuralist criticism that seeks to explore the links between contemporary experience and the problem of “survivance” in the play of simulations. “Survivance”, a term coined by the Native American writer and literary critic Gerald Vizenor, indicates the combination of survival and resistance techniques by which Native Americans face the challenges of a world structured around simulations of Indian identity, but in which the native subjects can respond by re-shaping and re-appropriating these stories in order to create a Baudrillardian implosion of meaning.

However, Vizenor’s paradigm of postindian identity negotiations is far from winning the consent of his fellow critics. Almost three decades after the flourishing of what literary critics have labeled “the Native American Renaissance”, the field of Native American criticism is as diverse and fraught with controversies as the arena of indigenous literary productions. In fact, the debates between indigenous critics of various persuasions amount to almost a culture war over the right to representation. On the one hand, the proponents of nativism (in itself a very complex issue) reinforce the idea of a necessary intellectual sovereignty that could counteract the tendency of First World theorists to supplant the voice of the native and to frame “local knowledge” ( in Foucault’s philosophy) according to the dimensions of Euramerican cultures. On the

other hand, the new poststructuralist critics discuss the issue of cultural hybridity, emphasizing how the mutual shaping of Native and Euramerican cultures has been characterized by the dialogic mode of interaction (Krupat, *Turn* 21) since the first encounters.

This introduction will follow, therefore, some of the major lines in Native American criticism, addressing the contributions of both native and non-native scholars working in the field of Native American studies. It will also show why and how the critical lenses used in poststructuralist thought have been reappropriated by those native scholars who acknowledge the intertwining of the conditions of postmodernity and postcoloniality. To illustrate the benefit and appropriateness of this reading, the fiction and cinematic productions of the Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie will be examined in this thesis in parallel to the mode of inquiry proposed by the Ojibwa critic and writer Gerald Vizenor.

The reason for introducing counter-arguments to the poststructuralist direction of the postcolonial methodology employed in this thesis concerns the difficulty of striking a balance between the need to expand the definition of "ethnic" subjectivity to include cross-cultural modes of (self)-representation, and the need to find a specific voice for particular contemporary problems. Thus, even if it may appear at first that the opponents of postcolonial theory favor isolationism to an absurd degree, while postmodern thinkers like Gerald Vizenor promote ideas without concern for the needs of the community, there is in fact a very productive interweaving of both sides, to the effect that the concerns expressed predominantly by one group of theorists will be approached in a fruitful way by scholars pursuing other lines of inquiry. Thus, although the "nativist" position seems

to be on completely different grounds than Bhabha's theorizing of the "third space" of cultural interconnectedness, the proponents of the "tribalcentric" approach (Pulitano 60) do not deny the omnipresence of cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism, as well as the necessity of intervening in the discursive structure of power.

Furthermore, the analysis of Sherman Alexie's work will highlight how contemporary issues of local distress (e.g., life on the reservation, the (in)accessibility of empowering discourses and so on) can be addressed in a way that responds to the challenges of the postmodern cosmopolitan world. Thus, while Alexie has been voicing for years a multitude of anxieties regarding the precarious condition of indigenous people, he has also found a way to connect his discourse to that of the most vocal postmodern thinkers. These newly developed interpretive strategies can be used to address the indigenous question on a more global level and thus attract a great deal of attention to what would have risked remaining unjustifiably parochial.

Addressing the rather Sartrean question of authentic or inauthentic modes of thinking about the direction of American Indian studies, the Santee Sioux critic and poet Elizabeth Cook-Lynn attempts to inscribe a clear line of distinction between the correct and incorrect approaches. In opposition to what she perceives as the fruitless talk of postcolonial scholars, the crucial objective of such studies, as defined by Cook-Lynn, is not to satisfy the taste of mainstream theorists of cosmopolitanism. Instead, the focus of the investigation is meant to lead to the assertion of the natives' right to separate their concerns from those targeted, yet allegedly poorly and vaguely defined by postcolonial and poststructuralist critics, and to concentrate on specific problems of contemporary life for Native Americans.

In trying to condemn the tendency to speculate loosely and also excessively on the diasporic condition of the postcolonial subject in the postmodern world, a topic which she views as quite vague and serving no specific interest, Cook-Lynn is arguing in favor of a return to the more local and yet unresolved issues of Indian self-determination. Before expressing criticism of her approach, one must acknowledge that, even if promoting an exceedingly severe judgment on the perceived inefficiency of contemporary theory, Cook-Lynn's concern is not singular among those studying aboriginal cultures. As unidirectional and monologic as it may appear, one cannot deny it does voice the concerns of many American Indians still facing a life of poverty and humiliation.

Moreover, a similar kind of criticism has been launched by a number of scholars regarding the structure of the field of postcolonial studies. First of all, one needs to reassess the condition of American Indian sovereignty today, given that, as Arnold Krupat argues, the colonial situation never did become postcolonial, and American Indians are still caught in a situation of subordination or "internal colonialism" (Churchill qtd. in Krupat, "Postcoloniality" 169) to the colonizing powers of the settlers (Owens, "As If" 14). Then, as Ania Loomba points out, when applied indiscriminately, poststructuralist theories of history run the risk of erasing differences among various types of colonial-neocolonial-postcolonial types of situations and of creating a new form of grand narratives of globalized struggles for the reshaping of subjectivities: "Postcolonial theory has been accused of precisely this: it shifts the focus from locations and institutions to individuals and their subjectivities. Postcoloniality becomes a vague

condition of people anywhere and everywhere, and the specificities of locale do not matter” (17).

However, the field and practices of postcolonial theory are not the only object of criticism from scholars such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Robert Allen Warrior, Craig S. Womack, and Ward Churchill. More importantly, perhaps, the text-based approach of poststructuralism has come under attack for reasons dealing once again with the possibility of and context for the assertion of a clearly demarcated and resistant cultural identity. Yet, as I will argue further, in fact, instead of representing a Western attempt to impose another grand narrative of cultural imperialism, poststructuralism constitutes a necessary ally of minority critical discourse in that it celebrates and encourages the heteroglot space of hierarchy-defying cultural spaces. Thus, it introduces the possibility of a disengagement from the debates on “essential”, non-becoming, self-sufficient and individualistic approaches versus the Sartrean recognition of achieving freedom of consciousness and artistic expression in the never-ending process of becoming.

Acting as just one voice among the many voices of concerned minority studies scholars, Cook-Lynn takes issue again with the alleged poststructuralist penchant for the erasing of authorship, “true” agency, subjectivity and hard-won resistance. While one should admit that fears regarding the obliteration of minority presence and cultural and political involvement are justifiable, one must nevertheless debunk the stereotype of the so-called French (somehow taken to represent the whole of an allegedly monolithic European philosophy) theory as being an adversary to the indigenist discourse. Talking primarily about the rendition of native oral literature into written format, Arnold Krupat highlights precisely the connections between oral literatures and the discourse of

poststructuralism, in their common concern for the openness of the performed text and the continuously reformulated area of meaning as defined by the endless play of traces (“Post-structuralism” 117-8).

Furthermore, as Krupat points out, one must be aware of the distinctions within the field of indigenous studies, where these distinctions tend to multiply with every new voice. Thus, his demarcation of the main directions in native theory differentiates between the nationalist, the indigenist, and the cosmopolitan positions, recognizing their overlappings and oxymoronic interlockings (“Nationalism” 617). While his own conclusions favor the moderate cosmopolitan orientation, it is interesting to note that his suggestion of *ethnocriticism* as a method of cultural inquiry combines the contributions of indigenist and poststructuralist theory.

In his view, therefore, the nationalist discourse is primarily focused on the issue of sovereignty as a question of politics and law, and responds actively to any attempt to blend cultures, since blending is seen as only one more act of appropriation of native resources by the politically dominant culture. Moreover, Cook-Lynn’s emphasis in “American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story” on autonomy is seen as facilitating an increased sense of confidence in the past, present and future contributions of an oppressed people:

We must work toward a new set of principles the tribally specific literary traditions by which we have always judged the imagination. This distinguished legacy – largely untapped by critics, mainstream readers, and Native participants – is too essential to be ignored as we struggle toward the inevitable modernity of Native American intellectualism. (76)

Krupat's analysis of the indigenist discourse seems to highlight a somewhat Foucauldian concern with alternative "bodies of knowledge" ("Nationalism" 619-20). The attention to the construction and acknowledgment of a typically native worldview is based on a politics of difference and perhaps on a moderate form of identity politics which maintains the sense of cultural resistance, "foregrounding epistemological difference and value rather than the national category" (621). Unlike Cook-Lynn's dismissal of practically every successful Native American author, from Momaday to Silko to Alexie and Owens, the indigenist outlook approaches with a certain degree of moderation the subject of the interchange between Western traditions and native creations.

Lastly, Krupat's analysis of the cosmopolitan position corroborates his intuition of the productive overlappings between the indigenist and the cosmopolitan discourses. Thus, the work of Louis Owens is held as an example in both discursive orientations, insisting both on a "shared consciousness, an inherently identifiable world-view" (620) of native authors, and also on the constitution and relevance of the figure of the mixedblood in the contemporary critical discourse. As marginal as the mixedblood identity might appear to critics such as Cook-Lynn, who objects to the implication of an inconsistent and unreliable identity, such a transgressive figure stands for the transformation of the space (*territory*) of confinement into the space of liberation, as Owens re-appropriates the *frontier* as the arena of the trickster (Pulitano 128).

More than identifying an indigenous worldview, Owens goes so far as to state his belief in a sort of universalist reading of culture which would enable the understanding texts across a cross-cultural horizon. Rather than criticizing what might appear as the

prospect of promoting a diluted sense of identity among the oppressed indigenous populations, Owens astutely remarks (following and followed by Vizenor) that the notion of what being an “Indian” means presupposes a constant process of negotiation around various competing definitions of cultural authenticity, where authenticity is taken in certain contexts to stand for resistance. Thus, what follows is a semiotic confrontation between various regimes of authenticity and an unfortunate double bind that seems to continue to oppose Cook-Lynn to Vizenor, making almost the entire span of contemporary Native American literature work under the conditions of an aporetic discourse.

Owens’ theses, therefore, create a bridging critical paradigm that facilitates an understanding of Vizenor’s radically subversive strategies of disengaging the field of representation and criticism from an ontologically and epistemologically limited domain of inquiry, such as the one promoted by Western social sciences, as well as by nationalist native scholars. This thesis will be concerned with investigating how both Vizenor’s theories and Alexie’s fiction and films can be seen as avoiding the predicament of having to choose between two marginal subject positions: either as a marginal Indian in the eyes of the white society, or as a marginal mixedblood in the eyes of those who advocate intellectual, if not legal, sovereignty. These two authors’ attempts to problematize and also expand the question of ethnic identity should not be seen, therefore, as a negation of valid concerns about the acknowledgement of an empowered Native American subject today.

Instead, this thesis proposes that the theories under examination be seen as instruments for a reformulation of the ways in which the idea of Native American identity

has been envisioned thus far. On the one hand, the new tropes of discourse and figures of genre-blurring literature advanced by Vizenor will be acknowledged as crucial in the effort to go beyond the rhetoric of prescriptive definitions of the self. On the other hand, Alexie's contributions will be analyzed as fruitful explorations of the condition of cultural hybridity in popular culture, in terms of his engagement with issues of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity in the process of demystifying comfortable simulations or poses of identity. While Vizenor's theories will provide the overarching critical orientation, it is through the intermediary of Alexie's fiction and film that the thesis of "postindian survivance", as defined by Vizenor, will be shown to be a fundamental tool for resistance in the postmodern world.

## Chapter II

### Postindian Survivance and the Mixedblood Challenge:

#### Gerald Vizenor's Deconstructive Turn

A controversial figure among Native American scholars due to his overt predilection for a postmodern mode of understanding identity construction and artistic intervention, Gerald Vizenor advocates a revolutionary performance of cultural difference, meant to destabilize the homogenous codes of cultural hermeneutics. Thus, his interrogation of necessarily hybrid contemporary identities highlights increasingly complex ways of engaging with the world, bypassing the traditionalist static tropes of discourse and representation. His critical project draws inspiration from multiples sources in the field of poststructuralist cultural theory, thus running contrary to a great deal of influential indigenous voices that do not favor a so-called Western theoretical approach. One cannot help but compare Vizenor's groundbreaking reinterpretation of Native American culture(s) in the age of postmodernism with Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha's handling of Western philosophical discourses for the purposes of expanding the area of postcolonial studies and making the marginalized voice of the non-Western scholar and artist heard in the arena of dominant academic scholarship.

Yet, even more than accepting and skillfully manipulating the instruments of critical thought developed in the Western tradition, Vizenor produces, in fact, a crossing over of indigenous and non-indigenous discourses which, in the act of folding in and over each other, create the moving sands of a possible Native American critical theory. In offering a discourse constructed around native tropes of culture, the Chippewa critic and

writer articulates a solid theoretical position which parallels the efforts made by other ethnic critics toward encouraging the formation of an ethnic discourse of cultural criticism. In the area of African American studies, it remains to be seen whether bell hooks, for instance, has managed to negotiate a form of “black theory” that would satisfy the needs of a Western-educated audience, as well as of the African American subject searching for possibilities of self-representation. One of the concerns of this essay will be to demonstrate that Vizenor’s immersion in the field of modern critical theory has led to the construction of a form of analytical discourse which is particularly fit to explore the problems of the Native American presence in the contemporary processes of negotiating cultural identities.

Furthermore, another matter of interest in later chapters will be the examination of the ways in which Vizenor’s contribution can be used to explain and explore the dimensions of Sherman Alexie’s literary and cinematic productions. The theses proposed by Vizenor address a condition of postcolonial liminality which is sometimes described as problematic by Alexie. However, if ontologically Alexie’s examination of his own work may not include an acknowledgement of such a condition of transitionality and transformativity, epistemologically, the representational strategies he uses can be found to be in accordance with Vizenor’s conception and enactment of semiotic subversion.

This chapter, therefore, aims to provide an introduction to Vizenor’s critical approach, focusing on his shift he proposes from the tragic mode of stereotyping Indian subjectivities to the condition of the postmodern, playful, and critically aware *postindian*. His analysis of the dialectic of absence and presence breaks new ground by not revolving anymore around the mourning of the marginalized, ignored, and hence absent Indian

subject. It does not, therefore, attempt to oppose two polarities (of a binding presence and of a disempowering absence), but, in a decidedly Derridean gesture of pointing out and transgressing fabricated hierarchies and binary separations, it suggests a mutual implication of the two situations, resulting in an increased cultural participation.

Dissenting from the essentialism (or, as the case may be, strategic essentialism) of the nativist discourse, Vizenor rejects any attempt to limit the play of cultural elements in a text or to restrict the dissemination of traces to a single authoritative and unmistakably authentic source. He thus strongly denounces the idea of categorizing Native American literature as Indian literature, and instead favors a more Barthesian approach to literature as an open, writerly text, as opposed to the static view of literature as a finished work, sealed off from re-interpretations (Barthes' idea of the readerly text).

To this purpose, he presents several reasons for his criticism of the labeling of literature under an ethnic rubric. In an interview with the German scholar Hartwig Isernagen in 1999, Vizenor claims that group identities (such as "Indian literature") have so far been assigned on the basis of a lack of consideration for the particular individual voice sustaining the creative process, and thus eroding even further the possibility of allowing literature written by Native Americans to be anything but a conventional representation of exoticized (by the Western eye) subject (as is the case with the romanticized figure of the Indian). Vizenor's distrust of group identities is further supported by his criticism of the inclination to view Indians as nothing more perpetual victims, thus pigeonholing them as powerless subalterns and foreclosing any creative way of bypassing the cultural hierarchy West/East (83-4).

Yet, even more significantly, one of Vizenor's major contentions has to do with the restriction of Indian literature to blood-based authenticity and the denial of the multiplicity of cultural relations that have shaped the artistic performance of many tribal writers. In an argument reminiscent of Owens' defense of the mixedblood metaphor, Vizenor explains survival in terms of dynamic interchange and trickster adaptability (Isernhagen 83-91), allowing that a great number of tribes have been reconfigured in their interaction with the white society rather than with other tribes. The dialogic model is then expanded to the dimension of liberatory cultural hybridity, including indigenous artists from all over the world, alongside various other dominant or non-dominant social groups in America (91). The remarks made during the interview offer but a brief account of Vizenor's investigation of the impact of identity politics and of his celebrated theory of Postindian survivance.

Famously calling Indian literature a literature of "simulation" and dominance, Vizenor dwells on his powerful criticism of the fabrication of stereotypes in his book *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. The volume itself is designed to shock the readers into a visual contestation of the established dialectic of discourse and vision by placing on the front cover Andy Warhol's portrait of Russell Means as a classic Curtis-like Indian figure. It is the deconstruction of this equation of identity with constructed knowledge that Vizenor will attempt in his theory of postindian trickster hermeneutics, a project which is described by the Chippewa scholar Kimberly Blaeser in this way:

Vizenor variously explicates this whole complicated situation, fictionalizes the account, attacks the inventors of the idealized Indian,

satirizes the Native Americans who assume that romantic pose and the whites who buy into it, exhorts tribal people to avoid the timebound identities, and outlines strategies for surviving the invention. (54-5)

The necessity to escape “the dead voices of racial photographs and the vanishing pose” (*Manifest Manners* 126), denounced in a reinforcement of Magritte’s dictum (and Foucault’s analysis of it) that identification is only illusory (“This portrait is not an Indian”, repeats Vizenor), leads to the rejection of “manifest manners” (232) as a contemporary manifestation of the destructive ideology of the manifest destiny. Manifest manners are the ideological expression of the “surveillance and domination of the tribes in literature” (4), serving to replace the “tribal real” (4) with dangerous fabrications that solidify romanticized and victimized identities while obscuring “the wild memories and rich diversities of tribal and postindian literature” (80).

Vizenor’s plea, therefore, springs from a Baudrillardian acknowledgement of the dimension of lack, which is constitutive of the shifting composition of cultural identity in the process of being constructed. His observation concerning the danger of remaining essentialized in stereotypical representations has undoubtedly been shared by many other critics, yet Vizenor’s original contribution rests convincingly in his interpretation of poststructuralist theory from an ethnic perspective. By positing the disappearance of the real under the system of simulated presences, Vizenor combines a theme which is popular in Native American scholarship dating back to Roy Harvey Pearce’s *Savagism and Civilization*, with a creative take on the condition of postmodern semiotic manifestations, thus striking a balance between the established discourse on the invention of Indianness

and the possibility of liberation through a deconstructive twist on the reinvention of invention.

Pointing out the obvious fact that the word “Indian” has no referent in tribal languages, and taking his cue from Derrida’s approach to the missing origin, Vizenor’s next step is to turn the damaging construction of the hyperreal (or simulated) Indianness on its head and foreground its false claim to authenticity. In a manner similar to the French philosopher’s exposure of the absence of a transcendental signified that would ground and justify the sequencing of signifiers, Vizenor explodes the very basis of any rhetoric of “Indianness” by revealing it as entirely self-referential, self-constructed, and thus self-replicating.

It is very tempting, therefore, to see his manifesto against manifest manners as striking a similar note and producing an effect comparable to Derrida’s celebrated ground-breaking speech, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” His examination of the constructed nature of enforced identities is similar in scope with Derrida’s underscoring of the shift in human sciences towards the acknowledgement of the structurality of structure, hence of the way in which cultural components are arranged and distributed to create the appearance of a deeper level of cultural authenticity. By blowing apart a system of belief in the centrality of the question of identity and the possibility of its retrieval within the same system that fabricated it, Vizenor accomplishes an even more significant task. He replaces the essentialization of the fake (or Baudrillard’s “hyperreality”, if not even Magritte’s modernist challenge to the rhetoric of being) with the affirmation of the contingency of meaning.

It is telling, therefore, that while the conceptualization of the *différance* as a Nietzschean force of affirmative and subversive play is the focal point of Derrida's argument, Vizenor's comparable thesis is that of the trickster performance that transgresses any form of identity politics. While the relevance of the notion of *différance* as the dynamic constitution of the ever-deferred-and-reconstructed meaning will be pointed out later in reference to Vizenor's theory of "shadow survivance," it is important to note briefly that Nietzsche's blasting away of the Platonic and Kantian philosophical tradition by means of his glorification of the Dionysian forces is probably one of the most appropriate associations within the Western tradition for Vizenor's revolutionary thesis of a radically transgressive performance.

The figure of the trickster is characterized by Blaeser as an embodiment of "contradiction and ambiguity" and as mediating between opposing forces, thus going beyond the dividing line of either/or and putting both options into play (139). Commenting on the image of the conjunction of contraries, Blaeser remarks that "the mediation becomes the *raison d'être* of the mixedbloods in Vizenor's prose and the central impetus behind much of his writing" (139).

In this light, as a figure of resistance to totalization and to the lure of absolute full presence, the trickster represents the possibility of a subversive performance that does not respond to the prescriptive straightjacket of an enforced identity. Opposing the tyranny of absolute referentiality and traditional verisimilitude, the trickster figure is engaged in a cultural critique of the limitations of the discourse of the social sciences, which, in Vizenor's judgment, have always presented a static and archaic image of Native American culture. The Jungian interpretation of the trickster stories, in its concern for an

assumed distant mythic past, is as inadequate as the usual anthropological view which museumises the tribal people by subjugating them to “terminal creeds” (Vizenor’s alternative term for manifest manners). Thus, challenging the reading of the trickster as a pigeon-holed mythological figure of simplistic buffoonery, Vizenor makes this figure into the fundament for his attack on imposed notions of identity. Coining the word “postindian” as a rewriting of the notion of “Indian,” which was designed as a “tragic” invention that masked the absence of the “tribal real”, Gerald Vizenor makes the trickster the emblematic figure for the Indian crossblood, where the term “crossblood” covers several cultural positionalities.

Even more, by designating the trickster as the main force of the dynamic interplay which enables the construction of a cultural identity, Vizenor takes a Derridean stance against any form of reductionist identity politics. What is crucially important in Derrida’s analysis of the mutual engagement of signs is the idea of a permanently deferred ultimate meaning, for what exists as temporarily valid signification is only what is manifested contextually and what *becomes* as a result of the contingency of meaning. A permanently deferred identity signals an identity which is activated as identity only in the unstable arrangement of signifiers with their dispersed signifieds and only as actualized in the movement of the traces of the signifier-signified shifting relationships. Thus, making the presence of meaning variable and dependent on an entire range of factors, a deconstructionist analysis would highlight how, in a non-Lacanian manner, absence as lack is not necessarily a tragic premise for the effort to achieve completeness. Instead, absence is involved in the structure of the trace that connects an indeterminable number

of signs, and its interest lies not in the possibility of its disappearance (or covering of the gap), but in its openness to the process of reshaping of signification.

The importance of the interplay of absence and presence cannot be underestimated in the theoretical work of Gerald Vizenor, for it creates the semiotic breach that allows for the creation and acknowledgement of interstitial identities for what Vizenor calls “tribal people” (instead of Indians or Native Americans, both deemed discursively repressive). Thus, it is of prime importance here to observe that, in a characteristically deconstructionist manner, Vizenor refuses to pin down a definition of identity that would suit the expectations of a classic discourse on “Indianness,” and instead concentrates on “trickster hermeneutics” as a form of closure-defying survivance involved in the construction of transgressive identities.

Described as a form of engagement in discourse by using linguistic play to stress the contingency of meaning which would replace the fake supremacy of simulations (Leitch 1967), trickster hermeneutics serves as a discursive means of transforming the constructed knowledge and conventions of stereotypes into a form of performative resistance. The refrain of “This is not an Indian,” in addition to being a scathing critique of the actions of Russell Means (and of any other militant members of AIM, for that matter), is also an exhortation to resistance by means of non-identification and through the process of a never-ending deferment of stable recognition.

By refusing to say what Indianness *is* and by suggesting a form of discourse that does not destroy the sense of active participation, Vizenor avoids the pitfalls of the rhetoric of essentialism. For, despite all good intentions on the part of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Ward Churchill or Russell Means, once a discourse of identification is produced, it

necessarily is followed by the articulation of a static position of subjectivity which invites the destructive force of binary oppositions, with all the ensuing paradigms of hierarchization. Thus, by positioning trickster hermeneutics inside the dominant discourse and making it a prime resource for the construction of mediated cultures, Vizenor reveals a crucial concern for the creation of a new position of enunciation.

The trickster or the mixedblood as an intermediary between cultures, allowing for a situation of undecidability (or indecidability), can be seen as facilitating a situation of in-betweenness and reciprocal re-construction. The new discourse which follows such a restructuring of enunciation practices inhabits, in fact, a field of multiple articulations of identity that fall through the cracks of a long-established system of circumscribing indigenous identity. The recognition of this new field of interaction can be sustained through the theoretical contribution of Homi K. Bhabha, whose work on cultural hybridity has had an overwhelming impact on postcolonial studies in the form of the theory of the third space of enunciation.

Bhabha starts from a critique of the static understanding of cultural diversity as a sum of linearly produced and co-existing differences, and proposes instead that we look at cultural difference as being the *écart* of cultural discourse that is generated at the borders of cultural arenas. This gap (*écart*) which arises out of the undecidability of cultural discourse at the margins is the condition for the construction of cultural hybridity through the work of intersecting subject positionalities. In this way, instead of acknowledging a type of definitive cultural identity built on separation and opposition (as with cultural diversity being a case of concatenation of neatly delimited forms of

variation), Bhabha urges a reconsideration of the very conditions that make the subject position possible.

In order to introduce the idea of a fundamental breach in the cultural formulation of the subject, Bhabha resorts to the Derridean notion of *différance* as a mutual implication of absence and presence in the construction of the speaking subject. Unlike the essentialist stance on cultural meaning as resulting from the ever present-to-themselves ultimate signifieds of tradition and self-determination, Bhabha's deconstructionist project looks at the cultural text as "crossed by the *différance* of writing" and admits that "meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent" (36). This is also what prompts the critic to re-assess the conditions of cultural enunciation and, in light of his examination of the embeddedness of the discursive positions of all parties involved in the production of cultural meaning, a Third Space of enunciation is recognized as allowing for the ambivalence and undecidability of cultural enunciations of identity.

Thus, the cultural position of the speaking subject is never pinned down referentially and instead is described as being caught in the never-ending process of signification, in its cross-cultural and multidimensional production:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a

homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People ...

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or “purity” of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. (37)

The account provided by Bhabha highlights the instability of the situation of cultural enunciation with respect to the construction of identity, as well as of the processes of deferment and differentiation creating a subject that is never fully present to itself and thus never being in possession of any fullness of meaning. Consequently, this thesis serves to underscore Vizenor’s notion of trickster hermeneutics. The trickster as “a language game, a wild cross causal neotic liberation, not a measure of representation of invented cultural values” (“Ruins” 13) is in itself a principle of instability and ambiguity, rather than a traceable character. As a force – similar to *différance* – writing the space of dynamic interaction, the trickster becomes a principle of semiotic movement across the gaps of rhizomatically connected cultures, providing the opportunity for an interpretation of texts as permanently escaping determination and reshaping one another.

Vizenor’s thesis of trickster hermeneutics as a form of cultural survivance and subversion in the literatures of dominance is further strengthened by his analysis of the movement of *pronouncement* (another term coined by Vizenor) across narratives of identity. In his article “The Ruins of Representation: Shadow Survivance and the Literature of Dominance”, in a manner analogous to Bhabha’s investigation of situation

of enunciation, Vizenor's consideration of the self's engagement with the world highlights the necessity to abandon binary thinking:

First person pronouns have no referent... The demonstrative pronouns are the transaction of the others, the elusive invitations to a presence in the absence of cotribal entities.

We must need new pronouns that would misconstrue gender binaries, that would combine the want of a presence in the absence of the heard, a shadow pronoun to pronounce memories in silence, in the absence of cotribal names and nouns. The *pronouncement* combines the sense of the words *pronoun* and *pronounce* with the actions and conditions of survivance in tribal memories and stories. The *trickster pronouncement* has a shadow with no numbered person. (23)

Thus, the performative act of projecting one's identity develops both into an act of protest against the imposition of simulations through the literature of dominance (24), and into a reformulation of the speaking subject beyond the limits of representation. The postindian as a trickster and as a *pronouncement* with no numbered (that is, both stable and delimited by the discourse of the social sciences) referent is a construction that transgresses the limited environment of essentializing discourses, and is, in fact, involved in a process of survival by means of its self-deferment.

The act of postponing the utterance (the Lacanian *énonciation*) of a definitive statement (*énoncé*) inserts in the order of discourse the epistemological break that allows the subject to enter into and manipulate the play of simulations as the play of absences and presences. Unlike the traditionalist rhetoric of absence as oppressive erasure and as

tragic mode of victimry, Vizenor conceives of absence as only one of the dimensions of the constitution of the speaking subject. His gesture of reformulating absence, following Bhabha's project of re-reading Derrida in terms of the trace structure of a necessarily hybrid identity, opens up the field of cultural interpretation and reads absence not as lack or deficiency, but as transgressing the limitations of binary oppositions. In his article "Trickster Discourse," Vizenor even goes so far as to call trickster hermeneutics a game in "comic holotropes" (277), a play (in the same manner in which Derrida understands the play of signifiers) on the "absolute fakes" (278) which have dominated the conventional representation of Native American identity.

By asserting that "Native American Indian literatures are unstudied landscapes, wild and comic rather than tragic and representational" (279), Vizenor underlines the unrepresentability – along the lines allowed by the traditionally binary Western frame of mind – of native cultures which may be said to exist interstitially, in a situation beyond the boundaries of the known discourse of valorized presence over de-valored absence. His acknowledgement of the simulations and of the "absolute fakes" as elements in the game of survivance indicates that what could be conceived (in the tragic mode which Vizenor deplors) as disempowering – as traces of a long-gone past and unitary self-sufficient identity – is actually productive, in the sense that it stimulates the re-interpretation of cultural signs. The tragic split pointed out by Cook-Lynn and other essentialist critics is therefore turned into a fruitful situation of cultural dissemination that leads to a permanent repositioning of the self, thus prepared to overturn various forms of domination.

## Chapter III

### Sherman Alexie's Fiction and Film: The Trickster Condition of In-Betweenness

Hailed as one of the most prolific voices in recent Native American literature, Sherman Alexie has risen to the status of media celebrity, thus making many Native scholars of a more essentialist persuasion rather uncomfortable with his sudden success. Despite criticism, his approach to questions of ethnicity and literary achievement cannot be easily characterized in any one particular fashion, as Alexie's writing is traversed by unstable definitions of being; representation and responsibility. While some of his earlier prose and poetry shows an essentialist edge that Alexie never denied, his more recent literary productions locate the problematics of identity within a more comprehensive (and yet even more contested) space of in-betweenness. This chapter will try to propose an appreciation of Alexie's fiction and film as an instance of interstitial autoethnographic discourse, conceived as driven by trickster hermeneutics and involved in a process of re-visioning the textual dimension of a culturally hybrid world.

#### Facing simulations in literature and criticism

A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer, director and overall performer, Alexie grew up in Wellpinit, Washington, on the Spokane Indian reservation, a place which will figure as a fundamental setting in most of his literary and cinematic productions. Born hydrocephalic and having survived brain surgery at the age of six, Alexie grew up to be a distinguished student, graduating *cum laude* from Washington State University, with a

degree in American Studies. The span of his education and the extent of his readings from canonical Western literature will become evident in his work, where crucial epistemological encounters with the dominant Anglo-American ideology will form the crux of his subversive literary undertakings.

Alexie's sudden rise to fame appears to have divided scholars of Native American literature into supporters and detractors, each side finding either brilliance or fault with the promising Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer. In a review of the reception of Alexie's work, Suzanne Lundquist notes the high praise with which the literary establishment, through the voice of James R. Kincaid in *The New York Times Book Review*, received Alexie's first two poetry collections, *The Business of Fancydancing* and *I Would Steal Horses*, launching Alexie as a major name in contemporary poetry (Lundquist 152). The material for these two collections, published when Alexie was only 26, was for the most part written and revised during the poet's college years at WSU. Even more, in 1993, only one year after the publication of his poems, Alexie's book of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, enjoys a resounding success and wins a citation for the PEN-Hemingway Award for best debut in fiction. Moreover, alongside eleven more books of poetry and fiction and countless contributions to literary anthologies, Alexie has also written the screenplays for two award-winning films, *Smoke Signals* and *The Business of Fancydancing*.

In the face of increasing praise from the more canonical sources of criticism on the American stage, Alexie's work has met with resistance from a number of leading Native American scholars, suspicious of Alexie's success in mainstream literary circles. The main objections were based on a reading of Alexie's texts as circulating age-old

stereotypical images of self-destructive drunken Indians, thus playing into the expectations of white readers:

...his bleakly absurd and aimless Indians are imploding in a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing; there is no family or community center toward which his characters...might turn for coherence; and in the process of self-destruction the Indians provide Euramerican readers with pleasurable moments of dark humor of the titillation of bloodthirsty imagery. (Owens 79-80)

It is striking to see that, faced with a work of fiction that questions the obligation to propose a unitary vision of contemporary Indian life, the otherwise poststructuralist critic Louis Owens is concerned with the lack of a cultural center or of a dimension of hope and coherence. Praising Vizenor for his deconstructive stance, Owens nevertheless resorts to a curious rhetoric of literary didacticism in accusing Alexie of focusing excessively on the process of self-destruction. However, one must also be warned that Owens exhibits elsewhere in his book significant nuances of a universalist type of critical discourse. In this light, then, it is no longer so shocking to see the theorist of the frontier-as-inbetweenness (as explained earlier in the introduction to this thesis) practicing such a prescriptive mode of literary criticism.

Even more, Owens fails to consider Alexie's work in more than a fragmented manner, as he completely ignores the dynamic of life on the Spokane reservation as it inhabits Alexie's texts. Populating his texts with ever-revised characters that appear in more or less identical roles and in a combination of more or less similar names in his short stories, as well as novels, Alexie plays with the idea of community in a postmodern

manner that engages creatively with the oral tradition in Native American literature. Thus, while *Lester Falls Apart* seems to show up as an “ongoing character” serving as “a unifying feature of Alexie’s work” from *The Business of Fancydancing* onwards (Evans 13) and displaying features of a trickster figure, other characters are rehashed and appear in a multiplicity of family citations (one fitting example would be the long career of the Polatkin characters). Alexie thus challenges the very idea of a singular branch of identifications and instead proposes a multidimensional space where lines of history, constrictions of time and anticipated connections and disconnections are all overturned.

More than the predictable condemnation of Alexie’s work by the moralizing traditionalist scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (which will be discussed later), Owens’ critique seems to be entirely oblivious of the extent to which Alexie’s subversive and often dark humor creates characters that question - in a radical postmodern gesture - discourses of authenticity and authoritativeness coming from both the Euramerican readership and the Native American community. Alexie’s novels and short stories are fraught with references to disputable presumptions of “Indianness” on the part of either tribal council members or white America, thus threatening the stability of established knowledge in a bi-cultural environment and exposing the absolute fake of simulated identities, as Vizenor often claims with regard to his own texts.

In a Kafkaesque magical-realist short story titled “The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire,” the main character (ubiquitous in Alexie’s writing) is put on trial because “he had once held the reservation postmaster hostage for eight hours with the idea of a gun and had also threatened to make significant changes in the tribal vision” (*Lone Ranger* 93). In an equally biting episode in *Reservation Blues*, the Tribal Chairman David

WalksAlong is mocked for what Lundquist calls his “reverse Native racism – against whites, against Indian drunks, and against people from other tribes” (161) when he expresses his criticism of the Spokane rock band Coyote Springs:

I am beginning to seriously wonder about Coyote Springs’s ability to represent the Spokane Tribe...First of all, they are drunks. Victor and Junior are such drunks that even Lester FallsApart thinks they drink too much...Do we really want people to think that the Spokanes are a crazy storyteller, a couple of irresponsible drunks, a pair of Flathead Indians, and two white women? I don’t think so. (175-76)

Yet Alexie does not fail to point out the simulations of Indian identity circulated in the mainstream media as well, as in the ridiculous assessment of the Coyote Springs band provided by the two white scouts for a famous record company: “Overall, this band looks and sounds Indian. They all have dark skin. Chess, Checkers, and Junior all have long hair. Thomas has a big nose, and Victor has many scars. We’re looking at some genuine crossover appeal” (190).

Mocking the traditionalist discourse of the right to authentic representation, Alexie is equally critical of the mainstream narratives of conquest, as he demonstrates in his short story “The Sin Eaters.” Proposing a revised account of the strategies for assimilation enforced at the turn of the twentieth century in the form of the removal of Indian children from their families and their placement in boarding schools, the short story focuses on the attempt by the Western world to ensure its survival by surgically extracting the remedy for its terminal illness from the bodies of kidnapped Indian children. The story thus offers a critique of the constitution of the dominant ethnic class

through the exploitation and forced incorporation of the subjugated people into its very core, an idea which lends itself quite fruitfully to a Derridean interpretation of the movement of the supplement that ensures the existence of the center.

An often anthologized poem by Sherman Alexie from his collection *The Summer of Black Widows*, titled “How to Write the Great American Indian novel,” presents an even more straightforward condemnation of the re-writing of Native American culture by some Indian writers in the form of clichés and visions of acculturation as immediate harmony, serving to underscore the subsumption of Native cultures under the imperialist umbrella of white culture’s desires. Exploring the mingling of cultures as a form of domination of Native American culture by a white culture powerful enough to fabricate the pretense of an Indian identity by proximity (the “playing Indian” game analyzed by Philip Deloria and so many other scholars), Alexie concludes with these lines: “In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written,/ all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts” (39-40).

Commenting on the process of the continual self-effacement of native cultures by agreeing to play into the expectations of a governing white culture which does not let the “subaltern speak,” (to reiterate – in a new narrative context – Spivak’s warning addressed to the First World theorists), the final lines of the poem also address the question of cultural extinction through cultural consumption. The assimilation of stereotypical romantic poses as indicative of a shared (by the Euramerican world) essence is seen as a destructive force operating in the field of a type of cultural hybridity understood as cultural obliteration. Despite criticism of his equivocal cultural positioning, Alexie reveals here his suspicions of a mock dialogue which seems to be carried out with the

colonizing culture and which threatens to end in a monologic grip on a reality constructed as an “absolute fake” (in Vizenor’s much-quoted condemnation of a simulated presence).

Thus, far from pursuing the facile line of identification offered in the traditional simulations of native culture as constructed by the mainstream white audience, Alexie chooses to disrupt traditional narratives and provide a new imaginary of reservation life in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and urban life in *The Toughest Indian in the World* and *Ten Little Indians*. A significant act of revision is accomplished in the short story “Imagining the Reservation”, from Alexie’s first collection of short fiction, where the condition of survival - defined as “Survival = Anger x Imagination” (150) – is fundamentally defined by humor, which can be translated in the terms set up by Vizenor’s idea of the comic holotrope of the trickster: “Do you believe laughter can save us? All I know is that I count coyotes to help me sleep” (152). To insist on the appropriateness of Vizenor’s theories in the context of the liberation of the imagination proposed by Alexie, one needs only to juxtapose these words and the wry wit which traverses the entire collection with Vizenor’s emphasis on subversion through ironical commentary and new tribal narratives:

Natives, of course, use simulations, too, but for reasons of liberation rather than dominance. Postindians create a native presence, and that sense of presence is both reversion and futurity. Yes, and the reversions are tricky and ironic, as they have always been in native stories... The postindian stands for an active, ironic resistance to dominance, and the good energy of native survivance. (Lee, *Postindian* 84-5)

Moreover, in the same self-reflexive short story, commenting on the predominantly unilateral infusion of mainstream popular culture into the reservation life, the situation of urban Indians is described as critically defined by mainstream media: “Imagine Crazy Horse invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated it over Washington, D.C. Would the urban Indians still be sprawled around the one-room apartment in the cable television reservation?” (149). Circumscribing his representation of the Spokane reservation within the parameters allowed by the stereotypes of the culture industry, Alexie asks: “What do you believe in? Does every Indian depend on Hollywood for a twentieth-century vision?” (151) and proposes imagination with an ironic twist as a way to escape the “terminal creeds” (Vizenor’s term) of Hollywood’s romanticizing of the so-called vanishing race.

Reviewing Alexie’s first book of short stories, the critic Stephen Evans claims that, far from being a disillusioned observer of the degradation of reservation life, Alexie becomes a true satirist, endowed with a social conscience that enables him to mock and invert stereotypes in the process of inventing new modes of survival. Yet, apparently, such a deconstructionist stance is not convincing enough for Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who faults Alexie for creating works that “reflect little or no defense of treaty-protected reservation land bases as homelands to the indigenes, nor do they suggest a responsibility of art as an ethical endeavor or the artist as a responsible social critic” (qtd. in Lundquist 161). In his playful-serious manner, Alexie claims he does not want to be a propagandist (Lundquist 161) and mocks these expectations as nothing more than another set of simulations: “When any Indian shows the slightest hint of talent in any direction, the rest of the tribe starts expecting Jesus. Sometimes they’ll stop a reservation hero in the middle

of the street, look into his eyes, and ask him to change a can of sardines into a river salmon” (*Reservation Blues* 97).

Alexie’s act of revisioning the canon of conquest narratives in popular culture starts with the very title of his collection, in which Tonto ceases to be the Lone Ranger’s subservient companion and engages in a battle of representational practices. The critic James Cox considers Alexie’s work from an angle which differs radically from Owens or Cook-Lynn’s: “...rather than exclusively offering critiques of the conquest narratives the dominant culture produces and consumes, he illustrates the damage these narratives engender in his Native American characters, then rewrites or revises and subverts them” (55). Alexie’s involvement in teasing out Hollywood-defined fabrications continues in *The Toughest Indian in the World*, where a much more socially committed Alexie explores issues of class, gender and sexuality, in addition to those of ethnicity and cultural heritage.

Alexie’s engagement with the enemy’s tools, therefore with the repertoire of popular culture images that cast the life of urban Indians into the pattern of a Baudrillardian vacuum of meaning and communication in a hyperreal urban existence, proves to be his main line of attack against continued colonialism. Instead of blaming Alexie for his ironical use of popular culture imagery, critic John Newton stresses the large appeal that his poetry and fiction gain on a global scale. Analyzing the enthusiastic reception of Alexie’s work among his students from New Zealand, Newton contends that his work has, in fact, an even more important political edge than Cook-Lynn would assume. By satirizing the invader discourse on the terrain of popular culture, and in a way which draws on globalized articulations of identity among other “othered” peoples (the

pressure of the hyperreal being perceptible on a global scale), Alexie's work raises therefore the level of social awareness to a degree which explodes the limitations of "some autochthonous interiority" (Newton 415) and culturally restricted identity.

Examining Alexie's confrontations with a brutal colonial past, Newton is careful to distinguish between Alexie's acknowledgement of his own colonized identity and his affiliation with urban popular culture. Thus, Alexie openly declares that he is "a colonized man" and that he is "always going to write like one who is colonized" (qtd. in Newton 414). Nevertheless, the Australian critic does not fail to recognize the Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer's commitment to non-essentialist, cross-cultural explorations of the self. In an irreverent comment on the persistently traditionalist representation of indigenous spirituality and opposition to U.S. imperialism, Alexie declares: "I don't know about you, but growing up all I got exposed to was Mother Earth Father Sky stuff, or direction stuff. That's how I thought Indians wrote. I didn't know I could actually write about my *life*...I could write about fry bread and fried bologna" (qtd. in Newton 414).

Noting Alexie's "playful activism" (415) as indicated by his commitment to a discussion of a colonial history of contact, and not one of indigenous retreat and separation, Newton makes a crucial observation regarding Alexie's negotiations of identity. The critic writes that "the result is a 'postcolonialism' that makes no claim to disentangle itself either from the colonial past or from the postmodern present" (415). The recognition of Alexie's interstitial location of a personal and communal identity in-between past and present helps the reader understand Alexie's transgressive formulation not of a tragically split consciousness, but of a multiple consciousness that operates on

many interconnected levels of interpretation and performance of identity. This realization enables Newton to characterize Alexie's work as an instance of autoethnography in a postmodern context of breaking the boundaries between low and high culture. Mary Louise Pratt's notion of *autoethnography*, as quoted by Newton, proposes that "if ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually) subjugated others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations" (416). Thus, one may speculate that the engagement with the colonizer's own terms becomes a part of the process of Foucauldian resistance through self-representation in an act of playing with (and thus, in Derridean fashion, questioning and estranging) canonical representations.

Hence, in the context of Alexie's renewed interest in popular cultural representations in a bi-cultural environment, his autoethnographic act staging of an encounter between an anthropologist and a Spokane woman in his short story "Dear John Wayne" deals a serious blow to a number of widely accepted discourses. In Alexie's take on academic scholarship (from where most of the criticism to Alexie's previous work comes), the figure of the anthropologist is subjected to intense ridicule, as evinced in the never-ending series of clichés articulated by the interviewer, the anthropologist Spencer Cox. For instance, when encountering resistance to conventional anthropological survey questions on the part of the Spokane interviewee, Spencer Cox remarks: "Okay, wait, I think I understand. We were participating in a tribal dialogue, weren't we? That sort of confrontational banter which solidifies familial and tribal ties, weren't we?" (193). And yet, when the Spokane woman seems puzzled by his explanation, he goes on to provide a formal clarification of his intuition, thus practically translating Indian culture back to the

Indian subject, but only after it has been recycled and reframed by Western knowledge: “It’s all part of the oral tradition. And here I was being insulted by you, and I didn’t recognize it as an integral and quite lovely component of the oral tradition. Of course you had to insult me. It’s your tradition” (193).

Although the contempt for the traditional anthropologist or ethnographer preying on Indian subjects has been a recurrent theme in Native American scholarship at least since Vine Deloria’s sustained attack on Eurocentric social sciences, Alexie’s treatment of this figure includes the dimension of its immersion in popular culture, and not only in the elite discourse of the academe. The anthropologist is here exposed to the native subject’s total reconfiguration of central Hollywood myths as he learns of the love connection between the Indian woman he is interviewing and John Wayne. His interviewee, who recalls being a prop in the western *The Searchers*, reconstructs the figure of John Wayne, the mythical hero of the Hollywood’s re-conquest of the West, as a figure of transgressive gender positionality. John Wayne, the symbol of triumphant Western masculinity, becomes John Wayne, the lover uncertain of his sexual performance and whose real name, Marion (which he discloses to his Indian girlfriend), is already a hint at the subversion of his macho posture. However, more importantly, John Wayne as Marion is observed by the Spokane woman in the process of teaching his sons about the necessity of accepting their feminine side, and is made to express his gender-crossing act through the perspective of contemporary social constructivism in stating that “gender is mostly a social construction” (203).

As much as Alexie’s story is a clear reference to Louise Erdrich’s poem “Dear John Wayne”, concerned with the construction of the ethnic self through identification

with the white gaze in the Western movie, it also serves to set up the characteristic mode of Alexie's inversion of cinematic stereotypes in his own movie, *Smoke Signals*. As will be explained in the next part of this chapter, Alexie's films present an interesting investigation of the postindian identity as defined by Vizenor. The trickster hermeneutics of *Smoke Signals* combines with a rigorous self-examination in *The Business of Fancydancing* and together they trace Alexie's project of changing and challenging the politics of representation of Native American communities, as well as individuals.

#### Rewriting popular culture in film: narrative subversion and alternative identities

The problematic issue of the politically charged regimes of representation of the Native Americans in the media has been a key subject for most native theorists, writers, and artists for quite a number of decades. A great deal has been written on the topic of mainstream stereotyping, and research informed by the main critical orientations at least since the sixties has not failed to acknowledge the fabrication of the so-called "Indian" subject through the dominant discourses of visual representation. Alexie's cinematic texts exemplify a move towards a complex critique of the discourse of "Indianness," which will continue to be discussed here in conjunction with the theoretical contributions of Gerald Vizenor.

It might seem superfluous to recount the major points of criticism against the typical portrayal of American Indians in film, given the interest that poststructuralist theory, in all its forms, has taken since the very beginning in a thorough examination of the politics of representation. Needless to say that the major voices among native

scholars, among which Ward Churchill, Vine Deloria, Elisabeth Bird and so on have continued to draw attention to the strategies through which mainstream cinema has persisted in downplaying native voices and romanticizing the exotic indigenous figure, despite the progress made by allowing Indian roles to be finally played by Indian actors and actresses. Few Native American scholars would argue that most cinematic productions to date have permitted the development of an indigenous discourse articulated by an indigenous voice and carrying a complex range of questions concerning the right to representation.

Even more important steps have been made since the growing interest in postcolonial studies led to a re-evaluation of the status of the subaltern and of its construction from various sources of discursive authority. One of the figures that spearheaded this initial interest in the relationship with the Other was, of course, Franz Fanon, whose analysis of the make-up of the black subject in *Black Skin, White Masks* has in many ways remained valid with regard to the limits within which the native subject is allowed to formulate an identity in a discursive space set up by the center. Thus, many Hollywood productions involving Native Americans can fruitfully be examined through the lens of Fanon's critique of the dialectical relationship of the self with the Other, particularly in terms of strategies of power and identification.

Yet, while the initial interest in the margin-center relationship was a crucial step for postcolonial studies, the time has come to witness how the so-called margin tends to disengage from the center, generating a discourse that does not start from the assumption of its supplementarity. Moreover, this recent stage in the articulation of an identity beyond the master-slave dialectic has also seen the development of representational

discourses that pose the problem of crosscultural identity construction in the process of acknowledging the interstitial condition of what Vizenor calls the crossblood native subject.

Alexie's most popular and highly acclaimed cinematic production is his first movie, *Smoke Signals*, based on his first collection of short stories and in which he participated as a co-producer (with Arapaho producer and director Chris Eyre) and as a screenwriter. Not only did the movie achieve mainstream success as a brilliant comedy with intense satirical moments, but it was also awarded several distinctions in major film festivals, such as the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Filmmaker's Trophy, the Audience Award, as well as a Grand Jury Prize nomination. However, due to the already impressive amount of scholarship devoted to this film, this thesis will offer only a schematic analysis of the movie through the lens of Vizenor's notion of trickster hermeneutics. Therefore, this chapter will provide a more in-depth examination of Alexie's second film, *The Business of Fancydancing*, which has so far received less intense critical attention.

Although it might appear as a stretch to most orthodox critics who maintain a clear division of genres and voices in Native American fiction, one could begin to discuss the film's decoding and disassembling of stereotypical constructions of "Indianness" by comparing it to Vizenor's vignette "Graduation with Ishi," from his book *The Trickster of Liberty*. The trickster hermeneutics as a survivance technique proposed by the Chippewa critic is enacted in his text as the trickster's discursive striptease show or juggling act with stereotypes in front of his audience, mainly made up of anthropologists. *Smoke Signals* rests on a similar strategy of setting up a complex relationship with the viewers

by parading and simultaneously deriding clichéd knowledge. Thus, the general condition for the performance of trickster hermeneutics is fulfilled in *Smoke Signals* by the movie's engagement with the perceived notions held by its bicultural – if not even multicultural – public.

In an analysis of the film's rewriting of the conventions of the buddy movie (usually featuring two white characters) and of its concern with the construction of Indian identity, the critic John Warren Gilroy makes the following observation:

The simultaneous push/pull of a mainstream Euramerican audience's identification with the film's genre, juxtaposed against the alienation of a story and characters that arise from distinctly "Other" cultural backgrounds, creates what American Indian author/critic Louis Owens refers to in *Mixedblood Metaphors* as a "frontier" space. (25)

In his opinion, this hybrid space of cultural and genre expectations is fundamental to the project of undermining the pejorative static view of Native Americans. Moreover, one could add that the performance of trickster hermeneutics can be successful precisely in a frontier space that defies binaries.

*Smoke Signals* is constructed along the lines of a powerful critique of any rhetoric of "Indianness", questioning its validity with regard to representations produced in both white and Native American cultures. By commenting on aspects of contemporary life on a specific Indian reservation – the Coeur d'Alene Indian reservation – the movie's individualizing technique already moves away from the theme (so treasured even by present-day Hollywood films) of the predictably tragic life of the vanishing Indian. As a result, the focus will shift away from the anticipated grand narratives of the past or

present struggles for survival onto constructions of Native Americans in popular culture. Yet, the movie maintains a great deal of complexity by interlocking the humoristic line of its deconstruction of clichés with the more serious line of the tragedy that produced the plot in the first place: the death of Victor Joseph's estranged father.

To summarize briefly, the plot presents two young Indian men, Victor Joseph and Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, setting off on a trip to Arizona to bring back the ashes of Victor's dad. This occasions a series of comic confrontations of ideas between the two men, who are diametrically opposed in their understanding of cultural identity and modern life. Victor and Thomas will have to face the challenge of engaging with the mainstream discourses of the white world, as well as with instances of internalized racism.

In an act of playful deconstruction of conventional self-images, *Smoke Signals* includes a number of references to representations of Native American cultures which are judged differently by Victor or Thomas. Thus, one of the most telling and also comic scenes in the movie has Victor teaching Thomas how to be a real Indian:

First of all, quit grinning like an idiot. Indians ain't supposed to smile like that. Get stoic....You got to look mean or people won't respect you. White people will run all over you if you don't look mean. You got to look like you just got back from killing a buffalo. (qtd. in Gilroy 24)

And furthermore, when Thomas tries to demystify the situation by explaining that their tribe was not a tribe of hunters, Victor retorts: "What? You want to look like you just came back from catching a fish? It ain't Dances with Salmon, you know?...Thomas, you got to look like a warrior" (qtd. in Gilroy 24). Moreover, the episode culminates with

Thomas' great change (he lets his hair loose and adopts "adequate" clothing) only to mock it in the end: as he gets back on the bus, dressed according to Victor's indications, Thomas smiles back at the camera with his old, nerdish smile. Thomas also continues to be Victor's object of ridicule throughout the movie, as his road buddy reproaches him with putting on a simulation of the traditional storyteller figure, with a quasi-mystical understanding of the world.

Internalized stereotypes are not the only target of criticism, as the film also stages encounters with reactions from mainstream white characters. In one of the bitter episodes of *Smoke Signals*, Victor and Thomas lose their seats on the bus to two churlish cowboys, who reply bluntly: "Those are our seats now. And there's not a damn thing you can do about it. So why don't you and Super Indian there find yourself someplace else to have a powwow, okay?" (Gilroy 35). There are other biting remarks, as well, during the course of the movie, concerning the relationship with white culture and the colonial past. Thus, in a sendup to the accidental or planned extermination of Native Americans in the past by contact with germ-carrying colonists, the two Indian men are told, upon their departure from the Coeur d'Alene reservation, to get their vaccinations (as well as their passports) because they are entering a foreign country. Moreover, the story of the alienation of Victor's father from his family is seen as dating back to a fire he accidentally started during a celebration held by the Indians on the reservation precisely on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, in a powerful comment on colonial history once again.

Ultimately, Gilroy considers that the most subversive element of the movie consists of Thomas' radically different epistemology. Accused by Victor of putting on the façade of a traditional storyteller only to tell lies, Thomas is seen as offering an

therapeutic alternative to the Western obsession with truth. Thomas can then be regarded as fighting the postindian war of survivance by mixing definitions of truth and fiction so as to question reality as culturally engraved and to show that their complete separation is a painful myth, while their co-existence in a discursively hybrid space enables one to reach a more healing dimension of self-knowledge. In this light, Gilroy claims that the most important contribution of *Smoke Signals* is to be found in one of the final scenes, when Victor sees his father through Thomas' visions, thus finally making peace with his estranged father:

Victor's crucial moment of identification with Thomas' stories echoes metonymically the film's place in the larger culture. The current focus on issues of self-representation within the scholarly debates surrounding American Indian literatures situates *Smoke Signals* at and as a historically crucial moment. This moment perhaps defines the kernel of an American Indian canon of film, perhaps the next logical step to proceed from the arguably "established" American Indian literary canon. (38)

In an examination of the questions raised in *The Business of Fancydancing*, one needs to start investigating the transformations in the field of imagology initiated by Alexie's film *The Business of Fancydancing*, by discussing the implications of the ways in which he re-addresses some of the classic, yet inescapable double binds and major dilemmas of contemporary American Indians. It is in this light that Sherman Alexie's latest movie, *The Business of Fancydancing*, can be regarded as a truly comprehensive project that proposes an examination of a multiplicity of discourses of identity. It is not simply a response to the simulations constructed by white America; nor is it just an

attempt to recuperate an essentially indigenous voice. Rather, it can be characterized as a staging of competing discourses of identity, where no one discourse is clearly the winner. In fact, one may say that it proposes an interesting self-reflexive engagement with some of the main bones of contention among native scholars and artists, while positioning its main actors largely in a space of ambiguity.

One should return, nevertheless, to the question of Alexie's second cinematic contribution by mentioning that it is the first movie entirely written, directed and performed by Native Americans. With his second movie, which features Alexie as director, but also with a small, yet significant cameo, the case can be made that the Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer has managed to assemble an impressive layering of discourses that destabilize even further any notions of a definitive understanding of a Native American cultural identity.

To sum up, as unjust as it may sound, the film deals with the choices made by a number of Coeur d'Alene/Spokane Indians to live on or outside the reservation. Seymour Polatkin, a successful gay writer who has chosen to live in the city, returns to the reservation to attend the funeral of Mouse, one of his old-time friends. His former best friend, Aristotle Joseph, now fiercely contests Seymour's right to return to the reservation or to write about Indians, while Agnes Roth, a Jewish-Native American schoolteacher and Seymour's former girlfriend, maintains that Polatkin does a good job of fighting a war outside the reservation. Finally, the ending of the movie could not be more ambiguous, with an image of Seymour splitting himself upon leaving the reservation and also dropping the fancydancing costume he has been shown wearing at various times in the narrative.

A juxtaposition of images of hyperreal simulations (usually performed in an urban environment) with images of death (Mouse's funeral on the reservation) is one of the first indications that a debate concerning the right to "authenticity" will be one of the focal points of the movie. However, despite binarist tendencies to settle the debate on one side or the other, an understanding of Seymour Polatkin's character as a transgressive figure may facilitate a reading of the film as loaded with ambiguities and as defying the desire to fictionalize a unitary and coherent cultural identity. To this purpose, an interpretation of Seymour Polatkin as a trickster figure that allows no binaries or strict cultural delimitations, encouraging the spinning production of momentary identifications, may serve to underline the ways in which the movie produces several texts of being versus becoming.

In the field of Native American studies, the key word of "becoming" may not always carry the connotations attributed in Western philosophy. Rather than indicating the possibility of, say, the freedom of consciousness, as in Sartre's existentialism, becoming as becoming-Indian has been criticized by many native scholars as white America's attempt to play at being Indian (as in, for instance, the New Age trend). Yet, Gerald Vizenor reappropriates and rewrites the notion of becoming in the figure of the crossblood, or what he calls the "postindian warrior of survivance". Heavily relying on Derridean and Baudrillardian paradigms of undecidability, on the one hand, and the simulations of being, on the other, Vizenor discusses the crossblood as a dealer in simulations, performing temporary identifications so as to avoid essentialization and stereotyping. Thus, contrary to what the nationalist voices of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn or Craig Womack propose as "true authenticity", Vizenor advocates a productive condition

of in-betweenness which would acknowledge the complex cross-articulation of discourses of identity, without recourse to any strategy of straightjacketing what has for centuries been a dialogic mode of being in the world.

The trickster play of Seymour Polatkin covers various areas of his performance of identity, of which, to a certain extent, the movie seems to be critical. In one of the first shots of the movie, the writer Seymour Polatkin is shown sitting in a bookstore window, reading his poem in a space of painful emptiness, while talking about the great American Indian novel as being populated with simulations of identity. Furthermore, a recurrent image in the movie, a sort of cinematic leitmotif, is the moment of fancydancing, when the traditional costume is worn across cultural spaces and yet is dropped in the final scene, when Seymour kneels and strips himself of what appears to be the parodic signifier of a lost signified.

The distinction between parody and performance, introduced by Judith Butler in her re-assessment of the critical understanding of identity against the heterosexual normative matrix, may be helpful in a discussion of Seymour's transition from being an "accomplished liar" (to make an indirect reference to Alexie's poem "Sister Fire, Brother Smoke" from *The Summer of Black Widows*) as the Indian writer his white audience fantasizes about to his final act of shedding the traditional costume. It may be argued that what is at stake in Seymour's self-reassessment, as well as in Vizenor's notion of trickster hermeneutics and trickster performance, is the choice of performance over parody. Thus, abandoning the stereotyped costume of fancydancing may be seen as renouncing the parodical act of fulfilling the expectations of a white audience. It would seem, then, that Seymour's act of resistance as performance, in Butler's sense of the

word, would start precisely with the dismantling of the fiction of a unidimensionally codified native subject, as seen in his final gesture of cultural striptease. Incidentally, Vizenor too remarks, yet not at all with reference to Alexie's movie, that what his theory of the crossblood survivance proposes is a cultural striptease of simulations and inventions.

Yet, there is at least one more dimension which proves fundamental to Seymour's performance as a cultural trickster. On the one hand, his queer identity, established in the form of his relationship with his white boyfriend, already positions him as a transgressor of normative patterns. Not only is he gay, fact which disrupts the compulsory heterosexuality of the white world (the understanding of gender relations being also more complex in Native American cultures, according to recent studies); he is also an in-between character by virtue of his cross-ethnic relationship.

Thus, one could argue that Seymour is located in a site of mediation, where his act of breaking down boundaries functions as a challenge to any definitive paradigm of separatism. This process of mediation, then, opens the door to a possible understanding of ethnicity along the lines of a theory of a continuum of positions. Butler and other feminist theorists speak of a continuum of gender and sexuality. It is certainly not a novel idea to talk about a continuum of ethnicities, yet Sherman Alexie's movie is significant in that it ties the issue of ethnic identification(s) to the issue of gender and sexuality.

In a telling episode in the movie, a quote presumably from one of Seymour's speeches states that he describes himself as "ambiguously ethnic" and as having had relations with men and women from a number of ethnic groups. It is relevant to note, therefore, that the process of enlarging one's identity ethnicity-wise is presented

alongside the exploration of the gender continuum. Thus, it would appear that the condition of cultural hybridity involved in one's diasporic status finds a correlation in a metaphoric cultural bisexuality. This idea finds support in the scenes in which Seymour, while in bed with his white boyfriend and seemingly lacking inspiration for his poetry, begins to write as soon as the figure of his Indian friend, now his adversary, Aristotle Joseph, replaces that of Seymour's white lover.

It has been argued already that the figure of the trickster is present in many tales as a figure of ambiguous sexual orientation. To Gerald Vizenor's exasperation, some critics have tried to impose a grid of interpretation suggesting that the trickster's so-called confusion serves as a counter-example which the audience, through a process of dis-identification, is expected to reject as incorrect. For Vizenor, however, it is crucial to observe that the role of the trickster is to question and to attempt to transform the social order and the composition of social and natural reality by the blurring of the lines between the social and the natural realms).

Thus, one could see how, in light of Vizenor's conceptualization of freedom from essentialization, the crossblood or the trickster can highlight the fluidity of the lines between various articulations of identity in terms of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so on. Alexie's project of upsetting hierarchies and cultural fixities is also apparent in his fiction, particularly in *The Toughest Indian in the World*. Thus, from the magical realism of his first novel, *Reservation Blues*, Alexie continues with a more socially involved type of literature, in which the issues of class, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality are all challenged simultaneously and a so-called "authentic" identity comes to be approached as a product of countless intersections.

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Postindian Survivance and the  
Trickster Condition of In-  
Betweenness: Reading Sherman  
Alexie and Gerald Vizenor in the  
World of Postmodernism

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