

## URBAN INDIANS IN THE SHORT FICTION OF SHERMAN ALEXIE

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### ABSTRACT

Although we still think of American Indians as riding horses, paddling canoes or hunting buffalo, the fact is that three out of four Native Americans now live in cities. The migration from the backwoods and reservations to the big metropolises began late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but only gained great momentum after World War II. While Sherman Alexie's early fiction focused on the tribulations faced by American Indians on reservations, by the turn of the new millennium he was portraying the experiences of the Native diaspora in urban areas. In the two collections of short stories *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) and *Ten Little Indians* (2003), Alexie captures the more complex and unpredictable relationships that Native Americans build in diverse and fluid urban spaces. These new relationships are often marked by feelings of loss (of tribal bonds), alienation (from other human groups), nostalgia, ambition, and other psycho-social diseases. Helped by the ideas of experts such as James Clifford, Donald Fixico, Susan Lobo, and David Rice, this article explores the significant transformations and identity crises experienced by American Indians in urban contexts.

### RESUMEN

Aunque solemos pensar en los indios americanos montando a caballo y cazando búfalos, lo cierto es que tres de cada cuatro viven ahora en ciudades. Las migraciones desde las zonas agrestes y las reservas hacia las metrópolis comenzaron a finales del siglo XIX, pero sólo se consolidaron a partir de la 2<sup>a</sup> Guerra Mundial. Si bien

las primeras obras de Sherman Alexie se centran en los problemas de los indios en las reservas, con la llegada del nuevo milenio sus relatos pasan a retratar la experiencia de la diáspora nativa en las grandes urbes. En las dos colecciones de relatos *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) and *Ten Little Indians* (2003), Alexie describe las complejas y volátiles relaciones que los indios establecen en los fluidos y variados espacios urbanos. Estas nuevas relaciones se ven marcadas por sentimientos de pérdida (de lazos tribales), alienación (frente a otros grupos humanos), nostalgia, ambición y otras afecciones psico-sociales. Con la ayuda de las ideas de expertos como James Clifford, Donald Fixico, Susan Lobo, and David Rice, este artículo analiza las profundas transformaciones y problemas de identidad experimentados por los indios en estos entornos urbanos.

*To the extent that later generations, forced or drawn into towns or cities, have no realistic intention of actually living continuously in traditional places, then the connection to lost homelands comes closer to a diasporic relation, with its characteristic forms of longing, long-distance nationalism, and displaced performances of "heritage." Diaspora classically presupposes distance from the place of origin and deferred returns.*

James Clifford, "Varieties of Indigenous Experience"

*Sure, he was an enrolled member of the Spokane Indian tribe, but he was also a fully recognized member of the notebook-computer tribe and the security-checkpoint tribe and the rental-car tribe and the hotel-shuttle-bus tribe and the cell-phone-roaming-charge tribe.*

Sherman Alexie, "Flight Patterns"

## INTRODUCTION

The population of American Indians in the United States has increased notoriously during the 20<sup>th</sup> century from an all-time low of around 237,000 in the mid-1890s to slightly over two million individuals who identified themselves as Natives at the turn of the new millennium. This remarkable rise in numbers has been due mainly to historic geographical and cultural shifts in the Native population, as they have tried to keep afloat under the strong

pressure to assimilate into white mainstream America. Clearly, a substantial part of that recovery in the indigenous population is ascribable to the vertiginous growth of an urban American Indian diaspora, particularly after the 1950s. Native historian Donald Fixico has remarked that “Following World War II, a steady stream of Indians migrated to various cities across the nation” (2) and they saw their identity reshaped by the huge forces of an urban style of living and their new interests. The indigenous presence became noticeable for the first time in metropolitan areas around the country due to the government’s Relocation Program of the 1950s and the over 25,000 Indian veterans returning from the war. Statistics show that, while not even 10% of the total Native population lived in cities in 1940, by the early 1970s that figure had risen to 45%, and today it is nearing a historical high of 70% (over 1.5 million people). And yet, despite this increase in numbers, several Native scholars have protested that

The urban Indian community is most frequently invisible to the non-Indian world, both informally in the general public mind that has not discarded the stereotype that everything Indian is rural and in the past, but also formally via institutions such as the U.S. Census Bureau that has yet to adequately count urban Indian people. (Lobo 80)

Actually, in the minds of most non-Indians, indigenous peoples have been habitually imagined as riding wild horses, hunting buffalo on the plains, paddling canoes on rivers, and living in perfect harmony with nature. Both fiction and film have helped in the dissemination of that myth of the Noble Savage. Nevertheless, we know that this romanticized image of the Native population was hardly ever true –at least, after the arrival of first European settlers to the New World. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, most tribes’ way of life was deeply altered by the incursions of white homesteaders into their territories and, with the advent of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of them had been confined to reservations where it was inconceivable to go on living as they had before. Gerald Vizenor (2003) and others have observed that the history of Native Americans from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards has been one of “survivance” (survival + resistance), since they have had to struggle to maintain their traditions under the overpowering exigencies of white America, especially in urban contexts. Even as late as the 1970s and 80s, much of the academic literature still dwelt upon the hardships that

Indian people encountered in urban areas (see Sorkin *The Urban*), as the Relocation Program of the Bureau of Indian Affairs was failing to fulfil most of its promises. However, more recent literature has demonstrated that some Native people did manage to adapt and reinvent themselves in the context of urban living, just as African-Americans from the South and European immigrants had done one century before. In Fixico's opinion, "The early [doleful] image misrepresents the Indian population to an unfortunate degree, since many Indian citizens in cities hold professional positions and are members of the middle class in America" (27). In reality, although urban spaces have often been deemed as pernicious settings for Native Americans, demographers, ethnographers, and writers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have produced research and fiction that challenge such an antipodean view of reservation and city. David Rice remarks, for instance, that "Some young authors in the 1990s, such as Greg Sarris and Sherman Alexie, frustrate the deceptive simplicity of the urban/rural dichotomy by exploring the ways in which Indian protagonists can be both progressively urban and traditionally rural" (21). As the two epigraphs to this article suggest, there seems to be an ever-growing space "for contradiction and excess across a broad spectrum of indigenous experiences today by loosening the common opposition of 'indigenous' and 'diasporic' forms of life" (Clifford 69).

The early works of fiction by Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) dealt mostly with the afflictions experienced by Native Americans –or Indians, as the author prefers to call them– on the reservations of the American Northwest. However, after moving to Seattle in the mid-1990s, Alexie decided to depict a much wider range of characters that include, not just "rez Indians" usually living in squalid conditions, but also bourgeois –and even upstart– Natives and whites who have become an integral part of the human landscape in Northwestern cities. The author has explained in several interviews that this shift in focus seemed only natural if only because "more than two thirds of all American Indians" in the U.S. nowadays live in big cities (Nelson, "Humor" 39). But besides that fact, the move from rural contexts to big metropolises has allowed the author to delve more specifically into the problems faced by Indians who now straddle two different worlds, which may range from feelings of alienation and loss to the need of rethinking one's identity. Anthropologist Deborah Jackson (2002) has argued that the difficult transition from life on the reservations to an urban lifestyle has required a radical refashioning of American Indians' self-identity.

In the collections of short stories *The Toughest Indian in the World* (TIW 2000) and *Ten Little Indians* (TLI 2003), Alexie dwells upon the kinds of changes and challenges coming up in the lives of Native Americans who have either been born in cities of the Northwest or moved there and, consequently, undergone “an interactive, dynamic process of shifting scales and affiliations, uprootings and reroatings, the waxing and waning of identities” (Clifford 69). William Loman, for instance, the main character of “Flight Patterns,” feels compelled to acknowledge these multiple affiliations: “He didn’t want to choose between Ernie Hemingway and the Spokane tribal elders, between Mia Hamm and Crazy Horse, between *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and Chief Dan George. William wanted all of it. Hunger was his crime” (Alexie, TLI 102).

The main body of this article will be divided into three sections in which several of the key ideas already mentioned in the introduction will be expounded on. To begin with, a very succinct historical overview of the Native presence in urban centers will be provided, paying special attention to the kind of obstacles that American Indians have had to overcome at each historical juncture. Secondly, Alexie’s two collections will be used to illustrate some of the important socio-cultural transformations Native Americans have experienced as a result of their “conversion” to city-dwellers. Joan Weibel-Orlando, for example, has pointed out the emergence of various forms of Pan-Indianism –or “supratribal urban Indian communities” (60)– as a way of getting back to the pressures exerted by the dominant society. For others, on the other hand, keeping a connection with their homelands and their ties of tradition and kinship have been essential resources in the survival of a shared identity (cf. Nelson *Place and Vision*). The third section will consider the numerous challenges that Native Americans still confront in urban contexts, some of which are also evident in Alexie’s narratives: from homelessness and alcoholism to cultural disorientation and existential isolation. It will be argued, however, that some of these tribulations may have deserved some more space in his fiction. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn from the exploration of the unique articulations, performances, and translations observed in the experiences of recent urban Indians as portrayed in Alexie’s fiction.

## **DIASPORIC INDIANS: A SHORT HISTORY**

Most likely, the first important wave of Native Americans toward the cities occurred shortly before the brutal massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1890. A few years earlier, the General Allotment Act (1887) had been passed bestowing a tract of land and legal status only to those members of certain tribes who could demonstrate that at least fifty percent of their blood was Indian or were on the tribe rolls. Naturally, these strict restrictions pushed many American Indians outside the scheme and created a great divide between those who had been recognized by the government and those others who had not (Churchill 26). The latter were left without any tribal homeland and rule of law, and unable to access any federal support through the BIA. Some of these dispossessed Indians decided to pursue their future in incipient urban Native communities, which simply required identification with and participation in community projects instead of relying on blood quantum and official rolls. Rice notes that

This first wave of migrant urban Indians laid the groundwork for later burgeoning Native urban communities. Through intertribal friendship houses, pan-Indian religious organizations and informal communities of fellow Native workers, such as the famed Mohawk steelworkers of the east coast, disenfranchised Native Americans began to resituate themselves in American cities without being officially recognized by the government. (8)

While these initial influxes into metropolitan areas were taking place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many reservation tribes – whose population was slowly replenishing– kept representing a practical and moral problem for the government, which wanted to keep some control over tribal issues. In this context, the Indian Reorganization Act was passed in 1934 which, although allowing some degree of self-government to the tribes on reservations, needed to be overseen by the Secretary of the Interior. Vine Deloria Jr. claims that reservation Indians “thought that the organization of a corporate government, which the legislation would have authorized” (19), was de facto a negation of tribal citizenship and caused them to lose the rights of aboriginal nature they still held. Thus, during the interbellum period, most Native Americans found themselves facing the tough decision of either staying on the impoverished reservations where they had grown up or joining a new wave of Indians who began to trickle into the metropolitan areas of the country.

As noted above, both American Indians who had fought in both World Wars and other young Natives saw their future on the reservations as a blind alley offering them little opportunity. In the story “The Sin Eaters,” Alexie shows reservation Indians being transferred by the U.S. government into internment camps for medical experimentation in the 1960s. Unlike most of the other stories in *The Toughest Indian in the World*, the apocalyptic tone of this tale tries to capture somehow the atmosphere on many Indian reservations when the government were unsure about what to do regarding the so-called “Indian Problem”:

My parents’ faces fell to pieces in my mind only moments after those soldiers landed in our front yard. I began to forget pieces of my parents’ faces only moments after I was taken from them. By the time I was loaded into a school bus with twenty other kids from the reservation, I could remember only the dark of my mother’s eyes and the curve of my father’s jaw. By the time our bus crossed the border of the reservation, taking us away from what we had known and into what we could have never predicted, I had forgotten almost every piece of my parents’ faces. I touched my face, remembering that its features owed their shapes to the shapes of my parents’ faces, but I felt nothing familiar. I was strange and foreign. (Alexie, *TTW* 86)

The convergence of powerful social incentives and the assimilation policies that the federal government applied in the 1950s gave quite a push to the urban Indian diaspora. In 1953, for example, House Concurrent Resolution 108 was approved, which unilaterally dissolved over one hundred Native nations. Ward Churchill has described some of the negative impacts that the “termination” of those nations had and how –in conjunction with the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, which provided funding to establish “job training centers” for American Indians in cities on condition that they “sign agreements that they would not return to their respective reservations” (34)– these moves became the basis of Indian urban migration for the future. Of course, like most “forced migrations,” the initial results of these efforts to relocate and integrate Native migrants into metropolitan areas were rather poor. According to Joe Whittle, the beginnings of Native Americans in urban environments were not easy at all, since “Those policies had devastating effects. Relocated tribal members became isolated from their communities. Low paying jobs and higher expenses, combined with the inability to return to reservations which had often been dissolved, left many in

precarious circumstances” (“Most Native”). Most Natives felt estranged from and confounded by lifestyles and cityscapes that had little to do with those experienced by their older relatives and tribal forebears. Novelist and critic Louis Owens has argued about early Native American fiction that “in spite of subtle invocations of sacred geography and patterns out of the oral tradition, both of which hint at continuity and survival,” most authors tended to doom their characters to “never [enjoy] a chance within a civilization bent on turning Indians into Europeans” –thus helping to reinforce the stereotype of the “vanishing Indians” (25).

While it is undeniable that the failures of the Termination and Relocation Programs managed to befuddle Native power and sense of community significantly (cf. Fixico 5), it is that evident that it never attained the kind of assimilation that the government had pursued. In fact, by the mid-1960s it had become evident that, encouraged by the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement, Native Americans began to engage in social and political activism for their own rights both in the cities and on reservations. With almost half of the Indian population already living in big cities and succeeding in preserving elements of their culture, it could be said that a glimmer of hope was discernable in their future. Legal scholar Charles Wilkinson has noted that “Although relocation provided few benefits to the people it directly served, many of their children, having grown up in the cities, helped build the Indian professional middle class, which played a central role in revitalizing Indian life in the latter part of the twentieth century” (85). It is this generation and the next that we greet in Alexie’s two short story collections, in which most of the protagonists have liberal professions and lead easy lives. Mary Lynn, the Native protagonist of “Assimilation,” and her white husband, Jeremiah, are good examples of this lifestyle:

After they left Tan Tan [a pan-Asian restaurant in Seattle], they drove a sensible and indigenous Ford Taurus over the 520 bridge, back toward their house in Kirkland, a five-bedroom rancher only ten blocks away from the Microsoft campus. Mary Lynn [a Coeur D’Alene Indian] walked to work. That made her feel privileged. She estimated there were twenty-two American Indians who had ever felt even a moment of privilege” (TTW 15).

Obviously, the growing numbers of Native Americans living in cities has contributed not only to raising the figure of intermarriages

–over 50% now–, but also to eroding the distinctive identity elements and local traditions of tribal peoples. In *Indian Metropolis*, James LaGrand has contended, though, that regardless of the inevitable influences of the urban context, Natives have managed to preserve significant tribal practices in education, recreation, religion or politics, with some of them taking part in ethnic nationalist revivals (203).

### **SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN URBAN SETTINGS**

As aforesaid, until the publication of *Indian Killer* (1996), Alexie’s fiction had been mostly set on the Indian reservations of the Northwest, where his characters rarely interacted with people belonging to other ethnic groups. The main character of *Indian Killer*, John Smith –a Native adopted as an infant by a white Seattleite family with no knowledge of his tribal origins– is in fact Alexie’s first character who sees himself “trapped in an urban wilderness, dealing with the perils of modern, urban life” (James, “Indians” 171). Nevertheless, with the turn of the century, an increasing number of his characters go through their adventures in an urban, multicultural context and try to reorient their futures by taking advantage of the opportunities that cities provide. This is the case of Richard, the half-Indian, half-African American protagonist of “Lawyer’s League,” who aspires to become the next president of the U.S. one day:

I grew up in Seattle, played basketball at Ballard High School, and attended North Seattle Community College on a partial athletic scholarship. But I soon grew bored of school and small ball [...] I was underqualified for CC basketball and overqualified for CC academics. Don’t get me wrong. I think United States community colleges are the most successful models of socialism in the history of the world, but I was already an intellectual gladiator eager to do battle with the capitalistic lions. (TLI 53)

Notwithstanding Richard’s high political aspirations, he soon realizes that the structures within Indian bureaucracies –“corrupt and self-serving” (54)– are not going to help much and, moreover, there is the threat of racism that he will need to keep in mind in his relationships with women and with colleagues in the legal profession. Close to the end of the story, when Richard plays a ball game with a

group of white lawyers, he has a violent showdown with one of them that reveals how wide the gulf is between himself and this “clan.” Although he is the ever-calculating would-be politician, Richard realizes that for a minority candidate this is a highly arduous task as he is forced to deal civil ways with situations that could easily alienate him either from the white majority or his own minority group (cf. Grassian 178):

Yes, it’s true I’m single. I haven’t found the right woman. I’m searching for Miss Right. What do I want in a woman? Well, intelligence, wit, beauty, faith in God, and goodness. Would I marry another politician? Only if she were a liberal Democrat! I punched Big Bill because he reminded me of my father. No, I punched him because he reminded me of your father. This country would be a better place if every U.S. president had punched racists in the face. That would mean U.S. presidents would have spent a lot of time punching themselves in the face [...] Look at my hand. See how much it pains me? Can you see how much it hurts to use it? Do you understand that I have a limited range of motion? (*TLI* 68)

Alexie has stated in interviews that, after he moved to Seattle in the mid-1990s, his fiction became “less and less Indiancentric” and his attention was seized by urban Indians: “They are really an underrepresented population, and the ironic thing is very, very few of those we call Native American writers actually grew up on reservations, and yet most of their work is about reservations. As someone who grew up on a reservation, I’m tired of it” (Chapel 97). He felt compelled to contemplate the new possibilities offered by the formation of alternative alliances, since the urban milieu generates constant changes and fleeting relations across racial boundaries. In her review of *Ten Little Indians*, Emily Mead notes that Alexie is “an established chronicler of the rituals and ruptures of modern Native American life, but his eye for hard truths transcends any ethnic pigeonholing” (“Review *TLF*”). The author himself has noted that he is more interested now in people sharing similar problems –marital tensions, class insecurities, sexual disorientation, existential perplexity, fear of terrorism, etc.– in lively metropolises, rather than merely in skin color or ancestry. In this sense, Scott Andrews notes that Alexie has become more of a “cosmopolitan writer” in his attempt to counter the Manifest Manners of the Anglo culture and to fight the influence of the “imperialist nostalgia” (51) blocking the reconstruction of a certain heritage. Even if it is true that he has

widened the range of (Native and non-Native) characters that populate his fiction, it is also clear that he is still inclined to focus his attention on those –usually Native characters– who are struggling to find something they have lost. Such seems to be the case of Corliss Joseph in “The Search Machine,” a young Indian university student who, unsure of her identity in her transition into adult life, is involved in a vision quest that aspires to transcend ethnic concerns. This odd quest surprisingly culminates in a secondhand bookstore:

Two Indians crying in the back of a used-book store. Indians are always crying, Corliss thought, but at least we’re two Indians crying in an original venue. What kind of ceremony was that? An original ceremony! Every ceremony has to be created somewhere; her Eden was a used-book store. In the beginning, there was the word, and the word was on sale at the local bookstore. (*TLI* 49)

While Alexie has held onto some of the staple themes covered in his earlier fiction such as problems of identity, unrequited love, the reversal of stereotypes, basketball or absent fathers, the new urban surroundings drive him to challenging reformulations. Laura Szanto affirms that “Urban Indians carry with them connections to their homelands, the ties of tradition and kinship, but they also create new diasporic communities in the cities, complicating what it means to be Indian today” (3). Accordingly, Alexie’s characters see their self-definitions and destinies reshaped by the professional positions they hold, the family and friends they have or the neighborhoods they live in, as well as by their tribal roots. In the last story of *The Toughest Indian in the World* –“One Good Man”–, for example, the narrator is a Native urbanite who, despite his plans to return to the reservation after finishing college, has become “fully conscious of the reservation’s weaknesses, its inherent limitations (geographic, social, economic, and spiritual)” (*TIW* 221). Not only that but, even with the pains of his divorce, he is still happy that his son will move to live in a big metropolis with his white stepfather, where his opportunities will surely multiply:

Sure my vocabulary was bitter (She’d chosen somebody over me!) but I was happy the white man, the stepfather, was able to provide my son with a better life than I would have on my high school English teacher’s salary. And I was happy that my son was living in Seattle, where twenty percent of the city was brown-skinned, instead

of Spokane, where ninety-nine percent of the people were white. I'm not exactly a racist. I like white people as a theory; I'm just not crazy about them in practice. (TIW 217)

Throughout the story, the narrator comes up with different answers –depending on his own circumstances– to the question that one of his lecturers asked him on his first day of class at WSU: “*What is an Indian?*” (TIW 224; italics in original). Ultimately, he realizes that there is no single or exact definition of what being an “Indian” is and that, in fact, family ties and learning to sacrifice for others may well be more important than any other identity issues. According to Jennifer Ladino, the geographical movement from reservation to urban centers observable in Alexie’s short fiction has been accompanied by an “ideological shift” by means of which he has “moved away from dealing strictly with tribal issues” to show “considerable hope for human compassion that crosses racial, ethnic, tribal, geographic and socioeconomic boundaries” (38).

Alexie’s “urban stories” will partly surprise their readers because his Native characters now range from the traditionally lonesome and marginalized city Indians to others who have become successful writers, well-off lawyers, reporters or executives. Although identity problems –sometimes sexual, others racial, and even related to faith– are still central to his work, for his characters still run against walls of prejudice and stereotypes, it is also evident that the writer needs to stretch his imagination to figure out how the more complex urban setting is also shaping their existence (cf. Lobo 81). The City of Seattle with its libraries, hospitals, universities, bars, parks, pawnshops, etc. and the inevitable presence of water everywhere becomes a suitable context for Alexie’s sharp and witty scrutiny of the problems that urbanites –and, especially, Native American citizens– face when they have to pin down their various family, class, sexual, tribal, etc. affiliations. In Clifford’s words, “Across the current range of indigenous experiences, identifications are seldom exclusively local or inward looking but rather work at multiple scales of interaction” (71). Edgar (Eagle Runner) Joseph, a lawyer married to a white woman, discovers for example in the story “Class” that he cannot simply assume that other co-ethnics are going to feel sympathetic about the troubles he is experiencing in his marital life. Sissy, the bartender at an Indian bar, clarifies to him that he lives in a world completely different from that of her other Native patrons: “We have to worry about having enough to eat. What

do you have to worry about? That you're lonely? That you have a mortgage? That your wife doesn't love you? Fuck you, fuck you. *I have to worry about having enough to eat*" (TIW 56; italics in original). In many of these stories, the reader runs into city-dwellers who, like Edgar Joseph, are compelled to rethink their positions as human beings given the permeability and mobility of the boundaries separating them from others. Several reviewers have observed that the fluidity of city spaces and the diversity of its dwellers force urban Indians to make up new ceremonies to deal with or to change their circumstances (see Mead, "Review *TLF*"; Peluso, "Review *TIW*").

### **THE TRIBULATIONS OF URBAN INDIAN LIFE**

In his review of *The Toughest Indian in the World* in *The Washington Post*, novelist Jonathan Penner wrote about the main characters in the collection that "Being Indian in America is not, for them, an easy condition. Race shapes their entire lives, including the search for love" ("Review *TIW*"). It is a fact that most of the protagonists in the two collections of stories see their relations with friends, co-workers, relatives, lovers, and the mainstream society deeply affected by their tribal origins; yet, it would be difficult to claim that they are the victims of racism or direct discrimination. As noted above, most of these Native Americans have managed to reach a middle-class status and to establish a comfort zone for themselves that allows them to take their decisions with a remarkable degree of freedom. It is undeniable that characters such as Richard in "Lawyer's League" or Edgar in "Class" may seem rather flawed as they have serious difficulties in handling their ethnic identity appropriately when other goals interfere. The latter, for instance, would rather highlight the little drop of Mexica/Aztec blood in his ancestry instead of admitting his roots in the little-known Spokane Indian Reservation from which he fought his way out to go to college:

As for me, I'd told any number of white women that I was part Aztec and I'd told a few that I was completely Aztec. That gave me some mystery, some ethnic weight, a history of glorious color and mass executions. Strangely enough, there were aphrodisiacal benefits to claiming to be descended from ritual cannibals. In any event, pretending to be an Aztec warrior was a lot more impressive than revealing I was just a bright kid [...] (40).

It could be said that these characters enhance or minimize their tribal origins depending on the assumptions and stereotypes – or even prejudice– that they believe other urbanites may have of them. Strangely, they are frequently the first ones to disclose preconceptions about other socio-cultural groups –especially white Americans– which are seen to prevent them from developing normal relationships with them. Hence, the protagonist of the title story in *The Toughest Indian in the World* has learnt from his father to distrust all white people: “They’ll kill you if they get the chance,’ my father said. ‘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 white people dangerous’” (*TIW* 21). Logically, the protagonist-narrator, who has been away from his reservation for over a decade now and works for a newspaper in the city, feels utterly alienated from his white co-workers and has failed repeatedly in his romantic liaisons with white women. In fact, in the central event of the story, he ends up having unexpected homosexual intercourse with a Native boxer who he has picked up on the road and which, the reader surmises, allows him to reconnect with his roots and refurbish his damaged masculinity (cf. Grassian 155). Yet, as is the case of many other Native characters in Alexie’s short fiction, who also make unruly gestures in an attempt to recover that part of their identity that seems to be vanishing in the urban context, the final outcomes are not as positive as expected –at least from the narrator’s point of view:

Instead, I woke up early the next morning, before sunrise, and went out into the world. I walked past my car. I stepped onto the pavement, still warm from the previous day’s sun. I started walking. In bare feet, I traveled upriver toward the place I was born and will someday die. At that moment, if you had broken open my heart you could have looked inside and seen the thin skeletons of a thousand salmon. (*TIW* 34)

As Berglund has noted, the fact that Alexie “has turned his attention to the experiences of urban Indian people in a multiethnic environment in situations where identity and cultural loyalties are questioned because of class standing or romantic and sexual relationships” (xii) may have led the author away from some of the real problems faced by Native Americans in cities. According to Janeen Comenote, executive director of the NUIFC (National Urban

Indian Family Coalition), “poverty remains one of the most challenging aspects to contemporary urban Indian life. While I do recognize that a sizable chunk of our populations are solidly middle class, every Native person I know has either experienced poverty or has a family member who is [sic]” (qtd. in Whittle, “Most Native”). It is surprising—and somehow disappointing—that an author like Alexie, who has often boasted not to write just to entertain his readers but, rather, to challenge them and even offend them by showing the harsh realities of Indian lives (Cline 197), should devote so few pages to the still huge number of poor, homeless, alcoholic or gravely ill Natives. In a report published by the NUIFC in 2008, the data referring to the health problems of urban Indians, as well as some of the more general socio-economic indicators were simply devastating. Concerning the latter, urban Natives reached a poverty rate of over 20%, almost double that of the general urban population and the same thing happens with unemployment rates (1.7 times higher). “Urban Indians are three times more likely to be homeless than non-Indians” (NUIFC 11). The rates of illnesses like diabetes, cirrhosis, and liver disease are always higher, ranging from 50% to 150%, in most cases linked to high alcohol consumption. Timothy Williams noted in *The New York Times* that “Recent budget figures show that federal money has not followed the migration [to the cities], with only 1 percent of spending by the Indian Health Service going to urban programs. Cities, with their own budget problems, are also failing to meet their needs” (“Quietly”). While it is true that we hear distant echoes of these serious social dysfunctions in some of Alexie’s best stories (see “Indian Country,” “One Good Man” or “What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church”), they are never directly tackled or battled with as one would expect in an audacious writer like Alexie. In “Indian Country,” for one, we learn that the main character, Low Man Smith, had serious problems with alcohol before he became a popular mystery writer. The ghost of his social disease comes up again when he is stood up at Missoula airport by a girlfriend early in the story:

Low Man needed a drink. He’d been sober for ten years, but he still needed a drink. Not of alcohol, no, but of something. He never worried about falling off the wagon, not anymore. He had spent many nights in hotel rooms where the mini-bars were filled with booze, but had given in only to the temptations of the three-dollar candy bars. (TIW 124)

The reader would have liked to know how the protagonist a) fell into alcohol addiction in the cozy urban context in which he grew up and b) managed to pull out of it in time to reorient his life. Still, Alexie opts for turning the story into another exaltation of (female) homosexuality as a possible alternative to the male-chauvinist heterosexuality that guides the behavior of the main male Native characters in the story: “Sara looked at Low and wondered yet again why Indian men insisted on being warriors. *Put down your bows and arrows*, she wanted to scream at Low, at her father, at every hypermasculine Injun in the world. *Put down your fucking guns and pick up your kids*” (TIW 144; italics in original). Naturally, it could be said that, indirectly, the author is pointing here at the violent and destructive attitude that Indian men –and more specifically fathers– show in their relationships; but it is not as if the burning issue of child neglect and abuse in urban Native communities were being properly addressed here either.

Anyhow, it must be acknowledged that Alexie sometimes delves into some of the dire social problems referred to above. In “What You Pawn I Will Redeem” (2003), for example, the protagonist-narrator, Jackson Jackson, is not one of those urban professionals who have, at least seemingly, adapted to the city context; on the contrary, we hear about the struggle of a homeless Spokane Indian all too fond of the bottle. Jackson introduces himself as one of the many anonymous Indians rambling on the streets of Seattle without a home of their own:

Probably none of this interests you. I probably don't interest you much. Homeless Indians are everywhere in Seattle. We're common and boring, and you walk right on by us, with maybe a look of anger or disgust or even sadness at the terrible fate of the noble savage. But we have dreams and families. I'm friends with a homeless Plains Indian man whose son is the editor of a big-time newspaper back east. That's his story, but we Indians are great storytellers and liars and mythmakers, so maybe that Plains Indian hobo is a plain old everyday Indian. (TLI 170)

After seeing his grandmother's fancydancing regalia in the window of a small pawnshop, we follow the narrator's adventures around the city as he tries to obtain enough money to buy his grandmother's costume from the pawnbroker: “I know it's crazy, but

I wondered if I could bring my grandmother back to life if I bought back her regalia” (*TLI* 176). As expected, good old Jackson never manages to gather the significant amount of money required, as he spends the few dollars he is able to sponge on food and drinks for other poor and alcoholic Indians like himself. Nevertheless, the reader does get an idea of what the obscure and aimless existences of this type of urban Indians are like. In an unforeseen twist at the end of the story, Jackson’s tough mission is accomplished as the white pawnbroker altruistically decides to give him the regalia for free. The narrator’s conclusion (“Do you know how many good men live in the world? Too many to count!” [187]) shows quite clearly how Alexie’s views on White-Indian relations have mellowed notoriously in these two collections.

### **CLOSING REMARKS**

Specialists such as Carol Miller and Susan Lobo have defended that, all things considered, urban environments may prove more congenial to Native worldviews than they have usually been thought to be, deeply rooted as they are “in the matrices of communality, tradition, and homeland” (Miller 35). Unlike reservations, Lobo argues, urban Indian communities exist “within a fluidly defined region with niches of resources and boundaries that respond to [more specific] needs and activities” in those ever shifting and intricate spaces (76). As this scholar sees it, notwithstanding the injurious effects of the termination and relocation policies fostered by the federal government during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, urban Indians have succeeded in maintaining some of their shared histories, tribal values, and traditions and have also managed to adapt and come together into –Pan-Indian– community organizations that guaranty the “survivance” of their culture. Of course, this does not imply that urban Indians are not facing huge socio-economic trials that need to be worked out rather urgently. As Clifford has remarked,

Negative experiences of exile, poverty, alienation from family, despair, loss of language and tradition, endlessly deferred returns, nostalgia and yearning are certainly part of the varied experiences of native peoples living in settings removed from their homelands. The physical separation and different knowledge bases of ‘diaspora’ and ‘local’ peoples cannot always be bridged by kin ties, exchanges, and political alliances. (84)

As a matter of fact, besides the conspicuous “critical lack of research on the issues facing Native families residing in urban areas” (NUIFC 4), the other fundamental issue to be taken on is “to make sure that the needs of reservation-based and urban Native people are not a cause of division but, instead, for united action to achieve a better future for all Native people” (4). Obviously, the two collections of short stories by Sherman Alexie discussed in this article should help to find a suitable way to make a transition from tribal issues into urban Indian concerns and to show how specific segments of the Native population—women, young people, the elderly, etc.—are coming across different obstacles in the new city milieu. These are topics that other young Native writers such as Tommy Orange (*There There*, 2018) and Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr. (*Sacred Smokes*, 2018) have also delved into in their fiction. Even if Alexie is still intent on unveiling in these stories the grievances and injurious prejudices that Indians have historically suffered in various social spheres, he also represents the more hospitable and dynamic city spaces as convenient places where even the most under-privileged Natives can form new communities and develop new ceremonies that may bring hope to their future:

I took my grandmother’s regalia and walked outside. I knew that solitary yellow bead was part of me. I knew I was that yellow bead in part. Outside, I wrapped myself in my grandmother’s regalia and breathed her in. I stepped off the sidewalk and into the intersection. Pedestrians stopped. Cars stopped. The city stopped. They all watched me dance with my grandmother. I was my grandmother dancing. (Alexie, *TLI* 194)

My analysis of some of the stories in *The Toughest Indian in the World* and *Ten Little Indians* has shown that, as Fixico rightly noted, “Each native person who decided to move to the city grappled with the identity problem while facing a new frontier, an alien culture, and unforeseen changes” (3). Alexie has stated in interviews that after moving to the city in the 1990s and living there through events such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, he grew “increasingly suspicious of the word ‘tradition’” and his views on Indian affairs became less “fundamental” (Campbell, “Sherman”). Ladino concludes in her article on *Ten Little Indians* that “Alexie’s stories suggest that being Indian in Seattle involves walking a line between tradition and

adaptation, a process of transformation [...] shaped by complex social spaces and their diverse inhabitants” (52). In this same line, most reviewers of the two collections contended that, rather than viewing his Native characters as just members of an oppressed or alienated minority, he portrays them as affectionate and deeply-troubled men and women seeking to make connections in frequently complex and volatile contexts. Robert Peluso, for example, remarked that “They are stories that let their characters live and breathe; they are stories that refuse easy answers; they are stories in which Alexie shows sympathy and compassion for his characters as people rather than as mere vehicles for his thematic concerns” (“Review *TIW*”). In this regard, it seems evident that the author’s consideration of how their diasporic condition in big urban areas has deeply influenced the contemporary Indian experience supposed a turning point in his career as a writer. It could be argued that he has become increasingly aware of the diversity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity of dimensions that pervade that experience in urban environments. As Katherine Gottlieb (Aleut) has put it:

We are many. We are diverse. We represent our many cultures. We are a resource. We influence our people. We have roots and heritage. We live in two worlds. We feel unity when we gather. We have dual citizenships. We are the caretakers for many of our aging elder and children. We are the link to those who have left home. We are you. (qtd. in NUIFC 5).

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