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The Exiled Native. Questions of Cultural Removal and Translocal American Indian Identity in Novels by Sherman Alexie and James Welch

Presentation at the conference "Postcolonial Translocations" (GNEL 20), Münster, May 21–24, 2009

Presentation Outline

1. Official Indians: Identity per Blood Quantum
2. Historical Indians: Charging Elk in Europe
3. Experienced Indians: Reservation U.S.A.

Conclusions

Quotations

2. Historical Indians

James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000):

He liked this wide street with the rows of knobby trees on the street-side edge of the broad walkway. There were many places where he could look in windows at clothes and sweets and knives and everything a man might want. There were cafés, but he hadn't the courage yet to enter one for a small cup of the bitter pejuta sapa. But he always stopped at a particular kiosk with a bright green-and-white-striped awning that sold the flimsy papers with wasichu writing on them. Often they had pictures on them, drawings, mostly of men he thought all looked alike, with their beards and stiff collars. (165)

[after being shouted at in a restaurant,] Charging Elk sat for a moment, looking down at his half-eaten meal, confused. He understood why the wasicun miners in Paha Sapa hated him, but why would these sailors hate him in Marseille? There were many people of many colors here. Why would they choose him? He had spent the past three winters making himself invisible, yet they knew him right away. [...] Suddenly, he saw the crowds in the stands at the Wild West show with their big eyes and shouting voices as he rode hard after the buffaloes. (200)

He had never heard of the buffalo returning. All he ever heard about America – well, he heard almost nothing. Because he couldn't read, he didn't know what the journals said about his homeland. Sometimes he unloaded ships from America. Sometimes he heard his fellow workers curse America for being greedy and arrogant. President Roosevelt had attacked the small country of Cuba for no reason. Now they were in the Philippines. The rabblers among the dockworkers often talked about refusing to unload American goods. Charging Elk didn't understand their anger and didn't know enough about American to come to its defense – even if he wanted to. (420)

3. Experienced Indians

James Welch, *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979):

Amos After Buffalo will grow up, thought Loney, and he will discover that Thanksgiving is not meant for him. It will take him longer because he lives in Hays and Hays is on the edge of the world, but he will discover it someday and it will hurt him, a small wound when you think about it, but along with the hundred other small cuts and bruises, it will make a difference, and he will grow hard and bitter and he might do something bad, and people will say, "Didn't we tell you, he's like all the rest," and they will think Indians do not know the meaning of the word "Thanksgiving." (166)

James Welch in an Interview:

Only an Indian knows who he is [...] an individual who just happens to be an Indian – and if he has grown up on a reservation he will naturally write about what he knows. And hopefully he will have the toughness and fairness to present his material in a way that is not manufactured by conventional stance.... What I mean is – whites have to adopt a stance; Indians already have one. (quoted in Lincoln, "Back-Tracking James Welch," 24)

Sherman Alexie, *Flight* (2007):

Since I'm not a legal Indian, the government can put me wherever they want. So they put me with anybody who will take me. Mostly they're white people. I suppose that makes sense. I am half white. And it's not like any of this makes any difference. I've had two Indian foster fathers, and they were bigger jerks than any of my eighteen white foster fathers. (9)

I am standing in the middle of a real Indian camp, complete with thousands of real Indian tipis and tens of thousands of real old-time Indians. [...] Yep, a bunch of real old-time Indians. I'm not exactly sure what year it is. It's tough to tell the difference between seventeenth- and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Indians. These are how Indians used to be, how Indians are supposed to be. [...] These old-time Indians have dark skin. There aren't any half-breed pale-beige green-eyed Indians here. Nope, unlike me, these Indians are the real deal. I don't hear any of them speaking English. [...] Even the dogs seem to be barking in Indian. (60)

Crazy Horse is here. And that older Indian dude standing over there by the horses? He sure looks like Sitting Bull does in the history-book pictorials. I realize this skinny river is the Little Bighorn, and I have been transported back to June 1876. [...] Custer is marching towards his slaughter. Custer is a crazy egomaniac who thinks he is going to be President of the United States. Custer is one of the top two or three dumb asses in American history. [...] Thousands of hot and angry Indian dudes ride out to meet Custer and his doomed soldiers. (68f)

Sherman Alexie, "The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me" (2000):

Thesis: I have never met a Native American. Thesis repeated: I have met thousands of Indians. [...] "Why do you insist on calling yourselves Indian?" asks a white woman in a nice hat. "It's so demeaning." "Listen," I say. "The word belongs to us now. We are Indians. That has nothing to do with Indians from India. We are not American Indians. We are Indians, pronounced In-din. It belongs to us. We own it and we're not going to give it back." So much has been taken from us that we hold onto the smallest things left with all the strength we have. (*One Stick Song*, 13)

Sherman Alexie, "Dear John Wayne" (2000):

A: [...] I have lived in your world, your white world. In order to survive, to thrive, I have to be white for fifty-seven minutes of every hour.

Q: How about the other three minutes?

A: That, sir, is when I get to be Indian, and you have no idea, no concept, no possible way of knowing what happens in those three minutes.

Q: Then tell me. That's what I'm here for.

A: Oh, no, no, no. Those three minutes belong to us. They are very secret. You've colonized Indian land but I am not about to let you colonize my heart and mind.

(*The Toughest Indian in the World*, 194f)

[T]he subaltern, however disempowered in the contexts of official institutions, public media, and government, certainly can and does speak, but not necessarily to you. (Turner 93)

Conclusions

[T]ribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. We are the canon. [...] For much of this time period [i.e. American history], we have had literatures. Without Native American literature, there is no American Canon. (Craig Womack, *Red on Red*, 6f)

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