

**Warriors on the Road: Journey Narratives and Native American
Masculinity in Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World***

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Alkuperäisamerikkalaisen kirjallisuuden tutkimus on muutaman viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana kokenut merkittävän muutoksen, kun tekstejä on alettu tutkia jälkikolonialismin näkökulmasta. Tämän uuden tutkimusnäkökulman keskiössä on esimerkiksi rajaseudun, kodin ja alkuperäisamerikkalaisen identiteetin käsitteiden problematisointi. Tässä tutkielmassa pyrin osallistumaan tähän keskusteluun tutkimalla alkuperäisamerikkalaisen maskuliinisuuden rakentumista Sherman Alexien novellikokoelmassa *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000). Analysoimani novellit ovat kaikki matkakertomuksia, joissa liikkuvuus ja rajojen ylittäminen mahdollistavat perinteisen alkuperäisamerikkalaisen identiteetin ja maskuliinisuuden käsitteiden kyseenalaistamisen ja uudelleenmuotoilun.

Matkakertomukset ovat keskeinen osa sekä alkuperäisamerikkalaista kirjallisuutta että amerikkalaisen kirjallisuuden valtavirtaa. Alkuperäisamerikkalaista kirjallisuutta on perinteisesti luettu juurikin liikkeen ja matkaamisen näkökulmasta ja liike on nähty paluumatkana kotiin, kun taas amerikkalaisen kirjallisuuden valtavirrassa matkakertomukset ovat perinteisesti suuntautuneet pois päin kodista. Amerikkalaisessa kirjallisuudessa matkakertomusten kautta on perinteisesti kyseenalaistettu ja uudelleenmuotoiltu sukupuolirooleja, ja Alexien novellit ovatkin osa tätä jatkumoa. Tutkielmassa analysoiduissa novelleissa esiintyy sekä pako- että paluumatkoja, jotka molemmat johtavat maskuliinisuuden ja alkuperäisamerikkalaisuuden uudelleenmäärittelyyn. Matkaaminen itsessään vaikuttaakin olevan matkan suuntaa tärkeämpi tekijä.

Tutkimissani novelleissa matkaavat henkilöihahmot näkevät identiteettinsä alkuperäisamerikkalaisina miehinä olevan tiiviissä yhteydessä mielikuvaan soturista ja heidän matkansa voidaankin lukea vertauskuvallisina taisteluina, joissa he raivaavat itselleen tilaa nykypäivän Yhdysvalloissa. Novellien ”sotureiden” tavoitteena on aktiivinen läsnäolo nykyhetkessä ja sen kautta he vastustavat stereotyyppisiä esityksiä alkuperäisamerikkalaisesta miehestä. Analysoin tutkielmassa novellien päähenkilöiden liikkeen ja matkaamisen kautta rakentamaa alkuperäisamerikkalaista maskuliinisuutta, joka haastaa konventionaalisen käsityksen maskuliinisuudesta esimerkiksi kyseenalaistamalla totutun binaarisen käsityksen sukupuolesta ja seksuaalisuudesta.

Avainsanat: Sherman Alexie, maskuliinisuus, matkakertomus, alkuperäisamerikkalainen identiteetti

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1. Introduction

In my thesis I will explore the ways in which the journey narrative is used to comment on and re-negotiate Native American masculinity in Sherman Alexie's (Spokane/Coer d'Alene) short story collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000, hereinafter referred to as *Toughest Indian*). I will analyze Alexie's journey narratives in connection to the wider contexts of American and Native American literature and discuss the way his characters (re)claim and redefine warrior masculinity through mobility. The collection consists of nine stories, and I will primarily analyze six of them as they have clear journey narratives. The other stories will be briefly touched upon in terms of Native American identity and masculinity when necessary.

With the thesis I wish to take part in the discussion that began in the late 1980s when a significant shift took place in American Studies. Historians began to apply postcolonial terms to the westward expansion of the U.S, which was now viewed not in terms of the frontier but in terms of conflict and conquest. This paradigmatic shift meant rereading national myths, including the myth of 'the Indian'. In the post-9/11 world the interest in American imperialism and expansion has further increased, and numerous re-readings of American history are produced to counter the ideology of exceptionalism.

The study of Native American literature has similarly taken a postcolonial turn. Whereas the dominant approach to Native American literature before approximately 1990 was to place strong emphasis on aesthetics, the last few decades have seen a shift to a powerfully political, (post)colonial, reading of Native American literature for which the history of U.S imperialism provides an ongoing context (Cheyfitz, ix). This new political approach is by no means monolithic, as there are some – Craig Womack, for example – who call for the recognition of tribally specific literary traditions, and critics, such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who wish to distance themselves from

the Western theoretical academic postcolonialism in favor of indigenous intellectual traditions (Womack, 1999 and Cook-Lynn, 1996; 2012). There are also critics, such as Arnold Krupat, Louis Owens, and perhaps most prominently Gerald Vizenor, who align themselves with cosmopolitan postcolonialism. Vizenor, for example, does not disregard the theoretical fields that grew out of Western/European philosophy; instead, his writing is strongly connected to poststructuralism and he utilizes the framework of poststructuralist (post)colonialism to deconstruct the image of ‘the Indian’.

The underlying goal of the thesis is to examine what kind of Native American masculinity is presented through the journey narratives of *Toughest Indian*. I will treat the journey narrative as a means to comment on self-discovery and self-definition, and keeping in mind the fact that the journey narrative in American literature is a strongly gendered literary trope, I will connect the character’s journeys to their sense of Native American masculinity. My research will draw from the fields of gender studies, more specifically the study of masculinity, and Native American studies. Research on journey narratives will add to my theoretical background by providing a literary context for Alexie’s use of the pattern.

Masculinity studies have emerged during the last few decades after the paradigm-shift that took place in the field of feminist studies. Traister identifies Elaine Showalter’s “Introduction: the Rise of Gender” (1989) as the defining formulation of what was to become ‘gender studies’ (274). Showalter insists that in order to study the effects of gender we should, instead of reading only texts by women about women, also read text by and about men, as gender affects *all* texts. In his brief history of the study of masculinity, Traister notes that masculinity studies have a distinct Americanist flavor and that masculinity is studied to a great extent in a specifically American context (275-276). Masculinity studies can be seen as a two-pronged movement in the American context; firstly, it is rooted in “a new historiography of American masculinity that locates instability

at the base of all masculine identities constructed within American cultural matrices”, and secondly, it draws heavily from Judith Butler’s theory of performative and contingent gender (Traister, 276).

Native American masculinity, gender, and sexuality are recurring themes in Sherman Alexie's writing, as are the issues relating to the boundary between 'Indian country' - the reservations - and the rest of American society. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, a collection of short-stories published in 1993, addressed the problems related to life on the reservation: stagnation, addiction, violence, and self-destructive tendencies. The collection paints a picture of the reservation as a prison with an atmosphere that is confining both intellectually and culturally (Grassian 2005, 61). The collection's titular story, "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven", introduces a reservation Indian crossing the border and moving to the city where his every contact with white people is akin to a battle - a pattern that will be revisited in later stories. If *Toughest Indian* is a logical and thematic continuation of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the 2003 collection *Ten Little Indians* is the next instalment in the continuum. *Ten Little Indians* resumes the exploration of the lives of Native Americans in urban environments that was begun in *Toughest Indian*, but the emphasis has moved on from racial conflict and ethnic identity to problems brought on by patriarchal society and personal psychological problems. Because Alexie’s short-story collections forms a clear thematic continuum, the first collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, will occasionally provide a context for my analysis of *Toughest Indian*.

I will begin by introducing the theoretical background in chapter 2, discussing both Native American masculinity and the use of journey narratives in literature, and then go on to apply that framework to the analysis of *Toughest Indian* in the following chapters. The third chapter examines the journeys that venture outside the reservations – the confined space that Alexie’s characters inhabit in much of his earlier writing. In “South by Southwest”, Salmon Boy embarks upon ‘a nonviolent killing spree’ with a white wannabe-robber, and the protagonist of “Saint Junior” finds a place in the American society as a basketball player. These journeys are essentially stories of Native

American men seeking their place in a society controlled by white men. The protagonists struggle with powerlessness, inferiority, and feminization, but are simultaneously depicted as warriors venturing into 'foreign territory'. The characters' journeys beyond the confinements of the reservations provide an opportunity to examine Alexie's depiction of ethnic masculinity among white Americans. The journey itself – mobility, in other words – gives the characters agency (or active presence, in Vizenor's terms) and enables the characters to assume a sense of warrior masculinity.

In chapter 4, I will discuss the journeys that head back towards the characters' Native roots, either literally back to the reservations, or in a more abstract manner, back to a Native culture and community. These journeys back include a lawyer who, after a family tragedy, takes a trip to an Indian bar and a journalist who abandons his car and the job he was set out to do after an encounter with Native American hitch-hiker, who fights other Native Americans for a living. The characters who in Alexie's stories journey back are dissatisfied with their often prosperous middle-class lives among white society and seek to reclaim the warrior masculinity of their ancestors. These stories present their readers with a view of ideal masculinity that is quite different from the masculine ideal of mainstream white culture. However, the journey back does not give the characters a simple solution to their existential crisis, as in many stories the community they wish to re-enter no longer recognizes them as members, or the character finds out that the past cannot be retrieved; in both cases they have to find a new way to be present in the world. This new presence echoes Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance.

2. Masculinity and Journey Narratives in Native American Literature

In this thesis, Native American masculinity is examined from the viewpoint of the Native American sex/gender variability¹ that is largely based on the work of anthropologists such as Will Roscoe and Lester B. Brown, and then in terms of hegemonic masculinity and the hierarchy of masculinities as they are formulated by R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt. Warrior masculinity is then identified as an expression of masculinity that enjoys a high status in Native American hierarchy of masculinities and is for this reason a powerful metaphor that is used frequently in Native American literature and political rhetoric. Gerald Vizenor's concept of warriors of survivance utilizes the warrior metaphor, but I will argue that it distances the image of the warrior from its roots in actual warfare by applying it to all who resist and deconstruct the invented image of the 'Indian'. This extension of the warrior metaphor also opens up new possibilities to express ideal Native American masculinity, because it remains a strongly gendered metaphor that, in *Toughest Indian*, is employed mainly by male characters, even though Vizenor uses the metaphor to refer to women as well. The subchapter on Native American masculinity is concluded by a brief introduction of the definitions of Native American identity. The male characters in *Toughest Indian* frequently juxtapose their own masculinity with white masculinity and with that of other Native American men – whom they often consider more 'authentically' Native American.

Janis P. Stout's analysis of the patterns of journey narratives in American literature functions as the basis for my discussion in the latter part of the chapter. While her work from 1983 does not cover the more recent journey narratives in American literature, her analysis does provide a solid view into American literature during the time of the so-called Native American Renaissance, which began in the early 1960s and produced many of the most influential Native American texts which were the primary materials for the classic studies on Native American journey narratives. The

¹ sex is understood as biological, whereas gender is socially and culturally determined; here 'variability' refers to the fluidity of traditional Native American concepts of sex and gender and implies agency in the movement along that spectrum (Evans, 207)

narrative patterns of Native American literature are then discussed by comparing critics such as Matthew Herman and Helen May Dennis, who write about the contemporary trend of homing/lighting-out narratives, to William Bevis's classic definition of Native American literature as 'homing-in literature'. The connection between journey narratives and renegotiation of masculinity is then established by offering a brief history of the gendered nature of American journey narratives.

2.1. Native American Masculinity and Warriors of Survivance

This section of the thesis discusses the rather problematic concept of Native American masculinity. Firstly, the traditional sex/gender system in Native American culture is introduced in connection to *Toughest Indian*, and secondly I go on to discuss the importance of the image of the warrior to Native American masculinity, Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance, and Native American identity.

In his article "Indigenous Liaisons: Sex/Gender Variability, Indianness, and Intimacy in Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*" Stephen F. Evans discusses the ways in which Alexie's characters "subvert, adopt, or manipulate stereotypes of Indians that have been historically constructed and perpetuated by whites" (187). In particular, he draws attention to the differences between the forms of sexuality and gender identification in white dominant culture and those that were once commonplace among many Native American cultures, and identifies the struggle between these two as one of these most prominent themes in Alexie's writing. Evans notes that most stories in the collection are concerned with the interface of race, sex, and gender, and the negotiation between them in a bicultural context. (186-188)

American literature is replete with romanticized and eroticized stereotypes of Native American sexualities,² which devolved, as Evans argues, from European accounts of the conquest, colonization, and Christianization of America, and their efforts to understand what they encountered in terms that were familiar to them (188). The Native American understanding of sex and gender was, however, quite radically different from the European understanding. Anthropological studies made in recent decades have made the dimension of what anthropologist Will Roscoe calls *multiple gender paradigm* better understood. According to Evans, scholars such as Roscoe (2000) and Lester B. Brown (1997) suggest that in addition to the two genders (men and women) of white dominant culture the Native peoples of North America also had third and fourth genders – or even fifth and sixth genders – including not-men, not-women, lesbians and gays.³ Expanding the gender system to include more than the binary opposites of man and woman obviously problematizes the ‘conventional’ understanding of masculinity.

It is, however, important to note that using modern terminology of Western/European origin to discuss the historical Native American sex/gender system is problematic. As Evans states, it is difficult to find the common ground between terminology “embedded in the dominant culture’s binary concept of sex and gender” and the traditional Native American terminology that is based on a more fluid understanding of sex and gender (189). In terms of this thesis, it is precisely this fluidity and lack of binary oppositions in sex/gender identification that is important, and it would be rather beside the point to analyze the use of terminology in a historical context. As he writes:

while some characters and relationships in *Toughest Indian* reflect certain historical tribal perceptions of sex and gender, their representations in the stories are contemporary expressions of human sexual desires that are both transhistorical and transcultural (Evans, 189-190).

² Common stereotypes include, for example, James Fenimore Cooper’s noble savage, the hypermasculine despoiler of white women in captivity narratives, the Indian princess or squaw, the attraction of miscegenation in novels such as Ann Sophie Stephens’s *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* (1860), and the homoerotic, ambiguously dressed Native American men in ballads and stories of the Old West. (Evans, 187-188)

³ ‘Not-men’ refer to biological women who assume some aspects of male roles and ‘not-women’ refer to biological men who assume some aspects of female roles. (Evans, 188)

Here, the terms ‘transcultural’ and ‘transhistorical’ are used to denote the lack of explicit ties to a specific culture, space, or time. Evans’s reading of representations of sex and gender as transhistorical and transcultural mirrors Vizenor’s call for cosmopolitan postcolonialism as a tool to discuss and analyze Native American communities today, that favors an understanding that is universally applicable, instead of being tied to a specific time, place, or, in this case, tribe. Alexie’s characters, while sometimes aware of the history of Native American sex/gender variability, have adopted the dominant culture’s heteropatriarchal attitude toward sex and gender, and this attitude is a factor in their self-identification by necessity.

The colonization of North America included a reconstruction of what the European colonizers termed “deviant” gender identities among the Native peoples – deviant meaning any other than heteronormative (Evans, 188). The acquisition of the heteronormative sex/gender system through assimilation and acculturation is relatively recent in Native American culture, and the notable increase of homophobia and misogyny have had a strong effect on Native American masculinity. Sherman Alexie⁴ has rather emphatically stated that the contemporary Native American world is very homophobic and a growing number of acts of violence towards non-heterosexual Native Americans attests to this. Much of the struggle and renegotiation of Native American masculine identity in Alexie’s fiction stems precisely from the disjunction between traditional sex/gender variability and the heteronormative binary system of the dominant culture – between resistance and assimilation. (Evans, 186-187, 203)

Evans sees the spirit of Gerald Vizenor’s concept of survivance in the characters of *Toughest Indian* and in the body of Alexie’s writing as a whole (201). The characters’ satirical use of stereotypical Native American masculinity and their renegotiation of male identity – neither a surrender or assimilation to dominant white culture nor a return to an irretrievable past, but a

⁴ Evans cites Alexie’s interview by Robert Capriccioso on his film *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002). (203)

contemporary expression of Native American masculinity – justifies identifying them as modern warriors of survivance, which will be examined in more below.

In their reformulation of the influential concept of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt emphasize that the very core of the concept is understanding that there are numerous different masculinities and that these masculinities have a hierarchy (846). Certain masculinities are socially more acceptable and gain a hegemonic status in society. This position is not, however, absolute, but is continuously contested by, for example, ethnic minorities. Connell and Messerschmidt also note that there is not only one hegemonic masculinity, but in fact, there are regional and cultural masculinities that enjoy wider social acceptance, even though they are not hegemonic in the wider context (845-847). For example, traditional Native American warrior masculinity does not necessarily conform to the hegemonic American masculinity – white, middle-class, and rigidly heterosexual – but it has a high status in Native American communities. Here it should be noted that the high status of warrior masculinity among Native Americans is enforced by the fact that physical strength, patriotism, and soldiering are highly valued by the wider American society, as well. As Connell and Messerschmidt write, “we must understand that regional and local constructions of hegemonic masculinity are shaped by the articulation of these gender systems with global processes” (849).

According to Kathleen Glenister Roberts, warfare and warriorhood continue to be extremely important to masculinity in contemporary Native American culture (141-142). She does point out, however, that it is impossible to generalize Native Americans in any way, as there are hundreds of different tribes that all have unique features, and because in today’s world, the warrior ideal is not only reserved for men, as Native American women are strongly represented in the U.S. armed forces (Roberts, 140-142). Still, the warrior ideal remains an integral part of Native American masculinity and the metaphor of the warrior is frequently used in literature and as a factor in

conceptualizing Native American politics and criticism. It is an empowering image that calls to mind historical warrior figures, such as Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Geronimo, who have an important role in contemporary Native American culture as heroes. In *Toughest Indian* the male characters aspire to be warriors. For example, in “Class”, Sissy, a Native American bar-tender tells the protagonist that “[a]ll you Indian guys think you’re Crazy Horse” and in “Indian Country” Sara wonders why Native American men “insisted on being warriors”. The male obsession of emulating the warriors of old is a recurring theme in most stories of *Toughest Indian*.

However, the warrior is a stereotypical image that, for historical reasons, is imposed on Native Americans by the white society. In fact, the image of the Native American warrior has also been a way for white men to “retrieve deep manhood” by adopting what might be called “Redface” in a racist appropriation of Native American rituals (Kimmel, 316-320). The use of the image of the ‘Indian warrior’ by white men in sports, for example, has been challenged in recent years (for an extensive discussion on this, see *Team Spirits: The Native American Mascot Controversy* by King and Springwood). The image of the ‘Indian warrior’ has carried the connotations of power, physicality, athletic ability, aggressiveness, and brutality, and as such, it has been used by white men to strengthen their masculine identity.

While the warrior image has been used by both Native American and white men to portray a kind of ultimate masculinity, the stereotypical image has sometimes resulted in serious danger for those who are seen to *naturally* embody the values and characteristics of the ‘Indian warrior’. For example, in the wars fought by the U.S. in the 20th century, Native American soldiers were recognized and honored as exceptionally talented, but this recognition was a double-edged sword, as they were often given extremely dangerous missions because they were seen as *naturally* talented at tracking, navigating, and code-talking (Roberts, 143-147).

The warrior ideal communicates a masculinity that is grounded on the basic values of defending one’s home and family, and also incorporates the importance of athletic achievements for claiming

a higher status among men that was common especially among the Cherokee and the tribes of the Northern Plains (Roberts, 141, 145; also, Abram). The cultures of the Northern Plains tribes are important today, as they are the culture that the stereotypical image of the 'Indian' often copies. As Alexie's characters, for example in his film *Smoke Signals* (1998), note, to be seen as an 'Indian' he must look like a warrior returning from a buffalo hunt even though his tribe lived by fishing and never hunted buffaloes. In contemporary Native American culture these values included in the ideal warrior masculinity are still present, even though the forms of warriorhood have in many ways changed. Today's warrior are not only soldiers, but also athletes – basketball players and powwow dancers. The image of the warrior was historically very much tied to masculinity in Native American communities, and while today women are also attracted to a career in the military, the cultural ties between warriorhood and masculinity remain strong. While the gender roles in pre-Columbine Native American communities were much more diverse than the European understanding of gender roles – for example, in the fields of public discourse, decision-making, and work – both Europeans and Native Americans seemed to agree that war was the domain of men (see Abram and Little).

The image of the warrior has been a staple of Native American literature. Gercken notes that much of Native American literature is concerned about the loss of warrior cultures in contemporary Native American communities and often the protagonists of Native American literature are young men who do not know how to be men in the contemporary world (37). The proposed answer has often been to situate 'authentic Indian identity' in a specific tribe and in a specific Native space, in other words, in a specific reservation. Gercken lists N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1966), James Welch's *Death of Jim Loney* (1979), and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) as examples of the abovementioned Native texts who find authentic Native American masculinity in the image of a warrior who is tied to a specific tribal community, but notes that this trend is reversed by newer Native American authors, such as Sherman Alexie (37-38). Alexie frequently

utilizes the image of Crazy Horse, a very specific historical figure, in his texts, *Toughest Indian* included, but instead of advancing the idea of tribal sovereignty and revival of actual warrior cultures, Alexie uses Crazy Horse as a pan-tribal figure that is not tied to a specific tribe, and can actually be seen as an a-geographical and even a-historical metaphor (Gercken, 37, 44). Alexie is acutely aware of the fact that the image he uses, a pan-tribal Crazy Horse, is a simulation: while he takes advantage of the fact that Crazy Horse is a character who is familiar to all Native Americans, as well as the white readership, and can thus be turned into an affective metaphor, he also acknowledges the fact that depicting his pan-tribal character as a member of the horse-riding Plains tribes is a reproduction of one the most powerful stereotypes of Native Americans. This self-aware, ironic use of the image of Crazy Horse is a clear example of literary survivance that is discussed below.

Gerald Vizenor uses the warrior metaphor in his philosophy of survivance. In essence, Vizenor's survivance means "an active sense of presence" (1999, xii). It is something more than survival, memory, and reaction. Vizenor's theoretical writing is challenging as he rarely pauses to explain his terminology – often his words are altered or given new connotations – and he prefers postmodern prose instead of clear scientific language (Hume, 580). Still, it is clear that the concept of the postindian warrior of survivance is at the core of both his theoretical and fictional works. 'Postindian' means the absence of the 'Indian', a deconstruction of the invented stereotypical image, and the postindian warrior is the new simulation of survivance. This postindian warrior has an active presence in the contemporary world, a past and a future, as well as an understanding of the irony of the stereotypical images and an ability to *use* them. (Vizenor 1999, 11-13). Vizenor is very aware that these postindian warriors are simulations just as the stereotypical images, the simulations of dominance. He stresses the importance of irony to avoid the traps of 'authentic representations', stating that an ironist sees words as having no inherent nature or essential value, causing them to question, worry, and rethink. The postindian warrior of survivance is an ironist who worries first

and foremost about names, manners, and stories, which are the building blocks of culture (Vizenor, 1999; 2008). Irony and satire, that have a strong presence in Alexie's writing, are at the very core of Vizenor's rhetoric of survivance; satirical use of the stereotypical 'Indian' is the vehicle by which the stereotype, the simulation, is uncovered and exposed as unreal. As Powell states, this satirical use of the simulation "transforms their object-status within colonial discourse into a subject-status, a presence instead of an absence" (400). To avoid this same process from also undoing the contemporary Native American presence, which Vizenor recognizes as a cultural representation as well, the warrior of survivance – whether the author of the text or a character within it – also self-consciously includes a critique of the new simulation, or representation, of active presence (Powell, 400-401). In Alexie's writing this self-conscious use of the rhetorics of survivance can be found in the way he simultaneously exposes the inauthenticity of the stereotypical 'Indian' and refuses to ignore or sweep aside the very real problems that plague the contemporary Native American communities – for example, he does not shy away from addressing the question of alcoholism among Native Americans, which remains a characteristic of the stereotypical 'Indian' while also seriously affecting large numbers of contemporary Native Americans.

Vizenor's agents of survivance – the postindian warriors – invoke the abovementioned values of warriorhood: power, aggression, and physical ability, which in Vizenor's formulation is transformed into rhetoric ability. He describes them battling the simulations of dominance, linking the active presence of historical warriors, such as Crazy Horse and Geronimo, to the active presence, or survivance, of contemporary Native Americans:

The postindian warriors encounter their enemies with the same courage in literature as their ancestors once evidenced on horses, and they create their stories with a new sense of survivance. The warriors bear the simulations of their time and counter the manifest manners of domination. (Vizenor 1999, 4)

The use of the warrior metaphor attests to the continuing cultural importance and value of warriorhood in Native American culture. Even though it is recognized to be one of the stereotypical images of Native American, the warrior has such positive connotations that it can be used to battle

stereotypical representations. Vizenor's warriors of survivance are not all male; in fact, Paula Gunn Allen, whose writing has established a place for Native American spirituality in the contemporary world⁵, is one of his clearest examples of postindian warriors (1999, 21-22), but it is clear, that the concept carries with it the overtones of warrior masculinity. Despite the male connotations of the warrior metaphor, the warriors of survivance are first and foremost Native Americans who are active participants in the contemporary world, not the vanishing traces of a past culture. The aim is not to recreate a picture of a static past, but to be present today – this includes taking the current gender politics into account. In terms of Native American masculinity, the characters of *Toughest Indian* are warriors of survivance for their abovementioned expression of masculinity that retains the values of Native American sex/gender variability without retreating to an imagined, irretrievable past.

It could be argued that using the image of the warrior to illustrate survivance is in itself an example of the ironic use of a stereotypical simulation of the 'Indian'. As Roberts notes, that whether one sees the stereotypical Native American warrior as a positive generalization or not, it must be acknowledged that as well as being a vehicle for self-identification for Native Americans, "the warrior identity has continued as a stereotype imposed on Native Americans by non-Natives" (147). Utilizing this image as a vehicle or method of survivance successfully would then require the warrior to acknowledge the inherent inauthenticity of the warrior identity – while it is being used to battle stereotypes and the image of the 'Vanishing Indian', it, as an image and an identity, has inherent problems that should also be addressed.

Much of Sherman Alexie's fiction poses the question of what it means to be Native American and who is a Native American. Questions of ethnic and racial identity are also central to the renegotiation of masculinity in *Toughest Indian* as the characters' identity as Native American men

⁵ Vizenor cites *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986) and *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook* (1991) as examples of Paula Gunn Allen's writing as a warrior of survivance. (1999, 21)

is often juxtaposed with white masculinity. In this thesis I use the terms ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ to a large degree interchangeably, though the terms do have slightly different emphases. I employ the distinction made by Nagel, in which ethnicity is seen as “the broader concept subsuming race” (2000, 110). In Nagel’s thinking, race generally refers to visible distinctions between population, most often skin color, while ethnicity includes differences in language, religion, geographical region, and culture, to name a few (2000, 110-111). For the purposes of the analysis in this thesis it is important to note that ethnicity, just as gender and sexuality that were discussed above, can be seen as performative. Individuals or groups, engage in ethnic self-presentations in their everyday-life, and simultaneously ethnic boundaries are affirmed, reinforced, and renegotiated. Nagel states that, especially in humanities, ethnicity is often discussed precisely in terms of boundaries, borders, and frontiers that are the sites for *performing* ethnicity. (2000, 111-113)

Ethnic and racial identity is a problematic issue that includes legal, biological, cultural, and personal aspects. As Paige Raibmon notes, ‘authentic’ Native American racial and ethnic identity has a history of strong either-or notions fashioned by the white society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (7). In the white imagination, ‘authentic Indians’ were, among others, irrational, feminine, subordinate, traditional, timeless, and static (Raibmon, 7-8). Euro-American culture still often base their image of Native Americans on these characteristics, invoking stereotypes such as the noble savage and the vanishing Indian (Rose, 158). While these images of the vanishing Indian and the noble savage negatively influenced the numbers of people who identified themselves as Native Americans, the civil rights movement in the 1960s prompted a renaissance of Native American pride and more and more people were willing to identify as Native American, and the stereotypical representations were challenged by both literature and political rhetoric (Nagel 1995).

In *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America* (2003) Eva Marie Garrouette discusses Native American identity and ‘Indianness’ from the four aforementioned viewpoints: legal, biological, cultural, and personal. She states that, on one hand, these competing definitions of

‘authentic’ Native American identity complicate Native American identity politics, but on the other hand, they offer people alternative ways to negotiate a Native American identity – even if they fail to claim the identity on one definition, the claim may succeed on others (6). The male characters of *Toughest Indian* are especially concerned with whether their identity as Native American men is bound in biology or culture.

Both the federal government of the United States and the Native American tribes have legal definitions of Native American identity which regulate, for example, tribal membership and issues of minority status and affirmative action. The most usual requirements for the legal definition of Native American identity are lineage, residence, and blood quantum (Garrouette, 14-15). Garrouette emphasizes that the legal definitions are further complicated by the fact that the both the federal and state governments classify certain groups as Native American tribes with a recognized and acknowledged status, which carries a particular significance as the definitions of identity and nationality are further intertwined:

[b]y acknowledging a group of claimants as an Indian tribe, the federal government extends “government-to-government” relations to it, legally constituting that group as a sovereign power and as a “domestic dependent nation”. (25)

The biological definition of Native American identity depends on genetics – on the so-called blood quantum, which is also an integral part of many of the abovementioned legal definitions. Blood and genetics as a defining feature of ethnic and racial identity is by no means a solely Native American concern – for example, the one-drop rule is a well-known part of the history of African American and Native Hawaiian identity politics. However, as Garrouette points out,

[f]ar from being held to a one-drop rule, Indians are generally required – by both law and by public opinion – to establish rather *high* blood quanta in order for their claims to racial identity to be accepted as meaningful, the individual’s own opinion notwithstanding. (47)

The Bureau of Indian Affairs has issued detailed charts for calculating the degree of blood, but these charts do not remove the problems inherent in this definition of Native American identity: how much Native American blood does one actually need to have in order to qualify as a Native

American? Even with the widely recognized problems related to the biological definition of identity, many – even Native Americans – continue to see the close biological relationships with other Native Americans and the physical appearance that may follow those connections as implying the strongest claim to Native American identity. (Garrouette, 44-45, 51-52)

Culture has, in some cases, been the defining factor for Native American identity when the claimants have, for one reason or another, been unable to fulfill or prove the requirements for legal or biological definitions of identity. However, these cultural definitions are conceptually fuzzy, and their demands are, as Garrouette writes, “stereotyped to the point of absurdity” (66). Even the more fact-based cultural practices that are required for the cultural definition of Native American identity are usually misleading, as they strongly imply homogeneity and timelessness onto tribal cultures, which are, in fact, varied and evolving. This gives a particular group the status of *real* Native Americans, and those, whose culture differs from this, are considered degenerate and inauthentic. (Garrouette, 67)

The fourth definition of Native American identity discussed by Garrouette is the personal definition, under which Native Americans are those who say they are. The personal definition makes claiming a Native American identity possible for those who cannot claim it in terms of the three abovementioned definitions; for example, those who cannot claim membership to any surviving Native community. Even though these self-identified Native Americans do not receive a legal status as Native Americans, self-identification still offers a great deal of personal satisfaction. (82-84) It should, however, be noted that self-identification is sometimes used

as a sort of access card to American Indian spiritual and cultural practices, many of which have become objects of interest to a substantial proportion of the American population. This dynamic is particularly evident in some expressions of the New Age movement. (82-84)

It is precisely this fact that anyone can assert an ethnic identity that makes some people wary of self-identification as a definition of Native American identity. Self-identification does not mean that

others consider the claim legitimate, and self-identified Native Americans are often accused of ethnic switching and named “new Indians” or even “born-again Indians” (Garrouette, 85-86).

According to Nagel, Native American ethnicity is a purely social construct, as it by necessity refers to a myriad of sometimes extremely different tribal cultures and languages – from this follows that ethnicity can be revised, renegotiated, and changed (1995, 950-951). From the 1960’s onwards, the number of people who identify as Native American in the census has increased greatly, and this increase cannot be explained simply by increase in births and decrease in deaths – ethnic switching plays a significant role in this change (Nagel 1995, 950-951). Nagel calls this ethnic renewal, a switch from majority to minority, and attaches positive tones of reclamation and empowerment to the often disparaged ethnic switching and definition of identity through self-identification (1995, 947-948). In “Class”, the third story in *Toughest Indian*, two different directions of ethnic switching and self-identification are represented by the protagonist, Edgar, and his mother. The mother has always told people she was Spanish, not Spokane with a hint of Aztec, whereas Edgar always mentions that he is part Aztec, but sometimes he pretends to be completely Aztec, to give himself “some mystery, some ethnic weight” (*Toughest Indian*, 40).

2.2. Journey Narratives and Mobility as Survivance

The journey narrative is as literary pattern that permeates world literature. As Janis P. Stout states in *The Journey Narrative in American Literature*, the journey narrative is one of the oldest forms of storytelling (12-13). It can be found, for example, in oral literature and also in the holy scriptures of most world religions. Homer’s epics and biblical stories establish the journey narrative as an integral part of Western literary tradition. The journey narrative is a form with clear parameters but it is also flexible enough to lend itself to innumerable versions. The fact that it appears in virtually

all mythologies indicates that “the form was unquestionably seen to hold a potential for larger meanings” (Stout, 12-13). Very few journey narratives are simply literal, as most of them hold significant symbolic and metaphorical meanings.

This subchapter is further divided into three parts: the first gives a brief introduction to journey narratives in American literature and the traditional forms those narratives take, the second part discusses these narrative patterns in Native American literature, and the third part concludes the subchapter by examining the gendered nature of journey narratives, establishing them as fertile ground for analyzing the renegotiation of masculinity, and the possibility of mobility as a tactic of survivance.

American literature has always been characterized by journey narratives and images of motion and movement. According to Stout, the journey is so pervasive in American literature that even the texts that do not follow the form of the journey narrative often invoke the image of the journey “as a touchstone of value” (ix). When the journey narrative is examined in connection to American literature, American national history provides another context that should be taken into account in addition to the context of the wider tradition of Western literature.

Spatial movement has been the characteristic expression of the American sense of life (Stout, 4). The Pilgrim voyages have been elevated to a national myth, and journeys have been the most powerful shaping structure of the American experience. Once this pattern was set, it continued, and still continues, to be an essential part of American culture and life. The journey west in search of land, adventure, and freedom has been a staple of American culture for centuries, and while the westward journey meant different things to different people, it is an essential part of the ideology of the American dream. While the westward movement is by far the most powerful image of movement in American culture, there has also been a continuous counter movement eastward.

These journeys to the East include, for example, the return of the discouraged pioneers and the wartime journeys to Europe in the 20th century. (Stout, 4-5)

The journeys that have been seen as an integral part of American history have deeply influenced American literature and provided it with values associated with movement. In accordance with the historical move to the west, the westward journeys in American literature are strongly associated with positive values, such as freedom, progress, and sovereignty. The westerly movement has, however, two distinct types: the journey of the settler and the journey of the lone cowboy or outlaw. The settler searches for land and strives for the progress of civilization, whereas the lone cowboy values the West for its lack of social order and rule of law, and sees the journey itself as a value – not a means to an end, as in the settler’s case. While the two types move into opposite directions temporally – the settler’s direction being the future and the outlaw’s the past – both emphasize independent action (Stout, 6-7). According to Stout, these two orientations of the westerly movement in American literature create perhaps the most common theme in American journey narratives: the conflict between the past and the future, “hope and reality”, and “expectation and fulfillment” (8).

Stout further notes that American minority cultures seem to be equally fascinated by the images of movement and the journey narrative, although their directional values and journey patterns differ from the Anglo-American experience (10-11). She writes that

[f]or Chicano culture, the directions of symbolic value, roughly corresponding to the West/East values of Anglo-European Americans, are North and South. . . . Like the Chicano culture, Afro-American culture, through the heritage of the Underground Railway and escape in general, finds the North a locus of freedom and betterment . . . For the native Indian, deprived of his homeland and forced to migrate to a government reservation, going west could never mean progress but only despair and death.
(10-11)

While it is evident that the connotations of certain directions are most definitely ambiguous, it is equally evident that movement and journeying have an essential role in American literature and culture and they are most often related to questions of power, freedom, and self-determination.

The aforementioned types of westerly movement – that of the settler and that of the outlaw – can be seen in the two most common patterns of journey narratives in American fiction identified by Stout: the escape and the home-founding journey (41). These share “an overall structure of movement away from society toward unfamiliar or unsocialized space”, but the motivations behind escape and home-finding journeys are different. The escape is always a journey *away from* something – usually a stifling society that is seen as an imprisoning, rather than nurturing force. The image of escape is an important part of the mythology of American origins – it establishes the journeys of the Puritans as “visionary escapes from religious oppression” and characterizes the conquest of the West in terms of escape rather than expansion (Stout, 30-33). American literature presents escape as eventual victory and personal transcendence. Quite interestingly, the first escape tales in American literature were in fact ‘Indian captivity narratives’. In turn, the home-founding journeys in American literature have an inherently hopeful and confident tone rather than the sense of anxiety brought on by society that is found in escape narratives. Narratives of home-founding journeys reflect the Puritan goal of establishing a new and better society – this distinguishes the American pattern from the homeward return journeys far more common in world literature. (Stout, 42-43)

In addition to narratives of escape and home-finding, Stout identifies three other patterns: the return, the quest, and the narrative of wandering. The image of the return home is astonishingly infrequent in comparison to world literature, and when it does occur, it is not the ecstatic experience of the Israelites returning from Babylonian captivity or the homecoming of Odysseus. In American literature the return traditionally signifies defeat, surrender, frustration, and disappointment (Stout, 65-66). As for the quest, Stout observes that it

tends to be a mental journey; its “real” spatial dimension tends to recede or lose substance and its symbolic import to become dominant. . . . Even in a relatively external quest, the searcher tends to pursue his goal-emblem with an intensity of yearning altogether disproportionate and implausible unless it is taken as a totem or symbol. (90)

The last pattern identified by Stout – the narrative of wandering – became more and more common during the twentieth century. The journey of the lost wanderer carries connotations of divorce from the past, rootlessness, and lack of order. In fact, the characteristic American journey “has become the journey of uncertain destination or duration, the journey to no end”. (Stout, 105, 111)

Stout’s five patterns seem to be a succinct and clear way to analyze journey narratives in American literature, but she does emphasize that most journey narratives are in fact combinations of two or more of these patterns, and the conflict between them is in many cases essential (xi).

Journeys and movement are an integral part of Native American culture and history: “Native people have always been on the move just as Native communities (like all communities) are and have always been fluidly defined” (Gamber, 221). It is also important to emphasize that the movement in Native American culture does not only take the forms of displacement and forcible removal, but also forms of migration stories that tell that the people came from somewhere else before finding home, which was then lost.

Both Matthew Herman (4) and Helen May Dennis (91) cite William Bevis’s famous essay on Native American literature, written in 1987, as the traditional way of reading texts by Native Americans. Bevis characterizes Native American literature as literature of ‘homing-in’.⁶ This means that Bevis sees the most prominent plot-line in Native American fiction as a movement *back* – the protagonist’s journey “back toward reconciliation with traditional life and the people” (Herman, 4). It is interesting to note that the texts analyzed by Bevis are the same exact texts that Gercken gave as examples of the conventional use of the warrior image in Native American literature. The concern for the loss of traditional warrior cultures and warrior masculinity could perhaps be linked to the homing-in impulse identified by Bevis.

⁶ Bevis’s primary materials consisted of texts by male authors, such as N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1966), James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), and D’Arcy McNickle’s *The Surrounded* (1936), to name a few; the only female authored text discussed by Bevis was Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977).

Dennis notes in *Native American Literature: Towards a Spatialized Reading* that while Bevis's essay soon seemed unarguably outdated, it still remains the classic description of Native American literature (118-119). She suggests that the conceptual structures outlined by Bevis are helpful, even though some of the assumptions do need to be problematized – especially the static, unchanging life the protagonists are returning to; the home in homing-in; and the greatly reduced role of the individual. (Dennis, 119)

Herman suggests that much of recently published Native American fiction challenges the homing-in impulse that Bevis identified (4-5). This new direction that Herman calls 'homing-out' broadens the relatively narrow scope of homing-in:

Here, "home" can be seen broadening out to encompass new and alternative meanings, new and alternative social and cultural arrangements, and new and alternative modes of dwelling in new and alternative locations. (Herman, 4-5)

According to Herman, the homing-out plot does usually retain the reconciliation that is the central idea behind the homing-in plot, but the reconciliations in these to oppositional plot-lines are in many ways different. Literature that is characterized by homing-out tends to be more allegorical than homing-in stories in its treatment of social and cultural reconciliation, and the reconciliation in homing-out narratives has "less to do with territorial belonging than it does with familial or cultural belonging". Homing-out narratives also have a much lesser emphasis on reservation and homeland, and the reconciliation no longer depends on a narrow sense of tradition – these narratives are usually open to new ways of conceptualizing tribal identity and belonging. It is also important to note that in homing-out narratives the reconciliation is often "figured as a matter of greater personal rather than tribal significance" (Herman, 4-5). The homing-out narrative described by Herman thus takes into account the abovementioned problems inherent in homing-in narratives: the role of the individual and the static nature of Native American culture.

Dennis also offers another narrative structure as an emerging trend in contemporary Native American literature. She argues that the classic American lighting-out narrative seems to be at the

core of many recent Native American texts. ‘Lighting-out’ refers to Huckleberry Finn’s famous phrase “lighting out of the territory”, and immediately calls to mind ideas of escape, exploration, and freedom. (90-91) If we consider the patterns identified by Stout, it could be said that the homing-in stories are stories of return, but in contrast to most mainstream American literature, they do not signify defeat, disappointment or surrender – in a way, they resemble the European return story with tones of reunion and reconciliation. The more recent patterns in Native American literature, the homing/lighting-out pattern, move closer to typical American journey narratives of home-finding, escape, and exploration.

Unlike Herman, Dennis sees a gendered aspect to the two aforementioned narrative structures. She notes that “the typical plot of mainly *male-authored*, classic, Native American novels can be characterized as the ‘homing-in’ plot” (92, my emphasis). Dennis then goes on to analyze texts by Native American women⁷ that resist Bevis’s homing-in structure, while arguing that the journeys in these texts are as much about feminism and issues of female identity as they are about ethnic identity. Dennis links the narrative choices in these novels to the feminist novels from the 1970s onwards that rejected the traditional female roles, as the “protagonists prioritized personal development over and above the needs of their children and husbands” (93). While Dennis’s view of the gendered divide between the homing-in and homing-out/lighting-out narratives in Native American fiction is too clear-cut and simplistic, as evidenced by the male-authored works that follow the homing-out structure that Herman analyzes, it does draw attention to the fact that gender is an essential and irremovable aspect of identity and one that should be taken into account when analyzing journey narratives, the object of which is most often, as Hassan underlines, is self-realization (19).

If the female-authored Native American texts with an outward journey can be linked to a mainstream tradition of feminist literature that challenges the conventional roles for women in

⁷ For example, Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983), Betty Louise Bell’s *Faces in the Moon* (1994), and Janet Campbell Hale’s *The Jailing of Cecilia Capture* (1987).

society, we can certainly find a wider American context for literature with male protagonists who venture out and challenge normative masculinity. In fact, the journey narrative in American fiction is, for the most part, a masculine narrative – the travelers, explorers, and pioneers are primarily men, and their journeys are usually juxtaposed with a more feminine, domestic life. The role of men in society was well established in the stories of the Puritans crossing the Atlantic and in the narratives of the self-made men, the patriarchs in charge of their own lives and their families. There are, however, significant journey narratives that challenge the established understanding of masculinity, and these works have in fact become the quintessential representatives of the genre even though they started out as countercultural literature. (Ganser 44-46)

Ganser states that the portrayal of masculinity in the works of the beat generation, Kerouac's *On the Road* in particular, challenge the prevailing norms of the 1950s, by offering a view of an all-male on-road community instead of the post-war ideals of domesticity and hard work (44). While acknowledging that the novel's challenge to mainstream culture works largely on negative views on women, she notes that it also

harshly criticizes normative, mainstream masculinity and profoundly questions the conformism and racism of the American 1950s. The novel gives voice to masculine insecurities, unacknowledged homosexuality . . . and a desire for the ethnic Other . . . that were unspeakable in mainstream society. (Ganser, 46)

It seems clear that journey narratives in American literature are fertile ground for re-negotiations of both male and female identities and norms, and that in the narratives that do so, the movement is outward. As Dennis has demonstrated, Native American women have utilized the outward journey to challenge normative Native American femininity, and there seems to be no reason why the outward journey narratives with Native American male protagonists should, and could, not do the same and challenge traditional roles for men. A Native American challenge to the traditional understanding of masculinity and male roles would also constitute a challenge to mainstream ideal of masculinity; masculinity as a social and cultural construct is, after all, an interwoven web of meanings, where a change in one part of the web would also affect the other parts.

In his article “Tactical Mobility as Survivance” John Gamber outlines the possibilities of seeing movement, mobility, and journeying as methods of what Vizenor calls survivance – an active sense of presence. Gamber states that the ability “to adapt and to show the fluidity of communal, personal, tribal, and national boundaries resist static notions of Native peoples and speak to a postindian assault on notions of tribal purity”. (222) This ability to change means that Native peoples are not trapped in the past, a static, tragic image of the time when Europeans colonized the Americas, but are instead actively present and have agency in contemporary life.

Gamber draws on Michel de Certeau’s work on tactical mobility to examine the connection between movement and survivance, in other words, the positive ways in which survival is achieved by disguising or transforming (222-223). As he states, “[t]his survival is active, often subversive, and antiessentialist” (ibid). De Certeau’s tactical mobility can be connected to the works of other critics who have discussed movement and survival, for example, Louis Owens, whose notion of indigenous motion closely resembles the idea of tactical mobility, and Gerald Vizenor, who uses the term transmotion to describe movement across imagined boundaries – both of whom write specifically on Native American issues (ibid.) Tactical mobility, indigenous motion, and transmotion as survivance all contain an implication of fixed tribal identities as imprisoning and inhibiting. This places Owens and Vizenor in direct opposition with critics such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Craig Womack, who maintain that the greatest challenge for Native peoples today is to focus on upholding tribal identities and to remember the connections to specific geographical locations (Gamber, 225).

According to Gamber, Native American fiction that offers mobility as a method of survivance tends to redefine two spatial terms, home and frontier, that are essential to the understanding of Native American – and American – life and identity. Both Owens and De Certeau have proposed that a frontier is more akin to a zone, a region, than an actual borderline as the word seems to

suggest. A frontier comes into being when people meet, and from this follows that “the frontier exists everywhere in the Americas because colonizers and colonized are always meeting here”. If the frontier is everywhere in these texts, so is home. The emphasis is on home being “a mobile concept, not a static absolute”. Gamber does, however, note that movement is also always temporal as well as spatial, which enables us to interpret his concept of home as mobile to include the idea of home in the present instead of in the past which is also at the very core of Vizenor’s survivance. (224-229)

As journey narratives are first and foremost quests of self-discovery and identification, they can, then, be regarded as literary means of negotiating definitions and understandings of gender – in the case of this thesis, of Native American masculinity. In the following chapters, I will argue that journey narratives – narratives of tactical mobility, which connect to the idea of survivance – are the primary ‘vehicle’ for the renegotiation of masculinity for the characters in Sherman Alexie’s *Toughest Indian*.

3. Journeys Out

In this chapter, I analyze the outward journeys in *Toughest Indian*. Firstly, in subchapter 3.1, the focus is on analyzing the journeys that take the characters beyond the borders of the reservations and into the ‘white man’s world’. Secondly, in subchapter 3.2, the characters’ lives outside the reservations will be examined. This analysis aims to elaborate the ways in which journeys *out* are presented as ‘heroic deeds’ and the protagonists reclaim a sense of warrior masculinity by crossing the border between the reservation and the world beyond. Alexie’s stories, “Saint Junior”, “The Sin Eaters”, and “South by Southwest”, will be identified as examples of ‘lighting-out’ narratives, and their potential for the redefinition of masculinity and Native American identity is examined.

3.1. Beyond the Borders of the Reservation

In *Toughest Indian*, Sherman Alexie employs the outward journey narrative in most of the stories to explore and comment on the relationship between the reservation and the world beyond its borders. The clearest examples of outward journeys in the collection are Roman Gabriel Fury's journey from the Spokane reservation to a first class university in "Saint Junior" and the forced journey away from the reservation that Jonah experiences in "The Sin Eaters". These two stories will be at the center of this subchapter, but other stories and journeys of the collection will be touched upon when needed.

In order to analyze the journeys out of the reservation, it is important to first establish how Alexie's text presents the reservation and its relationship to the 'world beyond'. Alexie's descriptions of reservation life are emphatically ones of monotony and stasis. In "Indian Country", Low Man states that he believes the Coer d'Alene reservation to be a dangerous environments characterized by long stretches of dull monotony that is occasionally punctuated by acts of violence and revenge before returning back to monotony. Low Man's description also includes references to the world outside the reservation, as he says that the monotony that plagues the people who live in the reservation is precisely what white tourists look for, it is "a wet kind of monotony that white tourists saw as spiritual and magic" (*Toughest Indian*, 122). The people who live their lives on the reservation do not experience the peace and monotony as magical – instead, it causes a bitter resentment to fester in the atmosphere of the reservation that occasionally manifests in the form of violence. The reservation is, then, both a home to the people who live there and a tourist site, acting as a kind of a live museum, which is reminiscent of much of the criticism aimed at the various ethnographic and anthropological studies on Native American communities. Low Man's description of the relationship between the reservation and the outside world has only two points of

convergence: the aforementioned tourists who visit reservations as museums and the aftermaths of the violence that occasionally breaks the static life of the reservation:

[a]fterward, three or four people would wash the blood from their hands and hide in the hills, causing white men to write editorials, all of this news immediately followed by capture, trial, verdict, and bus ride to prison. And then, only then, would the long silence, the monotony, resume. (Alexie, 122)

Low Man's view of the reservation mirrors the stereotype of the vanishing Indian, in that it presents the reservations and the people who live there as things of the past, something that has no real place in the contemporary world – they are static reminders of the continent before it was *discovered* by Europeans. It seems logical, then, to regard the journey out of the reservation as a journey out of the past into the contemporary world, which is at the core of Vizenor's vision for the postindian warriors of survivance.

However, the view of reservation life in *Toughest Indian* is more complex than Low Man's description would lead one to assume. In "Saint Junior" Roman loves the Spokane Indian Reservation despite his efforts to move beyond its borders. "Saint Junior" seems to imply that the reservation can function as a shelter, a safe haven in a white world that is always less and less Native American: "[a]fter all, it took a special kind of courage to look out a window into the deep snow and see anything special in that vast whiteness" (*Toughest Indian*, 154). The people who live in the reservation are members of the same community, and the reservation is quite specifically *not* white; on the reservation, unlike in the city, a Native American is a member of the majority. In *Toughest Indian* the reservation means restrictions and monotony, living in a live museum, but as it is also a home, a shelter surrounded by a white world, and leaving it requires extreme courage and determination.

Despite the characterization of the reservation as a possible safe haven, the history of the reservations is grim. After the War of 1812 between the Americans and the British, when the borders of the United States and Canada were formed, "[n]ative people were displaced, herded onto reservations, and largely forgotten" (Valaskakis, 90). The reservations have been established as a

site of oppression, stagnation, and passivity in Alexie's writing before the publication of *Toughest Indian*. Especially his first collection of short-stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* addresses the problems of life on the reservation, and paints a stark contrast between the reservations and the rest of American society. In the wider context of Alexie's works, an escape from the reservation can also mean an escape from poverty, despondency, and subverted anger (Grassian, 57, 61). The one positive aspect connected to reservation seems to be a sense of community and tight family bonds – in “Every Little Hurricane”, Alexie does, however, imply that while these family bonds are extremely strong and can survive almost anything, they also bring a great deal of pain, because they are in part comprised of repressed animosity towards the outside world (*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*). Those who manage to escape the monotony of reservation life, whether it be by education or talents in sports, are established as ‘heroes’ and ‘warriors’, and the same theme continues of in the stories in *Toughest Indian*.

“Saint Junior” is the story of Roman Gabriel Fury, a retired basketball player from the Spokane Indian Reservation, and a significant part of the story is dedicated to his journey from the reservation into international basketball courts. As mentioned above, Roman loved the reservation, but still had an enduring need to travel beyond its borders.

From the very beginning of his life, he'd dreamed of leaving, not because he needed to escape – though his journey certainly could have been viewed as a form of flight – but because he'd always known that his true and real mission lay somewhere outside the boundaries of the reservations. (Alexie, 159)

When we consider Roman's journey beyond the borders of the reservation, it presents itself as a rather clear example of the narrative pattern of escape that was briefly introduced in chapter 2.2. Even though Roman himself denies the need to escape as a motivation his journey, he does acknowledge that the journey can be viewed as a form of flight, and the narrative certainly follows the form and pattern of the escape narrative.

As Stout writes, the escape narrative is the “most fully characteristic form adopted by the American imagination” and it constitutes a largely significant part of the American mythology (31).

The escape journey is an outward journey with a propulsive force behind it: it is “not a journey *toward* but a journey *away from*” (Stout, 30, italics in the original). The ‘original escape’ in American mythology is the Puritans’ escape from under religious oppression in the Old World, and similarly the later incarnations of the escape motif in American literature most often feature an oppressive, restrictive society from which to escape. The escape then becomes a personal victory for the hero who by escaping “pronounces judgment on his society, implicitly shaking its dust from his feet in assertion of his freedom from its conventionalism and corruption” (Stout, 33). Stout does, however, state that the pure escape journeys have become less hopeful and the tone has become much darker, as the pristine wilderness into which one might escape has vanished as the West was conquered (32).

In “Saint Junior” Roman did not escape religious persecution; instead his escape was from poverty. He had “played basketball until his palms bled, and read books, hundreds of books, thereby saving himself from a lifetime of reservation poverty” (Alexie, 159). Similarly, the protagonists in “Class” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” have fought their ways out of the reservation through education; in “Class” Edgar Eagle Runner works as a corporate lawyer in Seattle and his “monthly wage exceeded his mother’s yearly income”, while the unnamed reporter in “The Toughest Indian in the World” has not lived on his reservation for twelve years and “hardly ever go[es] home” (Alexie, 27). It seems evident that the characters’ feelings on the reservations are mixed: on one hand it is an accomplishment to get out of the reservation, but on the other hand, it is still – in the case of the unnamed reporter, after twelve years – their home. The fact that the characters still regard the reservation from which they escaped their home attests to the fact that their journeys are most definitely not ones of home-finding – they know where their true homes are, but something – a yearning for a better, more successful future – has propelled them to move beyond the borders of what they consider their home.

When questioned by the president of the Colonial Aptitude Testing Service on his rather unusual test-taking process, Roman tells him that his grandmother had “heroically taken care of him in Third World conditions” (Alexie, 171). A journey from the reservation is then simultaneously a journey from a Native American world to a white world, from the Third World into the First, and from the past into the present. These Third World conditions are undoubtedly the propelling force behind Roman’s endeavor to escape from the reservation. This is further complicated by the fact that the reservation he wishes to escape has been created by the politics of the white American society into which he seeks to escape in order to acquire a higher education in a first rate university.

Stout notes that the escape narrative seldom describes the actual journey after the initial act of breaking out that is the culmination point of the escape journey. If an ensuing journey is depicted, it is often in the form of consecutive breakthroughs which force the hero to reassert or reclaim their freedom. (32-33) In “Saint Junior”, Roman’s escape from the reservation also consists of a series of obstacles to be overcome. The culmination point in his journey is completing his CAT-test with a high enough score to gain entry to a good university. The test posed a substantial challenge as it was structured to disfavor poor people:

He knew the Colonial Aptitude Test was culturally biased, but he also knew the CAT was *supposed* to be culturally biased. The CAT was designed to exclude from college as many poor people as statistically possible. (Alexie, 165)

This exclusion of poor people hugely impacted economically disadvantaged Native Americans. “Saint Junior” implies that the structural cultural bias and disadvantage resulted in Native Americans not even wishing to pursue ‘mainstream education’, as evidenced in the excerpts below:

He was the first member of his extended family who’d even wanted to pursue higher education. In fact, there were only a couple of dozen Spokane Indians who’d ever graduated from a four-year university and only a few more than that who’d bothered to attend even the smallest community college. (Alexie, 165)

“You know,” Grandmother Fury said in rough English, in careful and clumsy syllables, after Roman had finished one bowl of mush and started in on another. “Those college tests, they’re not for Indians.” (Alexie, 165)

None of Roman's relatives had ever even wanted to pursue higher education, and higher education was actually seen as something that belonged to the world beyond the borders of the reservation.

As in typical escape narratives, Roman's escape was a series of escapes; before he could attend his CAT, he had to make his way from the reservation without a car and ended up walking for seventy-five miles to reach the city and then running additional thirty blocks to arrive at the private high school where the test took place because he had to make a decision between bus fare or lunch money. His journey to the high school where the test was given can be read to represent having to overcome obstacles such as poverty and distrust on the part of, presumably, white Americans:

“Well, you see, sir,” said Roman. “The thing is, I was exhausted from having to walk seventy-five miles to get from my reservation to Spokane for the test, because my grandmother and I are too poor to afford a dependable car.”

“You hitchhiked?” asked Williams.

“Oh, no, hitchhiking would mean that I actually got a ride. But people don't pick up Indians much, you know?” (Alexie, 170)

Roman could not afford a car and was, then forced to walk from the reservation to the city, and no passer-by was willing to offer him a ride. Hitch-hiking has an important role in another story in the collection, but in “The Toughest Indian in the World”, the Native American hitch-hiker is on his way to the reservation and is picked up by the protagonist of the story. For Roman, there is no one to help him on his way to the city which in the story represents white mainstream society. After overcoming the obstacles on his journey to the test and then completing it with excellent results, in spite of it being designed to disfavor him, Roman faces another challenge in meeting the aforementioned Mr. Williams, the president of the Colonial Aptitude Testing Service. He has to explain why his test-taking procedure included all kinds of irregularities; he arrived late – because he walked – and he wore his grass-dance outfit while taking the test to give him some extra power in the test. It is in this meeting that Roman reveals to Mr. Williams the propelling force behind his ‘escape’ – the Third World conditions on his reservation.

Escape narratives are, as mentioned above, usually escapes from an oppressing and restrictive society into freedom. While Roman's escape in "Saint Junior" certainly fills the formal requirements of a traditional escape narrative, there are some significant differences as well. The reservation is a restrictive space that has been created by the world outside of it – meaning that the oppressiveness of the reservation, monotony, stagnation, and poverty are not born from internal reasons only, because the forced removal of the Native Americans by the United States government underlies the problem. The destination of Roman's escape, the world outside the reservation, is not the traditional pristine wilderness of American escape narratives, either. Instead, his escape requires him to learn and play by the rules of white American society, and even after that, to justify his success, to explain why the rules should apply to him as well. Roman is understandably angry when the rules which have been created to favor members of the white, mainstream society, are discarded when the rules would finally work in his favor, and he asks: "And now, after all that, you want to take my score away from me? You want to change the rules after I learned them and beat them?" (*Toughest Indian*, 171) "Saint Junior" is, then, not a 'pure' example of the American escape narrative, but rather a new twist on the traditional formula that takes into account the realities of the relationship between Native American reservations and the American society outside of them.

Alexie's portrayal of Native American escape stories reflects a true change in the Native American community. Urbanization has been an important influence on the Native American community during the last few decades; as Shumway and Jackson state, from the 1950s to the 1990s the percentage of Native Americans who live in urban areas rose from 13.4% to 53% (187). Shumway and Jackson (1995, 191) also note that the "changes in regional distribution of Native Americans in the last four decades is only now beginning to *reverse* the historical western concentration that resulted from federal policies and the activities associated with westward-expanding settlements (my emphasis)". This suggests that the outward journey away from the

reservation – the escape – is, at the very least partially, an act of reversing the history of relocation, of fighting back.

Alexie's male characters who embark upon an outward escape journey from the reservation quite emphatically identify themselves as warriors, and these warriors fight to reverse the history of relocation and removal by leaving the reservation. In "Saint Junior", Roman describes his test-taking process to Mr. Williams by thinking that

I'm thinking, I am Crazy Horse, I am Geronimo, I am Sitting Bull, and I'm thinking the required number-two pencil is a bow and arrow, that every math question is Columbus, that every essay question is Custer, and I'm going to kill them dead. (*Toughest Indian*, 171)

Using a pencil as a weapon makes a possible reference to new Native American warriors using the white man's methods. As Vizenor has emphasized, the image of the vanishing Indian who has no place in the contemporary world has been created by the white majority's rule over names, images, and stories (1999, 11-13). The warrior of survivance would, then, be appropriately armed by a pencil with which to rewrite and reimagine these stereotypes. Because becoming a warrior is paramount to Roman's identity and he considers each and every detail that might further that goal; he even laments his given name, as he feels that a better name might have given him more power:

Roman Gabriel Fury often wished that his name was Sonny Six Killer Fury. With a name like that, Roman knew that he could have become a warrior. (Alexie, 166)

In "Saint Junior", the desire to be a warrior is quite clearly presented as a male desire – a part of Native American masculinity. Roman's wife, Grace, considers Roman's need to identify as a warrior a genetic throwback:

She'd always understood that his need to prove and test his masculinity was some genetic throwback. Given the choice, he'd rather have been a buffalo hunter and soldier killer (Alexie, 174-175)

It should, however, be noted that while Grace does not explicitly identify her actions and choices as those of a warrior, she has in fact acted very similarly to her husband: she had acquired a prestigious education due to her perfect score on the CAT test and during Roman's career in

basketball she had written and published numerous stories, poems, and essays in esteemed journals – albeit under various pseudonyms. Unlike Roman, Grace kept her success a secret and did not wish to identify as a warrior, but apart from that, their journeys and successes were rather similar. It is then rather clear that while both male and female characters in Alexie’s fiction fall under the definition of what Vizenor calls a warrior of survivance – and it could be argued that in the case of “Saint Junior” the female warrior is ultimately more successful – the male characters are more explicitly and firmly connected to the ideal of the warrior.

The exact wording of Roman’s description of himself as a warrior whose “number-two pencil is a bow and arrow” (Alexie, 171) closely resembles Vizenor’s (1994, 4) call for the warriors of survivance to “encounter their enemies with the same courage in literature as their ancestors evidenced on horses”. In fact, Roman exemplifies the warrior of survivance in two distinct ways: firstly, he is a literary character who fights against dominance and unequal opportunities, and secondly, his method of resistance, of warfare, is putting pen to paper to counter his circumstances.

While most of the stories in *Toughest Indian* present similar outward journeys – ones that are willingly, and enthusiastically, undertaken to improve the quality of life of the protagonist, there is also a story that is an exception to that rule. In “The Sin Eaters”, the main character, Jonah, is forcibly removed from his home and imprisoned in a facility where ‘full-blooded Indians’ are forced to fulfill their patriotic duty and procreate. “The Sin Eaters” can be read in the context of the relocation and removal of Native Americans by the United States government in the 19th century. The story is complex and offers no clear and simple way to read it, but it clearly comments on issues such as relocation and removal, imprisonment, blood, and genetics.

The very beginning of “The Sin Eaters” gives the story a time and a place: the Spokane reservation after the Second World War but before the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The poetic

way this is done references the Holocaust and draws parallels between the Native Americans and the Jewish people:

All of it happened before a handsome Catholic man was assassinated in Dallas, leaving a bright red mark on the tape measure of time, but after men with blue eyes had carried dark-eyed children into the ovens and made them ash.

I was a dark-eyed Indian boy who leaned against pine trees and broke them in half.
(*Toughest Indian*, 76-77)

Alexie's works have been discussed in relation to the Holocaust and Genocide by, for example, Nancy J. Peterson in her 2010 article "If I were Jewish, how would I mourn the dead?: Holocaust and Genocide in the Work of Sherman Alexie". She notes that one of the effects of World War II and the Holocaust was the "belated recognition of other acts of mass destruction and genocide, especially in the United States" and that the works of Sherman Alexie often reference this connection (Peterson, 63). Peterson argues that in Alexie's writing the Holocaust has a complex set of meanings; on one hand, images of the Holocaust are used to expose Native American history as one of genocide and to record the grief and mourning that still influences Native American life today, and on the other hand these images are given a humorous twist that enables the characters to assert their own kind of survivance. Alexie's stories lead to "life-affirming moments of cross-ethnic laughter and cross-cultural communication" (Peterson, 78-79).

In "The Sin Eaters", a young boy named Jonah Lot and his family are captured along with others from their reservation by soldiers, some of whom are white, some black, and some are presumably Native American: "With rifles raised, the soldiers advanced on us. I saw four white faces, two black faces, and a face that looked like mine" (*Toughest Indian*, 82). This makes it impossible to read "The Sin Eaters" as a simple confrontation between the dominant white society and the Native American society and introduces a more nuanced reading of racial power relations in the United States. It should, however, be noted that there are twice as many whites among the soldiers as there are blacks, and the Native American presence is a single soldier. This suggests a dynamic

construction of race relations where everyone has a part to play, but the parts are decidedly not equal.

During the Lots' initial encounter with the soldiers the racial identity of the Lots is quickly established:

“Joseph is full-blood Coeur d’Alene, Sarah is full-blood Spokane,” the black soldier said to a white soldier. “The Coer d’Alene and Spokane are both Interior Salish tribes, so there should be no problem of contamination with the child.” (*Toughest Indian*, 84)

It is clear from the start that blood plays an important role in “The Sin Eaters”, and being full-blood seem to be desirable in the soldiers' eyes. The nature of the contamination mentioned by the black soldier is never explained, but Native American blood is offered as the solution to this contamination. Jonah's father is beaten by the soldiers after resisting Jonah's capture, but eventually Jonah surrenders and lets the soldiers take him away. Jonah has his own predictions of the soldiers' intent, and he accuses them of planning to eat them and to drink their blood. The soldiers neither deny nor confirm that accusations, but simply claim that they need him.

When Jonah is put in a bus with other children from the reservation it is revealed that not all the children taken from the reservation are full-blood like Jonah. There is also Teddy, who has a white father, and Tyrone, whose father is black, and even Sam the Indian, who is really white but lives on the reservation, is also sitting on the same bus. Sam had been severely bullied by the other children, but on that bus he is loved by all, because they imagine his white skin would somehow save them all as the white soldiers noticed he is ‘one of them’:

We all said silent prayers for his safety because we all had, collectively and unconsciously, just decided that Sam's pale skin contained some kind of magic. We thought the white soldiers would notice Sam's white skin and call him brother. (*Toughest Indian*, 88)

Sam's pale skin does not, in the end, save him or his fellow prisoners, and he ends up being shot in the back after trying to escape with one of the Native American children. Sam's fate calls to mind the distinction made in another one of Alexie's stories, “One Good Man”, between Native American and Indian: Native American is someone with Native American blood and Indian is

someone who has lived in a reservation with other Native Americans, or as it might be more appropriate to say here, Indians. One could say that Alexie's distinction between Native American and Indian is essentially the difference between political and cultural activism and real life experiences. In "The Sin Eaters", Sam the Indian has lived in the reservation and that seems to be a more important factor in defining his racial identity than the color of his skin.

"The Sin Eaters" is an extremely complex story that, on one hand, sees racial identity as defined by blood and biology and, on the other hand, still maintains that the defining factor in racial identity is life experience. This inner conflict in the story reflects the discussion on Native American identity explored in chapter 2.1 of this thesis. The role of blood in "The Sin Eaters" calls to mind the attitudes towards interracial relationships that were common not too long ago and that are still held by some. In "The Sin Eaters" the soldiers are concerned with an unexplained contamination and the proposed answer is hidden in Jonah's 'pure' blood. The question of blood as a defining measure of racial identity is a theme that is explored in other stories by Alexie as well. For example, in "Saint Junior" Grace worries about fulfilling her duty to ensure the survival of all Indian people. She is acutely aware of the *mathematics* of racial identity and biology:

Most of her fellow Mohawks, and most members of every other tribe, were marrying white partners and conceiving fragile children. Grace knew how fractions worked; Indians were disappearing by halves. (*Toughest Indian*, 162)

In *Toughest Indian*, the concern with racial identity and biology seems to differ according to the character's age, implying a generational divide in attitudes. In "Class", a story which will be further analyzed in the following section, the protagonist's mother wishes to hide her Native American identity and urges her son to marry a white woman in the hopes that eventually "simple mathematics killed the Indian in us" (*Toughest Indian*, 40). This generational divide reflects the change in the number of people who identify as Native American that was discussed previously in chapter 2. In *Toughest Indian*, the seemingly straightforward biological definition of Native American identity is not exactly undermined – the characters do, after all, consider it a

mathematical fact – but it is shown to be subject to interpretation that is guided by cultural attitudes. In “The Sin Eaters”, Jonah’s *pure* Native American blood is seen as a cure to an unidentified disease, his blood and the racial identity defined by that blood are, then, desired to bring about a greater good for all.

When Jonah is forcibly taken from his home he is taken explicitly as a full-blood Native American, but he is also seen explicitly as male. Because the project that forced Jonah away from his reservation aims at procreation, his masculinity becomes vitally important. Jonah, who was clearly seen as a child in his home, becomes a man as he journeys outside of the reservation. It is very difficult to remove the aspect of sex, gender, and procreation from discussions of biologically defied racial identity, and in “The Sin Eaters” procreation is presented as a sacred duty – as something that can save everyone. It could be argued that Jonah’s blood is seen as a way to hold on to authentic – Native – American identity, which could somehow also help save the world. It should, however, be noted here, that Jonah is not a willing participant in the process. He is taken on this journey by gunpoint and later, after medical examinations that are reminiscent of the medical tests of the Nazis during the Holocaust, he is forced to have sex with an older Native American woman – another unwilling participant. While the story calls to mind imagery that is reminiscent of the Holocaust, the fact that Jonah’s blood is considered valuable and worth preserving is not easily reconciled with the aims of the Nazis’ during the Second World War. What is clearly similar here, is the fact that the fate of a community is totally in the hands of others and the power relations are upheld by violence.

Peterson suggests that many of Alexie’s stories transform the legacy of colonialism and genocide into stories of survivance. At first glance, stories that comment on the horrible and devastating chapters in Native American history and the comparisons drawn between the Holocaust and the Native American genocide seem to “feed into an image of Indians as ‘vanishing’ peoples”. (76) However, this imagery of the Holocaust and comparisons between the experiences of the Jewish

and Native American communities can be read as an example of what Peterson calls rigorous empathy; the act of comparing similar experiences, empathizing, and most importantly, finding common strategies to deal with the legacy of the atrocities that the communities have experienced. Peterson argues that Alexie's stories show that connecting the Native American experience to the Holocaust "may lead to life-affirming moments of cross-ethnic laughter and cross-cultural communication" and that this can be a way to build new, more inclusive, communities (79).

While the journeys taken by Roman in "Saint Junior" and Jonah in "The Sin Eaters" are radically different in that one is a voluntary journey to find a better life, and the other is a forcible relocation and enslavement, the two journeys do share some qualities. In both journeys the protagonists' identity as Native American men is examined and defined when they cross the reservation border and come into contact with people outside of their own community. For Roman, going to college is literally a way to continue the fight that was fought by Geronimo and Crazy Horse; by crossing the reservation border he truly sees himself as a Native American man fighting for his people. Even though Jonah is basically kidnapped, he also has a moment of self-definition when he agrees to go peacefully with the soldiers after seeing how afraid his father is – in essence, Jonah becomes a man at that moment, and he makes the choice in order to save his family. In both stories mobility is the catalyst that prompts the characters to define themselves. By journeying the characters become active agents who embody what Vizenor calls survivance.

3.2. Native American Men in a White Man's World

While in section 3.1 the focus was on the journey out of the reservation, this section will examine the lives of Alexie's characters outside the reservation, in the white man's world. I will analyze the ways in which the characters' identities as Native American men are influenced by their

surroundings, and alternately, how the fact that they are Native American men affect the way they perceive and interact with the world around them.

Alexie's "South by Southwest" is one of the most interesting journey narratives in *Toughest Indian*. In contrast to most of Alexie's stories, the protagonist in "South by Southwest", Seymour, is a white man, who embarks upon what he himself describes as "a nonviolent killing spree". The journey Seymour is planning resembles the classic Western narratives with lone warriors, outlaws, and cowboys who live their lives as outsiders. Seymour plans to travel from Spokane to Arizona because in his eyes Arizona is inherently dangerous and there is something romantic and nostalgic about danger. For that same reason his plans include robberies – he wants to be "potentially dangerous" (*Toughest Indian*, 58). Seymour's plan is, in fact, twofold: in addition to becoming a Gentleman Bandit, he also desperately wants to fall in love, and that is why he takes Salmon Boy with him on this journey. At the very beginning of "South by Southwest" Seymour takes the patrons of a diner hostage with the intention of finding a partner in crime among his hostages. Salmon Boy is a Native American man who volunteers to go with Seymour and to at least try to fall in love with him.

The journey narrative in "South by Southwest" is a rather clear example of the outlaw's western journey that was discussed previously in chapter 2.2, and is one of the most powerful narrative patterns in American literature. These patterns invoke the values of power, freedom, and self-determination, and at the same time they imply a temporal journey into the past (Stout, 6-8). Seymour hopes to recapture the sense of an unconquered West and the restriction-free life that environment would provide. Because Seymour, to his consternation, lives in modern-day America, his journey with Salmon Boy exposes the ways in which their racial identities affect the choices they make and the opportunities they have. What a journey back to freedom and independence is for Seymour, presents itself as a rather different experience for Salmon Boy. "South by Southwest" seems to be a retelling of popular American narratives of a white hero and his non-white sidekick,

such as the narrative of the Lone Ranger and Tonto that has been referenced in earlier works by Alexie.

It is worth noticing that while Seymour and Salmon Boy's journey exemplifies the outlaws' westward journey narrative, the actual direction of their journey is south. In this directional shift we can see the inevitability of change – even if they wish to return to the past, it is not possible – because the West of Seymour's dreams no longer exist. One could read this as a comment on the futility of trying to reclaim the past, and as an endorsement to look to the future, to existence in the here and now. The love story between Seymour and Salmon Boy is a radical rewriting of the old script as it replaces the master/servant dynamic with a sense of companionship and love.

“South by Southwest” is a story that seems to invite the reader to examine the power relations between Seymour and Salmon Boy. They form an outlaw duo that journeys across the land on the footsteps of classic Westerns, but the partnership is unequal from the very beginning. Salmon Boy is first introduced in the story as a hostage, and when he volunteers to join Seymour's journey, Seymour does not bother to ask his name, but rather names him Salmon Boy – referencing his Spokane heritage – and it is quite clear from the start that Seymour will be the one to make all the decisions during their travels. When Seymour questions Salmon Boy in order to determine whether he would be a suitable companion, he wants to ascertain that Salmon Boy is the right kind of Native American for his quest:

Seymour thought about that for five seconds. And then he asked,
 You're an Indian, ain't you?
 Yes, I am, yes, I am. Do you have a problem with that?
 Only if you're one of those buffalo hunters. I can't have a nomad in my car. You
 just can't trust a nomad.
 I come from the salmon tribe, said the fat Indian, and therefore I am a dependable
 man.
 Well, then, you're going with me. (*Toughest Indian*, 59)

It is ironic that Seymour finds it so very important to have a dependable, non-nomad as a companion, when the journey itself is supposed to be one of rebellion, a never-ending journey to recapture the days when men roamed free on the frontier.

In his examination of the masculine style of Western novels, Worden notes that while the cowboy masculinity created in these narratives did produce a masculinity that thrived on crossing the social boundaries of the established society, the model of heroic masculinity still had connotations of whiteness (33-35). In “South by Southwest”, this whiteness of heroic Western masculinity is quite clearly present, as Seymour has the ingredients to become a classic frontier hero, but Salmon Boy is excluded because of his Native American identity. Throughout the story there are statements that attest to Seymour’s privileged position:

He was a white man and, therefore, he was allowed to be romantic.

Salmon Boy smiled.

Like a good Indian, he knew when to talk and when to remain silent. Like a good Indian, he knew there was never a good time to talk. (*Toughest Indian*, 61)

Seymour wanted to be kind and he wanted to be romantic. He wanted to be the Man Who Saved the Indian. He wanted to be the Coyote Nailed to a Fence Post. He wanted to be the Man Who Could Shoot Thirteen People.

He was a white man, and therefore he could dream. (*Toughest Indian*, 57)

Seymour’s white skin gives him a privileged position, and he embodies what Connell and Messerschmidt have called hegemonic masculinity; as a white man Seymour’s masculinity is the social norm, and that gives him a position of power in society (846). Salmon Boy is in a disadvantaged position, he cannot dream the way Seymour dreams, nor can he assert himself with the same kind of assurance – he *knows* to stay silent.

“South by Southwest” also alludes to differences among Native American masculinities as well: the fact that Salmon Boy is not a member of a nomadic tribe is very important in defining whether he is trustworthy or not in Seymour’s eyes. Salmon Boy himself seems to find the fact that his ancestors were not nomads equally important, which can be read as an example of the complexity of the idea of hegemonic masculinity. Seymour, as a white man, is on top of the hierarchy of masculinity, but Salmon Boy has the hegemonic position among his own community – in the Spokane area, where the tribes were traditionally not nomadic, Salmon Boy represents a masculinity that is socially more acceptable among white men than, for example, the masculinity

represented by the buffalo hunters of the Great Plains area, who have traditionally been seen as the epitome of aggressive Indian masculinity.

“South by Southwest” is an intriguing story also because of the love story the characters are determined to create. In contrast with traditional narratives that almost without exception include a heteronormative relationship, Alexie’s story presents its readers with two men who decide to fall in love. As mentioned above, Seymour’s initial plan was to find a companion to join his non-violent killing spree and with whom to fall in love – he was planning a journey to recapture the romance and danger of the Western Frontier. When Salmon Boy volunteered for this mission, Seymour had asked for someone to fall in love with, and the fact that they were both men did not seem to be an issue for Salmon Boy:

I’ll go with you, said the fat Indian.
 Are you gay? asked Seymour. I’m not gay. Are you gay?
 No, sir, I am not homosexual, said the fat Indian, but I do believe in love.
 (*Toughest Indian*, 59)

Salmon Boy seems to consider love and sex as two rather completely separate issues, and he does not consider deliberately attempting to fall in love with a man as a threat to his masculinity. Here we can see echoes of a more fluid understanding of sex and gender, where socially acceptable masculinity is not necessarily rigidly heteronormative. However, we must note that Seymour, while occasionally questioning how two men could learn to love each other, is definitely not opposed to falling in love with another man – in fact, he seems to be looking for guidance on this front from Salmon Boy. It could possibly be argued that Alexie is implying that white masculinity has something to learn from Native American masculinity when it comes to love, sex, and gender.

As Evans points out, the relationship between Seymour and Salmon Boy in “South by Southwest” is not exactly a homosexual relationship, but a homosocial one with homoerotic undertones (197). Their goal is to achieve same-sex love, not physical intimacy, and this proves to be difficult because of their preconceived notions of what sex, love, and intimacy entail. As soon as

they get on the road, they decide that kissing is needed to make sure that they complete their quest to fall in love:

Do you think the police are following us? asked Salmon Boy.
 If they're not now, said Seymour, they soon will be.
 Well, then, said Salmon Boy. He asked, Do you think we should kiss now?
 It seems like the right time, don't it? asked Seymour. He licked his lips.
 Yes, it does, said Salmon Boy. He wished he had a mint.
 They kissed, keeping their tongues far away from each other, and then told each other secrets. (*Toughest Indian*, 60)

Later on, they make a decision not to kiss anymore, as neither of them found it all that pleasurable, and they find out that physical intimacy can bring happiness without sex:

I don't want to have sex, said Salmon Boy.
 I don't either.
 But how will we fall in love if we don't have sex?
 I don't know.
 They held each other tighter and tighter. They were afraid.
 I am happy in your arms, said Seymour.
 And I am happy in yours. (*Toughest Indian*, 70)

They held each other tighter and tighter. They were not aroused. They were warm and safe. (*Toughest Indian*, 70)

It could be argued that in “South by Southwest” Seymour and Salmon Boy manage to overcome what Evans calls “conditioned notions of stereotypical heteromasculine behavior” (197). They forge a meaningful intimate relationship without express physicality, thus broadening the definition of what men stereotypically consider intimate.

The exploration of what intimacy between men might look like without a sexual component in “South by Southwest” problematizes the stereotypical image of a heterosexual man – whether white, or Native American. Both Salmon Boy and Seymour’s identities are grounded in explicit heterosexuality at the very beginning of the story, in a similar fashion as the protagonist’s identity in “The Toughest Indian in the World” which will be discussed in detail in chapter 4.2, but as the story progresses, they challenge the ways in which heterosexual masculinity is conventionally understood and presented. Evans states that in Western society intimacy outside of sex is a realm of experience that is closed off for men, and due to cultural and societal pressure men have been

conditioned to only seek intimacy through sex (197-198). This conventional, restrictive understanding of masculinity leaves room for postcolonial resistance in the form of reclaiming non-binary systems of sex and gender as Tatonetti suggests. It is not inconsequential, that in “South by Southwest” it is Salmon Boy, who is equally heterosexual and confused by their search for intimacy, and not Seymour, volunteers to become Seymour’s lover and companion, thus suggesting a homosexual, or at the very least a homosocial relationship. Salmon Boy is also the one to distinguish feelings of love and affection from the physical act of kissing when they realize that physical attraction will never be a part of their relationship.

While Seymour and Salmon Boy journey from Spokane to Arizona, they meet quite a few people, and as the epithet ‘nonviolent killing spree’ suggests, no one is actually harmed during their mission. In fact, they are quite emphatically not taking lives, but rather, collecting stories from their victims. An old lady tells them the story of her dead husband who had fought in the Second World War, and when Seymour holds a family of four on gunpoint, he does not ask for their money, but for the man to tell them the story of how they fell in love:

Through the windshield, Salmon Boy watched as Seymour pointed the gun at a tourist family. Mother, father, son, daughter.

Here, here, said the father, you can have all the money.

I don’t want your money, said Seymour, I want to know how you met, I want to know how you fell in love.

But that’s our story, said the father, you can’t steal it. (*Toughest Indian*, 67-68)

In the end the family does tell their story, and Seymour and Salmon Boy continue on.

As mentioned above, Seymour and Salmon Boy’s journey fits the description of the outlaw’s journey narrative that has been common in American Westerns and buddy-films. If we examine the journey from the viewpoint of *time*, Seymour and Salmon Boy’s non-violent killing spree, which does not aim to end and collect lives but stories, is rather difficult. On one hand, they are recreating the classic outlaw’s journey and looking for their own Wild West, thus journeying back in time; but on the other hand, their quest to fall in love while travelling manages to break existing norms of love, sex, and intimacy, and thus finding a way forward. Perhaps one could say that Seymour and

Salmon Boy revisit the past and try to find a way to reconcile themselves with that past, to coexist, and to love each other.

When we take into account the multidimensional nature of Seymour and Salmon Boy's version of the outlaw's journey, their journey is quite easily identified as an example of a homing-out story. As explicated in chapter 2.2, homing-out stories are a narrative structure, identified, for example, by Herman, that are a direction taken by much of recently published Native American writing. Homing-out is defined in opposition, or at least in comparison, to the traditional reading of Native American literature as homing-in stories introduced by William Bevis in 1987. Bevis's homing-in plot was a journey *back*, a reconciliation with the past and a return to traditional life. The newer narrative of homing-out is described by Herman as an attempt to broaden the definition of *home*, to absorb new social and cultural meanings, and to avoid the problems inherent in the homing-in narratives; most importantly the diminished role of the individual and the relegation of Native American culture into something static and unchanging (Herman, 4-5).

"South by Southwest" has many of the characteristics that Herman states are essential to the homing-out narrative. Salmon Boy, the Native American protagonist of the story, does literally move away from his home in Spokane, but his journey seems to be motivated by a wish to find somewhere to belong to. The journey is one of broadening the characters' understanding of love, and they do indeed find new social and cultural meanings for love that were unavailable for them before. The reconciliation with the past comes through the acquisition of a broader understanding of their present situation, and, as Herman comments on homing-out plots, the reconciliation is more allegorical than in homing-in stories, and it has very little, if anything, to do with territory, reservation, or homeland. The reconciliation in "South by Southwest" is a personal one, as it is in most homing-out narratives – Salmon Boy and Seymour manage to reconcile their new personal experience of love and intimacy with their preconceived notions of what intimacy means for men.

Salmon Boy is one of Alexie's numerous warriors of survivance in *The Toughest Indian in the World* and it is precisely in the homing-out narrative structure that Salmon Boy's status as a warrior of survivance is produced. Vizenor describes survivance as active presence in the contemporary world instead of yearning for a past that cannot be recaptured (1999, 4-5). As mentioned above, the homing-out narrative overcomes the problem of static Native American culture that is inherent in homing-in narratives. Salmon Boy actively searches for new ways to exist in the contemporary world, to develop his understanding of masculinity and intimacy despite the pressure of pre-existing notions of how men form meaningful intimate relationships. While Salmon Boy and Seymour's journey follows the classic structure of Westerns and buddy-films and they do in a sense move *back* in time, the solutions they find are new and definitely tied to the contemporary reality.

As mentioned earlier in chapter 2.2 in connection to the idea of tactical mobility as survivance, the concept of the frontier tends to be redefined in Native American writing that utilizes mobility as a means of survivance (Gamber, 224-229). Gamber notes that frontier more akin to a zone than a border, and that frontiers exist wherever colonizers and those who are colonized meet. In the case of "South by Southwest", the journey taken by Seymour and Salmon Boy can, then, in itself, be called a frontier.

4. Journeys Back

In contrast to the previous chapter and journeys beyond the borders of the reservation, this chapter analyzes the journeys taken by the characters in *Toughest Indian* that can be described as journeys back. These *return journeys* are, at least superficially, examples of the archetypical homing-in narrative that was identified by William Bevis as a recurring theme in Native American fiction. Sherman Alexie's stories do, however, offer different kinds of homing-in narratives, that ultimately

transform the inherently nostalgic and culturally static homing-in story into a narrative of survivance. In the first subchapter I will examine the difficulties faced by the characters who journey back to the reservation or who intentionally aim to return to the Native American community that they have – for all intents and purposes – left behind before. The second subchapter concentrates on the characters of *Toughest Indian* as warriors of survivance and analyzes the role of mobility – of journeying – as a method or vehicle of survivance.

4.1. “You might be Native American but you sure as hell ain’t Indian”

In “Class”, the protagonist, Edgar Eagle Runner, recounts two journeys through which he metaphorically hopes to return to his beginnings and regain his *Indianness*. Eagle Runner is a lawyer who had fought his way out of the reservation by education – the outward journey he has made before the events of “Class” is very reminiscent of Roman’s journey in “Saint Junior” – and currently he lives his life surrounded by white society: Eagle Runner’s wife, Susan, is white, and so are most of his colleagues in the law firm. Especially Eagle Runner’s marriage with a white woman addresses the question of inter-ethnic romance that has a great significance for ethnic male assimilation in American society. Eagle Runner’s contact with his Native American community is very minimal after leaves the reservation. His family does attend Eagle Runner and Susan’s wedding, though, and especially his mother is extremely pleased about the fact that Eagle Runner married a white woman. As mentioned above in Chapter 2.1, Eagle Runner’s mother wishes she were white, while Eagle Runner finds his Native heritage to be an asset in both his personal and professional life. Eagle Runner always tells white women that he is part-Aztec as he believes that it lends him more ethnic weight and makes him more interesting, and in his professional life he enjoys the fact that his long black hair “impressed jurors but irritated judges” (*Toughest Indian*, 38). It is

clearly established in the story that Eagle Runner utilizes his heritage and especially his darker skin and long hair, but simultaneously rejects all ethnic stereotypes pertaining to behavior: “I don’t drink alcohol, never have, mostly because I don’t want to maintain and confirm any of my ethnic stereotypes” (*Toughest Indian*, 47).

The catalysts for Eagle Runner’s journeys back to the Native American community are problems and tragedies in his personal life. The first journey is taken after Eagle Runner discovers that Susan is having an affair, and he seeks to find a way to retaliate:

I suppose I could have exacted revenge on her by sleeping with one or more of her friends or coworkers. I’d received any number of subtle offers to do such a thing, but I didn’t want to embarrass her. Personal pain should never be made public. Instead, in quiet retaliation, I patronized prostitutes whenever I traveled out of town.
(*Toughest Indian*, 42)

In the extract above, one can also read an implicit reference to the stereotypical image of the “stoic Indian” who does not show his pain. This implicit reference is strengthened by the fact that dealing with pain and suffering is mentioned continuously throughout the story, often in connection with race, as in the very beginning of the story: “So much pain for such a white woman.” Eagle Runner seems to find his stoicism to be a sign of humility and, somewhat paradoxically, a reason for pride. “Class” reveals the differences between the ways Eagle Runner, a Native American man, and Susan, a white woman, deal with pain: Eagle Runner suffers in silence and is content with a quiet personal retaliation, while Susan has turned her pain into an anecdote for parties.

The first journey in “Class” takes place in San Francisco, where Eagle Runner hires a prostitute after a deposition hearing. Before, he has only ever hired white prostitutes, “all of them blond and blue-eyed”, but this time he asks for a Native American prostitute, because he had never had sex with a Native American woman (*Toughest Indian*, 43). As Eagle Runner’s marriage to a white woman, his patronage of only white prostitutes invokes the idea of assimilation through romantic/sexual relations with the ethnic ‘other’. His wish to hire a Native American prostitute is, then, a complete change to his earlier behavioral pattern – he no longer wishes to assimilate in the

white mainstream society, but instead, is searching for a way to reconnect with the Native American community. The woman sent by the escort service has worked in the porn industry and calls herself Tawny Feather, but Eagle Runner has trouble reconciling this with his image of a Native American woman:

I wondered what kind of Indian woman would call herself Tawny Feather. Sexually speaking, Indian women and men are simultaneously promiscuous and modest. That's a contradiction, but it also happens to be the truth. I just couldn't imagine an Indian woman who would star in pornographic movies.
(*Toughest Indian*, 44)

When Tawny Feather arrives to Eagle Runner's hotel room, it is revealed that she is not, in fact, a Native American, but a white woman dressed in stereotypically Native American apparel: "a conservative tan suit and a string of fake pearls. Dream-catcher earrings, turquoise rings, a stainless-steel eagle pinned to her lapel". But she was "also a white woman wearing a black wig over her short blond hair". (*Toughest Indian*, 45) The difficulties Eagle Runner has with imagining a Native American woman who would have a career as a porn star, reflect some of the issues relating to the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality, especially the need to police and control the frontier that is made of sexual and ethnic boundaries. Nagel emphasizes that *ethnosexual* borderlands are frontiers where the distinctions between *us* and *them* are affirmed and/or challenged, as they are simultaneously surveilled, policed, and restricted, but also "constantly penetrated by individuals forging sexual links with ethnic 'others'" (Nagel 2000, 113).

Eagle Runner's night with Tawny Feather addresses the issue of ethnosexual frontiers on two levels. Firstly, his amazement by a Native American woman with a supposed porn career exposes his preconceived notions about Native American (female) sexuality and the restrictions and rules he, at least unconsciously, recognizes to be applicable here: his own ethnic community should hold itself to a 'higher' standard of sexual conduct. It has been noted, in relation to ethnic minorities, that "a great deal of attention is paid to the sexual demeanor of group members – in inspection and enforcement of both formal and informal rules of sexual conduct" (Nagel 2000, 113). It could also

be argued that some of Eagle Runner's censure of any kind of hypersexuality is aimed equally at himself; after all, the sexually dangerous, aggressive, and promiscuous stereotypical Indian has been a part of the American cultural field since the first encounters between Native Americans and the European settlers, and enforcing such a stereotype would certainly be a failure on Eagle Runner's quest to reclaim authentic *Indianness*. Secondly, the fact that Tawny Feather is revealed to be a white woman dressed as a Native American exposes "the sexualization of exotic others" (Nagel 2000, 114). As Nagel states, the conquest of the West was filled with sexualized encounters between the colonizers and the Native peoples, and culturally the sexual relationships between white men and Native women have come to represent conquest, domination, and power (2000, 120). Similarly, Eagle Runner's relationship with a white woman can be read in the context of reclaiming power. The two women, Eagle Runner's white wife and Tawny Feather, whom he at first assumes to be Native American, could, in the context of ethnosexual frontiers, represent identification with and power over these two ethnic groups.

Eagle Runner's journey to exact personal revenge while reconnecting with his Native American community and heritage by having sex with a Native American woman for the first time in his life, ultimately fails. The prostitute he hires is only pretending to be Native American, which simultaneously confirms Eagle Runner's image of Native American women and creates a parallel to Eagle Runner's own self-admitted habit of emphasizing his Native American looks to enhance his attractiveness. It appears that Eagle Runner sees his own struggles to reconnect with his Native American identity in Tawny Feather – donning the stereotypical Native American apparel is not enough to make one a Native American, and Tawny Feather exposes the disconnect between appearances and identity.

Eagle Runner's search for a connection to his Native American identity raises the question of different definitions of Native American identity. In chapter 2.1, I discussed the four viewpoints on Native American identity as introduced by Eva Marie Garroutte. As Garroutte notes, these different

viewpoints – legal, biological, cultural, and personal – offer a variety of possibilities to negotiate a Native American identity (6-8). In “Class”, Eagle Runner’s connection to and acceptance of his Native American identity hinges on two of the viewpoint identified by Garrouette: those of biology and culture. His appreciation of the biological definition of Native American identity is explicitly stated in “Class”, as stated above, and he seeks to enforce and make visible his ethnic identity by emphasizing his Native American heritage – especially the fact that he is part-Aztec. Eagle Runner’s identity is grounded in the biological definition of ethnic identity, but he is not untouched by the other definitions; in fact, the cultural aspect of identity is a significant source of unease for him.

When tragedy strikes Eagle Runner and he feels unsure of his place in the world where he lives and works, his coping mechanisms – hiring a ‘Native American’ prostitute, as discussed above, and visiting an ‘Indian bar’, which will be discussed in depth below – expose the fact that Eagle Runner considers the cultural aspect of Native American identity as something of a failure on his part: by leaving the reservation and making a life for himself with a white wife and white colleagues he feels he also left behind a part of his identity. As mentioned above, the different ways to negotiate Native American identity do offer a multifaceted understanding of ethnic identity and they do make identifying oneself as Native American available for a wider spectrum of people. However, Sherman Alexie’s writing, for example in “Class”, draws attention to the fact that these viewpoints are not only different and, in the best scenario, complimentary, but they can be competing definitions that cause problems both in self-identification and in the context of communities. The encounter with Tawny Feather forces Eagle Runner to confront the fact that he feels disconnected from his Native American heritage despite his biology, and he is faced with the possibility that maybe his Native American biology and looks are only a disguise, similar to Tawny Feather’s disguise, as long as he remains disconnected from the Native American community and reservation.

Eagle Runner's second journey back is a trip to a local bar the clientele of which is almost exclusively Native American. Eagle Runner and Susan's firstborn has died shortly after being born and their relationship is strained by their grief. Eagle Runner's plan to relieve some of the pain is to visit a bar that is not like the fancy cocktail places he visits with his white fellow lawyers, and he goes to Chuck's, which he assumes is "an Indian bar, one of those establishments where the clientele, through chance and design, is mostly indigenous" (*Toughest Indian*, 47). While his first failed journey was sexual, this time Eagle Runner is searching for a way to reconnect with his Native American identity and to escape his pain through camaraderie. When he sees the patrons conversing, Eagle Runner is jealous of their connection and seeks to take part in the activity by simply watching a guy playing pool by himself. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the man playing does not see Eagle Runner as a comrade, but rather as a threat to be fought.

The pool player, called Junior by the bartender, quickly initiates an altercation by attacking Eagle Runner and releasing him only after the bartender, Sissy, commands him to let Eagle Runner go. This does not, however, stop Junior from threatening to dislocate Eagle Runner's hips if he sees him again:

He took a few steps back, pointed at me.

"I'm sick of little shits like you," he said. "Fucking urban Indians in your fancy fucking clothes. Fuck you. Fuck you."

I looked down and saw my denim jacket and polo shirt, the khakis and brown leather loafers. I looked like a Gap ad.

"I ever see you again," Junior said. "I'm going to dislocate your hips."
(*Toughest Indian*, 50)

Eagle Runner is not seen as someone who belongs to the community of the bar, and his presence is not welcome. It seems that by escaping the reservation and the problems that vast numbers of Native Americans face Eagle Runner has removed himself from the community for good – he does not share their life experiences, and because of that he is also denied the support of the community. Junior proceeds to list all the things that separate Eagle Runner from the rest of the bar clientele: he has money, a fancy car, a home in a respectable white neighborhood, and a white wife. It is only

after Junior tells Eagle Runner to “go home to your white fucking kids” that Eagle Runner truly reacts to his taunts and fights back. Once again Sissy the bartender separates the two men, but she makes it clear that she is willing to engage in the fight only for Junior’s sake:

“Why are you protecting him?” Junior asked.

“I don’t give a shit about him,” she said. “But I do care about you. You get into trouble again and you’re going to jail forever. You know that.” (*Toughest Indian*, 51)

Eagle Runner, however, insists on fighting Junior behind the bar even after Sissy gives him the chance to leave the bar safely, because according to him, “[d]eep in the heart of the heart of every Indian man’s heart, he believes he is Crazy Horse” (*Toughest Indian*, 53).

Predictably, the fight does not end in Eagle Runner’s favor, and he later wakes up in the bar’s storeroom with Sissy washing his bloody face with a cold towel. After a failed attempt to seduce Sissy, she asks Eagle Runner if fighting was supposed to impress her, and whether he thinks that a brawl behind a bar makes him a warrior. Eagle Runner’s affirmative opinion becomes evident when he immediately thinks that Sissy can “read minds” (*Toughest Indian*, 55). Sissy then goes on to state that “[a]ll of you Indian guys think you’re Crazy Horse”, a remarks which reveals that she sees some characteristics in Eagle Runner that she sees in all Native American men. In a way this remark by Sissy validates Eagle Runner’s image of the Native American man as a warrior, as it seems to be an image shared by other Native American men, but at the same time, she exposes the fact that the warrior image does not carry the same weight or recognition for other people.

Even though Sissy recognized Eagle Runner’s wish to be a warrior as something inherently important to Native American men, she also insists that Eagle Runner is emphatically not a part of their world. When she asks him why he came to the bar that night, the exchange that followed clearly defined them as members of two totally different groups:

“I wanted to be with my people,” I said.

“Your people?” asked Sissy. “Your people? We’re not your people.”

“We’re Indians.”

“Yeah, we’re Indians. You, me, Junior. But we live in this world and you live in your world.” (*Toughest Indian*, 55)

Both Eagle Runner and Sissy recognize the differences in their life experiences, and when Eagle Runner states that he does not like his world, Sissy has neither patience nor sympathy for his problems:

“Junior and me,” she said. “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.*” (*Toughest Indian*, 56)

Eagle Runner does, in fact, know how much the people in the bar want to have his life, as he himself spent his whole childhood and teenage years dreaming of living the life he currently has, and he does admit, at least intellectually, that the life he leads is very privileged in comparison to Sissy and Junior’s lives. For Eagle Runner, his comparatively privileged life does not, however, manage to mask the fact that Sissy has three children while he is grieving the death of his firstborn. After another failed journey to reconnect with his people, Eagle Runner returns home to Susan, and when questioned about his journey, he simply says that he was gone, but is now back.

Eagle Runner’s second journey was similar to the first one in that the journey revealed the tension between the biological and the cultural definitions of Native American identity. What is different during this second journey is that the first journey dealt with Eagle Runner’s own unease, whereas the second journey to the Indian bar exposes the Native American community’s dismissal of Eagle Runner as a member of their community. Sissy and Junior do not recognize Eagle Runner as a part of their world, because he lives in a privileged white neighborhood with his ‘white problems’, whereas the regular patrons of the bar have to worry about the bare necessities of life, such as having enough to eat.

While the schism between Sissy, Junior and Eagle Runner can quite clearly be read as a reference to what Garrouette calls the cultural definition of Native American identity, there are some differences in Alexie’s treatment of the issue. Garrouette noted that the cultural definition is strongly connected to stereotyped tribal and religious practices and thus carries implications of homogeneity and timelessness (66-67), but Alexie’s version of the cultural definition does not rely on specific

tribal cultures, but, instead, seems to be rooted in a kind of pan-tribal Native American life experience. This reflects the overall trend of not referencing or advocating any specific tribal traditions that is apparent in much of Alexie's writing. Instead of tribal traditions, the cultural definition of Native American identity in many of Alexie's stories is comprised of experiences of reservation life, poverty, and exclusion from the wider society. It could be said that this transformation of the cultural definition of Native American identity is a step into the direction of what Gerald Vizenor (1999, 11-13) called survivance – there is no attempt to return back into an irretrievable past, but rather an attempt to understand the contemporary presence of Native American peoples.

Eagle Runner's two ultimately failed journeys back to his Native American identity do not offer definite, clear-cut answers to the question of whether biology or culture is the true defining factor for Native American identity. Rather, "Class" gives the reader a glimpse into how these definitions can problematize ethnic identity: the story acknowledges the importance of the image of the warrior to Native American men, and in the end it is precisely the warrior ethos that fueled Eagle Runner's education and made his journey out of the reservation possible; which, ironically, is now the obstacle between Eagle Runner and the Native Americans in the bar.

In "Class", Alexie presents his readers with a dichotomy of Indian/Native American that is also explicitly referenced in the story "One Good Man", in which a college professor of Native American heritage, who places great value on Native American political activism and criticism, is teaching a course on Native American culture and is addressed by the protagonist's father, who has come to listen in on the lectures his son is attending. The professor asks his students to explain what it means to be Indian, and while none of the students is willing to answer, the father has something to say:

"I don't know," said my father. "Now, you may have some Indian blood. I can see a little bit of that aboriginal bone structure in your face, but you ain't Indian. No. You might even hang out with some Indians. Maybe even get a little of a ha-ha when one

of the women is feeling sorry for you. But you ain't Indian. No. You might be a Native American, but you sure as hell ain't Indian." (*Toughest Indian*, 227-228)

It seems that the biological definition of ethnic identity is enough to be called and to identify as Native American, but to be an Indian, one has to fit the criteria of the cultural definition of Native American identity, as well – to share the life experiences of the Native American community. In the end, the message that emerges from “Class” seems to be that shared life experiences are the most powerful factor in defining the group one belongs to. After all, “Class” ends with Eagle Runner returning home to Susan and finding at least a modicum of peace with the one person with whom he shared the biggest tragedy of his life, the loss of a child.

The journeys Eagle Runner embarks upon in “Class” can be categorized as homing-in stories. Eagle Runner feels lost and disconnected and attempts to heal himself by reconnecting with his Native American heritage that has mostly been a matter of biology to him since he left the reservation. As stated above in chapter 2.2, the homing-in structure identified by Bevis is a journey *back*, with the aim being reconciliation with traditional life and community and even rediscovery of one's own identity (Herman, 4-5; Dennis, 90-92). Eagle Runner's homing-in journeys are not successful in the end, and it could be argued that the reason for the failure of his pursuits is that the home he tries to reach no longer exists.

As with the cultural definition of Native American identity, much of the criticism on the homing-in structure is based on the fact that these concepts rely on a very static and unchanging understanding of Native American culture and identity (Garrouette; Dennis). Eagle Runner's homing-in journeys are ultimately futile, as the stereotypical, almost mythological, Native American culture and identity are not, in fact, accessible – Tawny Feather exposes the fact that appearances are not enough to authenticate an identity and the trip to the Indian bar reveals the rather grim reality of the Native American community of the bar; instead of support and camaraderie, he finds jealousy and misery. In “Class”, Alexie repudiates the central feature of

homing-in narratives; Eagle Runner does not manage to *return* to a Native American identity and culture – they have to find out what those mean in the contemporary world.

“Class” recognizes the attraction of the idea of returning home to traditional life and people, but simultaneously the story embodies Vizenor’s concept of survivance in that it makes apparent the fact that a return to a past that is to a large extent imagined and stereotypical is not a viable option for Native presence in today’s America. Vizenor’s postindian warriors of survivance oppose the image of the *vanishing Indian*, the idea that the Native American peoples are a part of a world that is surely disappearing – a world of frontiers and warriors – and seek to solidify their presence in the contemporary world (Vizenor 1999). Eagle Runner’s failed homing-in journeys make it apparent that stepping into a pre-Columbine Native America is not a possibility, and that his life is in the here and now, as is the life of the Native Americans who do not admit him into their midst in the bar.

Eagle Runner could, then, be read as a character who, at the beginning of “Class”, clearly embodies a warrior of survivance. He has carved a space for himself in the contemporary world, and, as many of Alexie’s characters, he employs irony as a warrior of survivance in Vizenor’s explication often does (Vizenor 1999, 11-14). A warrior of survivance understands the irony of stereotypical images and *uses* them; for example, Eagle Runner emphasizes his long black hair to give him a professional advantage and exaggerates his Aztec heritage to appeal to white women. Personal tragedies, first a betrayal by his wife and then the death of his firstborn, cause him to doubt his identity and place in the world, but in the end he regains at least some of the surety he had in the beginning: his place is with his family and the life he fought so hard to achieve in the first place.

Eagle Runner’s attempted return journeys in “Class” are also interesting when considered in terms of not only Native American journey narratives but the common narrative patterns in American literature as a whole. While the homing-in pattern has been seen as the traditional narrative structure in Native American literature, the return journey is much less common in

American literature in the wider sense. The homing-in narratives in Native American literature are said to bring reconciliation and to signal victory and peace, whereas the return journeys in mainstream American literature are most often characterized by defeat, surrender, disappointment, and frustration, as discussed in chapter 2.2. In a sense the attempted homing-in journeys in “Class” are more similar to the return journeys of mainstream American literature than the homing-in narratives Bevis identified in Native American fiction.

4.2. Warriors on the Road

In the previous chapter I analyzed the failed homing-in journeys in “Class”, and in this chapter the analysis will move on to journeys with a backward direction but significantly more successful results. The focus is on two stories, “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World”, both of which serve as great examples of mobility as survivance. This chapter will also focus on the connection between survivance and the Native American sex/gender variability discussed in chapter 2.1.

In “Indian Country”, the protagonist, Low Man, travels from Seattle to Montana to meet Carlotta, a Navajo woman who lives on the Flathead Indian Reservation and teaches English at the Flat head Indian College. The title, “Indian Country”, is in itself a reference to Low Man’s journey *back*, because ‘Indian country’ has historically been used to refer to the ‘unconquered’ West, the control of which remained in the hands of the Native peoples, and in the contemporary world the reservations are often considered ‘Indian Country’ within America. ‘Indian country’ also carries connotations of a space where Native Americans are the majority and the one’s with the power to either affirm or challenge the stereotypical image of the ‘Indian’. Low Man “was a Coeur d’Alene Indian, even though his mother was white” and he is a writer. Upon arriving in Montana, Low Man

finds out that Carlotta has just yesterday married Chuck, who according to Carlotta's boss has been sober a year longer than Low Man. When it becomes apparent that meeting and marrying Carlotta is not an option, Low Man has to find a new meaning and purpose to his journey to Montana, and finally, after being thrown out by the airport security, he ends up on a quest for a new story. For Low Man, writing is something of a battlefield, where a pen is an appropriate weapon, and the enemies are the simulations, that reinforce the stereotype of the vanishing Indian, which are primarily created by white men:

When he was working on a book, when he was writing, Low Man would drink a six-pack of soda every hour or so, and then, hopped up on the caffeine, he'd pound the keyboard, chapter after chapter, until carpal tunnel syndrome fossilized the bones in his wrists. There it was, the central dilemma of his warrior life: repetitive stress. In his day, Crazy Horse had to worry about Custer and the patriotic sociopaths of the Seventh Cavalry. (*Toughest Indian*, 124)

During his journey to write a new story, or indeed, to *become* a new story, Low Man visits a 7-11 and leaves his suitcase behind after telling the cashier that there is a body, or maybe just a head, inside the bag. After leaving the 7-11 Low Man is then arrested in a Barnes and Noble by two policemen carrying the suitcase he had left behind. When the policemen ask Low Man if he is Mr. Smith, he seems to have shed his identity with the suitcase and just answers: "You must be mistaken. My name is Crazy Horse." It seems that by embarking on a journey with no clear destination and leaving behind the vestiges of his professional life, Low Man has taken on the persona of a warrior.

The latter part of "Indian Country" describes how Low Man was picked up from jail by his old friend, Tracy, and was then invited to dinner with Tracy, her partner Sara, and Sara's parents. The atmosphere at dinner is extremely tense as Sara's Native American, Mormon, parents try to persuade her not to marry Tracy – a white woman – and Low Man, who has been in love with Tracy for years, tries to both defend and understand the relationship between Tracy and Sara. The dinner becomes a conversation – or more accurately, a fight – between Low Man and Sara's father Sid, as they struggle to make sense of a world that is not run by men. Low Man's defense of Tracy and

Sara's love engages the reader in a discussion about the origins of homophobia and heterosexism in Native American communities. As mentioned previously in chapter 2.1, Sherman Alexie has been rather outspoken about his concerns about the increasing homophobia of Native American communities, and "Indian Country" is a story that directly addresses this question.

The aggressively homophobic character in "Indian Country", Sara's father, Sid, formulates his objections in two different – in fact, somewhat contradictory – ways: first of all, he sees Sara's lesbian relationship as a deviation from the will of God and attempts to save his daughter by bringing her Christian values of salvation. Secondly, he blames Sara's homosexuality on Tracy's influence: "My daughter wasn't, wasn't a gay until she met this, this white woman" (*Toughest Indian*, 146). As Evans notes, "blaming Western culture ... for introducing the supposed 'deviance' of same-sex love to otherwise 'pure' communities is one of the oldest of homophobic strategies" (199). Similar discussions on homosexuality as a Western import are prevalent also, for example, in many African communities, of which Uganda is probably the clearest example at the moment.

Low Man's defense of same-sex relationships is very provocative and confrontational, and when Sid asks him what he thinks Jesus would have thought about a lesbian marriage, Low Man proposes that Jesus himself was a homosexual:

"No, no, no," continued Low. "Just think about it. I mean, there Jesus was, sticking up for the poor, the disadvantaged, the disabled. Who else but a fag would be that liberal, huh? And damn, Jesus hung out with twelve guys wearing great robes and great hair and never, ever talked about women." (*Toughest Indian*, 142)

"I'm being dead serious here, Sid," said Low. "I mean, Jesus was an incredibly decent human being and they crucified him for it. He sounds like a fag to me." (*Toughest Indian*, 143)

Low Man's defense of homosexuality in "Indian Country" is simultaneously a defense of a liberal reading of Christian teaching. Both Evans and Tatonetti state that gender and sexuality are integral areas of colonization and that Christian values have been a powerful factor in silencing and corrupting traditional Native American attitudes toward gender and sexuality (Evans, 198-200; Tatonetti, 204). The fact that Low Man does not ground his defense in 'authentic, traditional Native

American values' but instead chooses to operate within the framework of much of the contemporary American debate on LGBT-issues – Christianity – attests to his role as a warrior of survivance. His objective in his fight with Sid is not to return to a time and place before the conquest of America, but to move forward and create a place for Sara, a lesbian Native American, in the contemporary American society. While Tracy and Sara's relationship may reflect some historical tribal traditions, the representation of their relationship is very much a "contemporary expression ... of human sexual desire" that is "both transhistorical and transcultural" (Evans, 190).

"Indian Country" is also a challenge to a patriarchal society, where all power is in the hands of men. When Sid asks Low Man to "pretend we're alone here" and to "pretend this is a country of men", Low Man is clearly aware that, in fact, they are decidedly not in a country of men, and that there are three women – Tracy, Sara, and Sara's mother – with them at the dinner table, waiting to hear and judge his answer. He decides to avoid the question and claim to have no stake in matters of Christian theology, thus giving Tracy the opportunity to engage her future father-in-law. It should also be noted that Sid seems to be equally aware of, and discomfited by, the modern power dynamics between men and women, that do not follow the guidelines provided by his Mormon faith, as he explicitly asks Low Man to *pretend* that men have the ultimate power in society. The following excerpt draws attention to the irony and futility of two men discussing the possible marriage between two women, and it becomes apparent that Sid, the self-proclaimed patriarch, is the only one who does not realize it:

"I don't think it matters what I think," said Low Man. "I'm not a Christian. Let them have their Jesus."

"How vague," said Sid. "Tell me, then, what do you think their Jesus would say about lesbian marriage?"

Tracy and Sara sighed and leaned back in their chairs. How often had men sat around dinner tables and discussed women's lives, their choices, and the reasons why one woman reached across the bed to touch another woman? (*Toughest Indian*, 141)

When the argument escalates, Low Man further questions Sid's chosen brand of controlling parenting and suggests a softer approach to dealing with his daughter. What is also noteworthy here,

is the fact that in steering Sid to a softer, more accepting attitude towards Sara, he sacrifices his own long-held hopes of separating Tracy and Sara: “‘What’s wrong with you?’ Low asked Sid. ‘She’s your daughter. You should love her no matter what.’” (*Toughest Indian*, 146) Low Man’s challenge to patriarchal masculinity is explicitly stated when he first admits to Sid that he would like nothing better than to take Tracy back home and make her fall in love with him, and then, after Sid has happily agreed to help by taking Sara back where she belong, Low Man clearly states that they, the men, have no such power: “‘These women don’t belong to us. They live in whole separate worlds, man, don’t you know that?’” (*Toughest Indian*, 147)

“The Toughest Indian in the World” discusses similar themes, as it recounts the journey of an unnamed journalist who picks up a hitchhiker – an unnamed fighter – and after a night spent together at a motel walks away from his life as a journalist in Spokane with his sense of *Indianness* restored. In “The Toughest Indian in the World”, the journalist is established as a character who lives his life very much in the white mainstream community of Spokane. He rarely visits the reservation where his family lives, and as if to emphasize his assimilation into the mainstream society, he drives “a 1998 Toyota Camry, the best-selling automobile in the United States”. When the journalist picks up the hitchhiking fighter, he simultaneously begins a journey back into his childhood years when his father had used to pick up hitch-hikers – but only Native American ones. The journalist modifies his behavior to resemble that of the fighter as closely as possible, and in the end, after having sex with the fighter at a motel, he walks past his car and continues his journey on foot: “In bare feet, I traveled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die”.

“Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” are stories with quite a few similarities: they both feature a lone traveler, who journeys *back* in order to regain a certain sense of *Indianness* or warriorhood, and in both stories gender and sexuality play an important role in their reconciliation with their Native American identities in contemporary world. Both Low Man and the

unnamed journalist in “The Toughest Indian in the World” leave behind material possessions as they journey back and both stories make frequent, explicit references to warriors.

In her article “Sex and Salmon: Queer Identities in Sherman Alexie’s *The Toughest Indian in the World*”, Lisa Tatonetti suggests that in “Indian Country” and in “The Toughest Indian in the World” Alexie uses “queerness as a potential foundation of Native American cultural identification” (202). She argues that Alexie’s characters’ quest for indigeneity is intertwined with an exploration of queer desire – meaning that exploring sexuality and gender beyond the conventional western binary system of men and women, heterosexuality and homosexuality, functions as a vehicle for ethnic self-identification. Venturing beyond the heteronormative gender system provides a way to fight against colonization, because compulsory heterosexuality and a sex/gender system rooted in binaries are examples of colonialism that are still extremely influential in the contemporary society. (Tatonetti, 204-206) In her review of the responses to Alexie’s stories, Tatonetti notes that for the most part the responses reflect the fact that there is little or no room for Native American systems of sexuality and gender identification in the discussion and most of the reviews operate within the strict boundaries of the conventional Western binary understanding of gender and sexuality (203). The journalist in “The Toughest Indian in the World” is nearly always described as a straight character who winds up sleeping with another man: there are few instances when descriptions such as bi, queer, or Two-Spirit are suggested. (Tatonetti, 203) While many reviewers of Alexie’s work have chosen to read the texts in light of the dominant Western binary-system of gender and sexuality, the stories in *Toughest Indian* invite the reader to entertain the possibility of more than just two categories of gender and sexuality.

In “The Toughest Indian in the World”, the journalist’s homosexual encounter with the hitchhiking fighter is prefaced by an account of his previous relationship with a colleague, a white woman named Cindy. When considered in connection to his encounter with the fighter, the journalist’s sexual history with Cindy is important, because it inevitably forces him beyond the

boundaries of a binary system of sexuality – he is clearly neither straight nor gay, but something *else*. This exploration of sexuality beyond the straight/gay binary distinction connects to the journalist’s journey to reclaim his *Indianness*, for it is a rather explicit reference to bi-, and queer-identities, which were an integral part of the Native American sex/gender system before the effects of the colonization of sexuality. Tatonetti also notes that the journalist’s account of his sexual history with Cindy does not conform to the mainstream expectations of heterosexual masculinity (205). Unlike the stereotypical account of conquest, power, and passion by heterosexual men, the journalist describes himself as being exhausted by his companion’s erotic vocabulary, and falling asleep during sex only to wake up after climaxing out of reflex. The journalist is, then, breaking the ‘rules’ of conventional sexuality and gender roles by assuming the more passive role in his heterosexual relationships.

The journalist in “The Toughest Indian in the World” is fascinated by the hitch-hiking fighter from the very beginning. He notices the fighter’s impressive physique and pays attention to the details of his appearance, foreshadowing the oncoming intimacy:

Long, straggly black hair. Brown eyes and skin. Missing a couple of teeth. A bad complexion that used to be much worse. Crooked nose that had been broken more than once. Big, misshapen ears. A few whiskers masquerading as a mustache. Even before he climbed into my car I could tell he was tough. He had some serious muscles that threatened to rip through his blue jeans and denim jacket. (*Toughest Indian*, 26)

The journalist’s fascination with the fighter is a combination of sexual desire and a need to present himself as an authentic Native American. His attempt to imitate the fighter he admires can also be read as an attempt to imitate, and thus gain, hegemonic masculinity. The journalist clearly considers the fighting hitch-hiker as a prime model of hegemonic masculinity – he is physically capable, lives his life in ‘Indian country’ as he tours the reservations of North America, and he engages in actual physical battles. The irony here is that the journalist himself has already achieved a position of hegemonic masculinity as he lives and works among the white mainstream society. What is

considered hegemonic masculinity seems to be tied to the specific situation; the most desirable and powerful kind or form of masculinity might not retain its hegemonic position in other contexts.

In order to connect with his passenger, the journalist modifies his speech and actions to appear as Native American as he possibly can:

“Jeez,” I said. “You’re a fighter, enit?”
I threw in the “enit”, a reservation colloquialism, because I wanted the fighter to know that I had grown up on the rez, in the woods, with every Indian in the world.
(*Toughest Indian*, 26)

It had been a long time since I’d eaten jerky. The salt, the gamy taste. I felt as Indian as Indian gets, driving down the road in a fast car, chewing on jerky, talking to an indigenous fighter. (*Toughest Indian*, 27)

The conscious decisions the journalist makes to represent his ‘authentic’ Native American identity strongly imply that the journalist is aware of his own cultural performance, but at the same time, he does not realize that the image of the Native American warrior he idealizes is equally constructed. Tatonetti notes that this disconnect is emphasized by the fighter’s clear discomfort when the journalist “casts the fighter into the mold of a stereotypical Hollywood Indian” when he admiringly states that in the old days the fighter would have been a killer and a horse thief (206). “The Toughest Indian in the World” exposes the adoption of certain speech patterns and other stereotypically Native American habits as mere cultural projections of which the characters are very aware, and the conventional image of the warrior that is based on the Hollywood image of the marauding Plains Indian is similarly exposed as a constructed image by the fighter who is able to see the irony in his own character.

As noted earlier, in “The Toughest Indian in the World”, the journalist’s quest to reclaim his Native American identity, his journey back to *Indianness*, is tightly intertwined with his exploration of homosexual desire. Tatonetti suggests that in this story gay sex functions as a way to achieve cultural renewal (206-207). The journalist’s sexual encounter with the fighter can be read as an acknowledgement of the diversity of the Native American sex/gender system that was previously discussed in chapter 2.1, and by performing sexuality outside the binary system imposed by the

colonizing white society, the journalist regains a sense of himself as a Native American. After they have had sex, the journalist retreats to the bathroom, and acknowledges that the encounter has changed him; he is stronger, and he now “smelled like salmon” (*Toughest Indian*, 32). The scent of salmon can be read as an indication of cultural renewal and a regained vitality and reconciliation with his ethnic identity. As Tatonetti notes, salmon, which is both a traditional food and regionally specific sacred symbol for the Native American communities of the Pacific Northwest, is a frequently used symbol of renewal, interconnectedness, and sustenance in Alexie’s writing (208). Whereas Tatonetti considers the journalist’s insistence of not being gay right before they have sex as a denial of queer identity, I would argue that the journalist is not denying a queer identity but the participation in a binary system of sexuality – he is not gay, but he is evidently not straight either, which means that he has taken a position outside the conventional binary understanding of sexuality. As Evans points out, in “The Toughest Indian in the World” male intimacy is seen as a “spiritual experience through which the narrator hopes to regain his sense of Indianness” which he has lost by assimilating into the white mainstream society (196).

Both “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” are examples of journeys that take the protagonists back to their sense of *Indianness* and whose goal is reconciliation with their Native American identity that has been silenced by assimilation to white society. Neither Low Man nor the journalist live on the reservation, and when they have their respective moments of reconciliation they are ‘in transit’. Low Man is forced to abandon his plans to meet and marry the woman he has been corresponding with and at the dinner table, where he makes his stand as a warrior of survivance, he is an outsider. The journalist, for his part, is literally on the road – or in the motel – at the moment of reconciliation, and after the fact he continues his journey on the road. On the surface, the journey narratives in these two stories are similar to the journey narratives discussed above in chapter 4.1, in that they are journeys *back*, but there are certain key differences

that make the journeys in “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” much more successful.

The narrative patterns of “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” fall somewhere between traditional Native American homing-in narrative, which was exemplified by Eagle Runner’s quest for his lost *Indianness* in “Class”, and the newer trend of lighting-out narratives that was discussed in Chapter 3. The journeys undertaken by Low Man and the journalist could be characterized as homing-out narratives, which circumvent the problem of Native American culture as static and unchanging inherent in homing-in narratives, and still maintain reconciliation as the main objective of the narrative. Herman notes that the homing-out narratives tend to be very allegorical, and that the reconciliation is more a matter of personal identity and belonging than a literal return to a tribal past (4-6). The reconciliations achieved by Low Man and the journalist are definitely personal rather than tribal. In fact, specific tribal traditions play practically no role in Alexie’s writing – if we exclude the use of salmon as a metaphor for cultural renewal. For example, the journalist in “The Toughest Indian in the World” specifically refers to a pan-Tribal experience when he attempts to emphasize growing up “on the rez, in the woods, with every Indian in the world” (*Toughest Indian*, 26).

As discussed in chapter 2.2, journey narratives have been fertile ground for re-negotiations of gender identities and norms in American literature. The homing-out journeys in “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” are prime examples of narratives that challenge the prevailing attitudes towards gender and sexuality, but instead of being journeys of clear outward direction, these journeys can still be defined as journeys back; the main objective of these journeys is, after all, reconciliation. In “Indian Country”, Low Man is faced with the challenge of defending his friend and her wife-to-be from the attack of a stereotypical patriarchal male figure, and in doing so, he is also forced to acknowledge what those challenges to the patriarch’s power mean for him.

When the homing-out narratives of “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” are analyzed from the viewpoint of the common narrative patterns of American literature as identified by Stout, these journey narratives fall into the category of narratives of *wandering* that were briefly discussed in chapter 2.2. These journeys of lost wanderers have become more and more common during the last century – having ultimately become ‘the characteristic American journey narrative’. Narratives of wandering have neither certain destination, nor defined duration – they are essentially journeys “to no end”. (Stout 104-105)

While the narrative pattern of wandering in mainstream American literature usually carries connotations of divorce from the past, rootlessness, and lack of order, in these two stories by Alexie, the wandering results in reconciliation with the past, a clearer understanding of their place in the contemporary world, and a renewed connection to their identities as Native American men. I would argue that the wandering in “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” can be read as an example of tactical mobility, in which survival – or, indeed, survivance – is achieved through movement and transformation. Tactical mobility was discussed in more depth in connection to Louis Owens’s concept of indigenous motion and Gerald Vizenor’s concept of transmotion in chapter 2.2. In essence, tactical mobility is used here to refer to the journeys that cross imagined boundaries and thus create a space where to renegotiate identities and attitudes.

For Low Man in “Indian Country” and the journalist in “The Toughest Indian in the World” the journey with no certain destination or duration – in other words, the narrative of wandering – creates a frontier that is not a borderline, but rather a zone, where imagined boundaries can be crossed over and over, thus enabling them to continue their renegotiation of identity further and further. Low Man and the journalist are what Vizenor calls warriors of survivance, and mobility is their way to fight the battles of survivance, as it provides them with a vast frontier.

In chapter 2.2. of this thesis, I briefly addressed the need for warriors of survivance to simultaneously utilize the image of the warrior to battle stereotypical representations of the ‘Indian’

and to also self-consciously acknowledge the fact that the warrior image itself is a stereotypical representation, in order to avoid unmaking the contemporary Native American presence in the process. Both “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” manage to tackle this obstacle, for their processes of uncovering the inauthentic simulation of the ‘Indian’ do not imply that the warrior image is pure, wholly positive, or authentic.

In “Indian Country”, Low Man sheds his ‘urban Indian’ image as he leaves behind his suitcase with his newest manuscript in it, and instead adopts the identity of a warrior. At the dinner table he engages Sid in a verbal battle, when Sid asks him to talk with him as if this was a country of men; they are a war, and war is the dominion of men, as noted earlier in reference to Native American communities at the time of the European conquest. Low Man and Sid both consider themselves warriors, men who are protecting and defending those they call family – Sid tries to save his daughter and Low Man defends a friend he loves. Low Man differentiates himself from Sid as a warrior of survivance by acknowledging that the image of the warrior is just that, an image, and that holding on to the stereotypical warrior identity is not a truly viable option in the contemporary world. Low Man proves that he is a warrior of survivance by negating some of the most persistent and influential characteristics connected to the image of the warrior: he denies the power that warrior status would bring over one’s family by insisting that Trace and Sara are not subject to men’s decisions. “Indian Country” also exposes the fact that violence, which is included deep into the image of the warrior, is neither effective, nor a part of the weaponry of the contemporary warrior of survivance. While Sid is physically stronger and manages to overpower Low Man when a fight breaks out at the very end of the story, it is Low Man who wins the battle and emerges as the face of the modern Native American man.

In “The Toughest Indian in the World”, the hitch-hiking fighter is the one to expose the warrior image as a simulation. The journalist is totally enamored by the fighter and his warrior image: he pays close attention to the details of his passenger’s appearance and is extremely fascinated by the

fights he has fought. While he consciously creates an image of an ‘authentic Indian’ for himself by modifying his speech and habits and is quite clearly aware of the fact that his simulation is just that, a construct, he fails to realize that the fighter’s warrior image is equally constructed. The fighter himself does acknowledge this and has an ironic view of his own warrior identity, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

“Jeez,” I said. “You would’ve been a warrior in the old days, enit? You would’ve been a killer. You would have stolen everybody’s goddamn horses. That would’ve been you. You would’ve been it.”

I was excited. I wanted the fighter to know how much I thought of him. He didn’t even look at me.

“A killer,” he said. “Sure.” (*Toughest Indian*, 30)

The fighter reveals the reality behind his warrior image: he travels from reservation to reservation to fight other Native American fighters in illegal battles with no rules and little rewards. In “The Toughest Indian in the World”, the warriors of survivance are distanced from actual fighting and warfare, which are presented as a corrosive force in Native American communities, and instead they fight for the acknowledgement of non-binary ways to understand gender and sexuality, even though that fight is never explicitly identified in the story.

Vizenor’s concept of survivance is at its core a call for active presence in the contemporary world, and for that reason the battles these warriors of survivance fight are battles to challenge both the stereotypical representations of Native Americans and the impulse to return to an irretrievable past (Vizenor 1999, 11-13, 169). Because Vizenor’s survivance stresses the importance of the *contemporary* world, the warriors of survivance seek contemporary solutions to problems and take part in contemporary debates. Both Low Man and the journalist engage in renegotiations of gender and sexuality that are very much contemporary projects, and while they utilize the historical, tribal, traditions and attitudes to approach these debates, the solutions they offer are not formulated in terms of returning to a past that was somehow better, but in terms of forward-looking solutions that are transcultural, and as such can be applied to all who live in the contemporary world. While “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” present an understanding of sexuality

and gender that is not based on a system of clear binary divisions, and thus reflects the historical Native American systems of sex and gender that have been documented by Roscoe, for example, the stories do not explicitly mention these tribal concepts, but instead use the terminology and concepts of the contemporary American society.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this thesis, as formulated in the introduction, was to examine the interconnectedness of renegotiations of Native American masculinity and journey narratives in Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*. The theoretical framework for this analysis was outlined in chapter 2, which introduced some of the most important factors in questions pertaining to Native American identity and masculinity, especially in the context of Alexie's short stories, and which also established the journey narrative as an integral narrative pattern in Native American literature as well as in mainstream American literature – albeit with somewhat different emphases. The analysis was divided into two: chapter 3, concentrated on journeys with an outward direction and the fourth chapter discussed the journeys that took the stories' protagonists *back* in a patterns that, at least on the surface, closely resembled the homing-in plot, but in the end had certain key features that resisted this traditional reading of Native American literature.

The stories examined in chapter 3 – “Saint Junior”, “The Sin Eaters”, and “South by Southwest” – are all stories that take the protagonists beyond the borders of the reservation and are, then, examples of outward journeys. These outward journeys are very similar to the escape narrative that has been identified as one of the most prominent narrative formulas in American literature and has recently gained more and more prominence in Native American writing, especially by female authors. In “Saint Junior”, in particular, the journey out produces a stark

comparison between life in the reservation and beyond its borders, and for the protagonist, Roman, crossing this border is both a challenge to be fought and an opportunity to renegotiate and redefine what it means to be a Native American man. While Jonah's journey in "The Sin Eaters" is not a voluntary one, he also finds that mobility forces him to examine the meaning of Native American masculinity. It could be said that the change in their environments causes both Roman and Jonah to examine their identities more closely and to redefine their places in the contemporary world. Roman and Jonah, in their own ways, present themselves as modern warriors whose battles are fought in school exams or detaining facilities. For Roman, the school exams are the way out of his life on the reservation, which he sees as the embodiment of stagnation and passivity, while Jonah's way of presenting himself as a warrior was to volunteer himself for what was, in essence, kidnapping and imprisonment, to save his family from an even worse fate.

In "South by Southwest", Salmon Boy's journey out is in fact a journey in the world beyond the borders of the reservation and it addresses the obstacles faced by Native American men in white society, while at the same time challenging traditional understanding of masculinity. The non-violent killing spree that Salmon Boy and Seymour embark upon encloses them in a world where they challenge themselves to find love and intimacy between them – thus navigating issues of same-sex attraction, intimacy, and homosociality. In "South by Southwest", the journey quite literally functions as a method of redefinition of the protagonists' understanding of masculinity. This strategy of utilizing outward journey narratives to challenge and renegotiate masculinity mirrors the way Native American women have used the journey narrative to discuss issues pertaining to Native American women in lighting-out narratives that reach for empowerment and freedom. All the three stories discussed in chapter 3. have this same sense of empowerment, and even in "The Sin Eaters", which is essentially a story about *losing* one's freedom, the protagonist finds his own voice and a way assert himself as a warrior by making the conscious choice to save his parents by subjecting himself to imprisonment.

Whereas the third chapter discussed outward journeys that empower the protagonists, chapter 4 is focused on journeys back. These journeys with a backward direction in “Class”, “Indian Country”, and “The Toughest Indian in the World” have a similar direction, but the results of these journeys are rather different. “Class” is a more traditional homing-in story, the protagonist of which, Eagle Runner, aims to regain his sense of community and Native American identity by journeying back. However, it becomes apparent that such a return journey is not possible as the world Eagle Runner seeks to return to has changed, or indeed, never existed except in stereotypical understanding of the Native American community. In contrast, the return journeys of Low Man in “Indian Country” and the unnamed journalist in “The Toughest Indian in the World” are, in a sense, successful. The important difference between the journey in “Class” and the journeys in “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” is the fact that while Eagle Runner’s journey is a prime example of a failed homing-in journey, the journeys taken by Low Man and the journalist can be characterized as homing-*out* stories. Despite the backward direction and the objective of reconciliation, homing-out stories are similar to outward journeys in that the reconciliation is personal rather than communal. Low Man and the journalist are both deeply influenced by the image of the warrior and that inspires them to evaluate the meaning of Native American masculinity. Their journeys are journeys back in the sense that they have both lived among white mainstream society and during their journeys they reconnect with the Native American community, and in a more metaphorical sense, they reconnect with a Native American system and understanding of gender and sexuality, thus challenging the influence of Western ideology on Native American masculinity.

Sherman Alexie’s writing in *Toughest Indian* exemplifies what Gerald Vizenor has termed survivance. When one considers the stories that were examined in detail in this thesis, the journeys presented in them can be described as attempts by the protagonist to find a place and an active presence in the contemporary world, which is at the very core of the concept of survivance. This

seems to be true of both outward and backward journeys, the failed homing-in journey in “Class” being the one obvious exception – the very idea of homing-in, returning to an authentic Native American life and community, negates the idea of survivance. The fact, that the return journey in “Class” ultimately fails, because the world Eagle Runner long to return to no longer exists, is very reflective of Vizenor’s formulation of survivance – living in the past would result in stagnation, and ultimately the disappearance, of Native American culture, and thus, survivance is grounded in the here and now, not in an irretrievable past.

The image of the warrior is an integral part of the identity of the protagonists of the stories examined in this thesis. As Native American men they present themselves as warriors, who emulate the attitude, perseverance, and power of their ancestral heroes, but whose battles and weapons are very much a part of the contemporary world; they aim to assert their presence as Native American men in the contemporary world. While the image of the Native American man as a warrior is rather traditional in itself, the protagonists of *Toughest Indian* utilize this conventional image to challenge the prevailing understanding of masculinity by questioning the assumption of heterosexuality, for example, and introducing the possibility of a non-binary understanding of gender and sexuality. The wish to be a warrior is explicitly stated to be a part of the Native American male identity in Alexie’s writing, and while there is an acknowledgement of the nostalgia inherent in such a wish, the warriors in *Toughest Indian* are first and foremost engaged in challenging and renegotiating the understanding of Native American masculinity today – and for that reason, they can be read as warriors of survivance.

The use of irony as a method of survivance in Alexie’s writing, which was briefly touched upon in this thesis, would be a fruitful subject for further study. Alexie’s humor has, in fact, been discussed in literary criticism quite extensively, but the analysis has mostly been directed at his poetry. I believe that a similar analysis of his short-stories would result in an interesting and enlightening discussion on the interconnectedness of irony, postmodernism, and a postcolonial,

pan-tribal view on contemporary Native American literature. Simultaneously, this viewpoint would offer an opportunity to examine Sherman Alexie as an author who not only creates protagonists, who are warriors of survivance, but is one himself. This kind of exploration of Alexie's prose as a text of survivance would benefit from reading his numerous short-story collections as a continuum which addresses the themes of Native American identity, masculinity, and the frontiers between 'Indian country' and the mainstream society, and which collection by collection evolves into a more transcultural understanding of contemporary Native American life.

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