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Celts and *Indians*: revisions of the stereotype in Paul Durcan and Sherman Alexie

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the stereotypes of the *Celt* and the *Indian* through history, their construction and their current situation through literary works and responses. It is divided into different thematic parts, namely, a section on colonialism and the construction of the stereotypes; a justification of my choice of *Celts* and *Indians*; the analyses of two texts—one by an Irish writer and one by a Native American—and my final conclusion.

In the introduction, I present both stereotypes as they are popularly known: spiritual, nature-connected and wise, but also savage and primitive, and I also introduce the authors whose works are going to be analysed: "Before the Celtic Yoke" by Irish Paul Durcan, and "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation" by Native American Sherman Alexie. The next part provides the theoretical framework, as it deals with postcolonial theory such as Said's *Orientalism* or Bhabha's concept of the 'other', and the dichotomy *truth* and *representation*. A historical overview shows how English imperialism affected the construction of said stereotypes, whose connection due to mutual support and solidarity is addressed in the following part.

Once the basis has been established, I focus on the particular texts I used in order to discover current attitudes towards the dominant stereotypes about Celts and Natives, and the search for identity of both ethnic groups. In the case of the former, Durcan rejects the idea of *Celtic* as the main source of Irishness established by the first nationalists and tries to provide an alternative identity to which Irish people can turn. In the case of the latter, Alexie shows how the Natives must rely on hybridity to find their identity, since the *real Indian* does not exist and people's expectations about the Natives are fixed by what they have encountered in Westerns.

As a conclusion, both processes of self-identification resulted in something completely divergent, but it is clear that both authors use literature as a means of reshaping dominant stereotypes and creating a new identity. Their work also awakens readers to a sense of responsibility and a critical attitude towards reality and their place in the world.

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INTRODUCTION

'CELTS'. For many people this word is surrounded by a mystical and magical aura which connects them to a spiritual world, to nature and to ancient wisdom. This term in such popular context may be applied not only to the *Celtic* speaking peoples living in the continent and the British Isles before Romanisation, but also to their religion, art, literature and music. Nowadays, this denomination is globally spread due to the image of the *Celt* created during Romanticism and, frequently, it is coloured by a sense of melancholy, nostalgia, nobility and exoticism. Likewise, when we think of 'INDIANS' our mind relates directly to those long-haired and primitive peoples, those *noble savages* who live off the land and in communion with it, and who are characterised by nature-connected wisdom and spirituality. Furthermore, the term *Indian* reminds us of their other side so often represented in Westerns: the evil, treacherous and inhuman creatures that kill and scalp their white enemies as a sign of victory. Nevertheless, can we really say we know the peoples to whom those images refer? Both labels—*Celt* and *Indian*—are alien to them, since they were given by other civilisations based on different value systems. The Greeks called the European ethnic group *Keltoi* (later *Celt*), and Columbus named the Native Americans *Indians* due to his well-known confusion: he thought he had reached India. In this essay, I am using italics on *Celt* and *Indian* in order to distinguish between the stereotype and contemporary Irish and Native peoples[1].

In this essay I will analyse the poem "Before the Celtic Yoke" by contemporary Irish poet Paul Durcan (1944-) and the short story "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation" by Native American Sherman Alexie (1966-), and discuss their search for identity and self-definition in response to

[1] I am following Martínez Falquina's proposal in *Indias y fronteras,* developed from Gerald Vizenor's adaptation of the Derridean strategy of putting certain terms *sous rature*.

the aforementioned stereotypes. Both groups were invaded by the English, the Irish during the first phase of the empire, and the Native Americans during the following phase, also called the Atlantic empire. Usually, colonialism marks the colonised as not human, and the same occurs in this case. The colonised peoples were deprived of human rights and binary oppositions were established to depict and contain them. In Young's words, "as soon as the other can be represented, it can be appropriated and controlled" (143). If the colonisers were civilised, rational, intelligent and cultured, the colonised were considered barbaric, irrational, naïve and ignorant. This barrier also created new identities that go together and are inseparable. The establishment of colonialism had cultural and historical consequences; the whole world is now what it is due to European colonialism, its imagination and its expansion, and it also had a deep impact on how we see the world nowadays, for colonialism is also a matter of representation. As a way of example, McLeod mentions colonialism as surpassed by a "new political, juridical and economic globalization" and considers the current geographical limits, global economic inequalities and unresolved military strives as consequences of European colonialism (4).

COLONIALISM AND THE CREATION OF STEREOTYPES

According to Edward Said, trying to understand a culture from the specific point of view of another is an impossible task, and the very same language we use would be a conditioner. Following Focault's formula of *representation*, he argues that "knowledge is constructed according to a discursive field which creates a representation of the object of knowledge, its constitution and its limits" (Young 126). In order to communicate and be understood, one must comply with this so others can accept one's discourse as true. Said applies the same principle to the understanding of cultures: a set of values and characteristics is constructed around them so they can be described and understood by

the colonisers. Therefore, it can be said that what is circulating is not the *truth,* but a *representation.* It is this way that objectivity is lost and the stereotype is generated; a stereotype in which the colonisers' fears and desires are projected and binary oppositions created (Said 21). Homi Bhabha claims that "colonial power produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (71). This "other" is the reduction of a complex structure into something superficial that gives the colonisers the feeling of understanding and control—after all, the unknown is frightening. But it is all a deceit; it is only the human need for self-definition in terms of opposition and exclusion. In any case, knowledge was put in the service of colonial expansion and occupation. Colonialist discourse constructs the colonised as "degenerate types" due to their racial origin and utilises said construction as a justification for conquest and government (70).

Since the very beginning of contact, Native Americans and Celts were seen—or depicted—as barbarous, dangerous and wild. It cannot be forgotten that that description is made by an outsider who is more interested in conquering the land than in the inhabitants themselves, so it can be assumed that those visions are biased. In the case of the *Indians,* John Smith showed them as unpredictable and crazy in his *General History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles,* and Puritan Mary Rowlandson depicted them as inhuman devils in her captivity narrative. Both pieces are treated as historical accounts, but, as they are literary works, they lack historical rigour. When Rowlandson wrote her experiences as a captive of the Natives, England was in battle with them for the control of the land. Rowlandson's writing showed the Natives as a threat that must be dealt with, creating thus a kind of propaganda which urged the English to exterminate them.

Likewise, the Classical authors' *Celtic* vision cannot be fully trusted for the very same reason. Julius Caesar's description of this people in his work *The Gallic War* is determined by his own political needs. For example, he emphasises the Druid's position within the *Celtic* society and exaggerates their power, as Posidonius previously did, because it suits his policy to "stress the consolidation of power in the hands of the Gallic autocrats" (Tierney 214). In like manner, he takes advantage of Posidonius's theory of "religious and political degeneration" labelling the *Celts*' practices as superstitious and barbarous—taking as a way of example the human sacrifices. According to Caesar, innocents were sacrificed by being burned alive, shot with arrows or even impaled; however, Diodorus identified those victims as war prisoners (216-17).

In Romanticism, Celts and Natives are no longer seen as a threat, and their image changes accordingly. In the case of the latter, America has already been established as a country, and there is no need for contemplating them as enemies. Instead, they are praised as noble and wise. This noble stereotype might serve to both mask the Europeans' guilt—they have almost exterminated a whole culture—and to ennoble their former enemy and ennoble themselves as victors at the same time. In the case of the Celts, Romantic Nationalism played a major role in the articulation of their stereotype. This nationalism utilises *Celticism* as a key for distinctiveness as a result of England's control over the Celtic nations. In Matthew Arnold's work *Essay on the Study of Celtic Literature* (1786), we can find a detailed—and exotic—description of the *Celt*: "a pathetically languishing figure, incurably romantic and tragically ineffectual" as well as "a dreamer" and "always ready to react against the despotism of fact" (in Shaw 29). The *Celt* is always defeated. The reason for this perpetual vanquishment might be in their "undisciplinable, anarchical and turbulent" nature together with their lack of "balance, measure and patience" (29).

This description is similar to that of the *Indians* by American romantics such as James Fenimore Cooper or Philip Freneau. Both authors share the belief that, like the languishing *Celt*, the Natives are doomed to disappear, convinced that there is no room for them in the new country that America is. Likewise, the romantic view of the *Indian* is also bound to exoticism and magic. Cooper describes them as having a special relationship with nature and appearing and disappearing in the woods at will, as if it were by magic. In addition, he also highlights their nobility and wisdom, and Cooper's description is accompanied by a shadow of nostalgia. To borrow Vizenor's words, writers such as Cooper "used words to replace rather than to represent Indian reality" (8).

With the arrival of the 20th century and the movies, these *Indian* stereotypes became stronger and found their way into spectators' minds. Buffalo Bill's tour took the battle between the *Indian* warrior and the white soldier from the American Wild West to Europe. These theatrical representations of the *authentic Indian* in the tours and in Westerns showed an invented savage that somehow filled the gap left by the lack of the real native. Standing Bear, the son of an Oglala chief who toured with Buffalo Bill, was a fighter for the Indian rights movement in the 1920s. During this time, new stories of tribal courage—such as Standing Bear's books and autobiography (1928)—together with sermons, novels and literature of protest started to show that the Natives did not approve of what the white society had turn them into, and started to rebel against the dominance of stereotypes.

Meanwhile, the situation of the Irish changed enormously. After centuries of oppression under the British flag, they achieved their independence in 1922. This period is characterised by the need of a distinctive national identity which would differentiate the Irish from the British, separating them from the colonial experience. Responding to

this necessity, two literary currents appeared in Ireland: the Irish Revivalism and Modernism. Among the Revivalists, writers such as W.B. Yeats or Lady Gregory performed the task of linking the construction of the nation state with Irish language and *Celtic* folklore, considering them Ireland's people's roots. In contrast, the Irish modernists, such as James Joyce or Samuel Beckett, present different themes other than providing an identity or ideology and detach themselves from the creation of the nation state. Joyce rejects and satirises the *Celtic* revivalist culture. In addition, Joyce does not believe in the idea of the Irish as a racially pure ethnic group, but rather—as he states in *Ulysses*—as a group of people living in the same place or even different places. He considers Irish language a descendant of the Phoenicians', and Irish culture intimately linked with the Egyptians, as well as Ireland's pre-Christian religious practices: "Joyce's 'Sages' […] are Egyptianized Phoenicians who got to Ireland a century ahead of St Patrick and the saints and subsequently metamorphosed into Druids" (Cullingford 135).

INDIANS AND *CELTS*: A JUSTIFICATION

My choice of *Indians* and *Celts* as representatives of the construction and development of stereotypes in literature is based on their similar circumstances and their mutual support and solidarity, especially between the Native Americans and the Irish. Both are clear examples of cultures that were once colonised and reacted by creating intellectual works as a way of resistance to colonialism. In the case of the Irish, Durcan published his poem in 1976—Ireland had been independent for 54 years—and shows a quest for a new national identity different from that established by the first nationalists. In contrast, Native Americans are still under the rule of their oppressors, and their texts, together with other indigenous writings, often transmit a feeling of stoic resignation and

surrender. But, even if these feelings are usually dominant, it is also possible to find a beam of hope.

Both groups, Native Americans and the Irish, share a double stereotype: the noble, wise and primitive and the savage, inhuman and cruel, and both have been displaced and dispossessed—during the Ulster plantations in Ireland and the Trail of Tears in America, for example—and their language and traditions banned. Regarding the solidarity between oppressed societies, the Choctaw nation of Oklahoma made a donation in 1847 to the starving Irish during the Famine, and, nowadays, in the walls of Belfast we can see a mural depicting an *Indian* chieftain and the logo "Your struggle, our struggle". However, their connection does not end here. Comparisons have been made between both cultures by Irish writers such as Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney, whose poem "Hercules and Antaeus" (1975) sets Native Americans in comparison with his 'tribe'—the Irish—and puts characters from Irish (Celtic) mythology, such as the Formorian giant Balor, and historical figures such as Sitting Bull at the same level, using them as symbols of resistance and also as emblems of loss and origin (Cullingford 176).

PAUL DURCAN AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Unlike some contemporary writers such as Heaney, Paul Durcan—a highly popular Irish poet—never agreed with the *Celtic*-based Irish identity given by the generation of nationalists responsible for the creation of the Irish Free State in the first half of the 20th century and, as a result, he challenges the arbitrariness of the choice of the *Celtic* culture as the Irish origin and heritage. His self-reflective literature deals with issues such as nationalism as well as the search for a new identity, and attempts to find an alternative Irishness and make the readers—Irish readers in particular—reconsider their past and

adopt a critical attitude towards it. His aim is to reinvent national identity by defying the Irish language and Catholic religion and, by extension, the creation of the national myth itself. It is because of this that he is commonly considered a *postnationalist*.

For Durcan, like Joyce, *nation* and *identity* are flexible concepts that go beyond borders and geographical limits. This approach to the terms is in itself a rejection of the conventional idea of nationhood and of traditional Irish identity. He proposes "alternative-hybrid Irelands" outside the island together with new models of men and women (Kim 25). In many poems, he experiments going beyond gender and even species. His poetic speakers often transmute into men, women or animals, which gives readers a sense of utopia. Everyone is part of one community, without race or origin being taken into account. I would like to establish a connection between these transmutable poetic speakers and the traditional Native American figure of the *trickster*. The *trickster* is a creature that usually appears in human form but is capable of shifting into an animal and also of alternating between male and female. It embodies the opposites, and this way, it undermines the rigid roles and categories brought by a fixed identity (Martínez "Reimaginando" 335). Although Durcan's poetic speakers do not have the picaresque and mischievous attitude of the Native American *trickster*, they do, somehow, transmit the idea of change and unity of all their different faces.

Durcan's defiance of the building of the national myth is most clear in his poem "Before the Celtic Yoke" (1976). It is an anti-*Celtic* poem in which Ireland—which is the poetic speaker—tells the reader about the numerous invasions she suffered, the Celts being one of them, and how they forced their language and culture on her. The violence of her speech tells us about her having been raped and almost killed. Just as the Normans, the Vikings and the English, the Celts are depicted as a brutal invader, and *Celticism* appears as an imperialist force. Through this innovative interpretation of

history, Durcan aspires to present *real* images that he considers distorted by the majority due to political interest, i.e. romantisation of the pre-colonial Celtic era in order to find unique features to distinguish themselves from the invaders. This reinterpretation of the past is linked to the critical attitude towards the construction of a nationalist myth and to the previously explained Romantic Nationalism.

The poem comprises four stanzas. The first one opens with a question which presents the theme of the poem: "What was it like in Ireland before the Celtic yoke – / Before war insinuated its slime into the forest of the folk?" (lines 1-2) It is presupposing some kind of civilisation living in Ireland before the arrival of the Celts, and therefore, a previous, more ancient identity equally, or even more, legitimate to the Irish people than the *Celtic* one they have adopted. It also suggests that the "folk" lived peacefully since it makes allusion to the time "before war insinuated its slime" into the land. War is depicted, through the use of the word "slime", as something sticky and unpleasant that moves slowly, covering everything; almost as a disease that expands throughout the island and spoils the land, which is described as fertile and full of forests, where the people live. Likewise, the people are referred to as "the folk", as if making allusion to their unity and belonging to one community. The poetic speaker seems to be emphasising how perfect life was before the arrival of the Celts, which may give the reader a sense of utopia.

In the second stanza, Ireland names the different invaders that arrived at her shores, starting by the most recent one—"Elizabethan, Norman, Viking, Celt"—and gives them all the status of "conquistadores", "racialists" and "imperialists" (3-5). Fundamentally, Durcan is here applying to the Celts the same characteristics Irish people currently disapprove of when dealing with the English. It is not uncommon to hear an Irish person calling the English people that oppressed them "imperialist

bastards". I believe that Durcan's aim is precisely to make the Irish aware that, at some point, the *Celtic* culture in which they based their current identity and national language was a foreign invader, just as the English later were. Their Gaelic language was forced on them and their own, forgotten.

The personification of Ireland is also emphasising the fact that all these "conquistadores" are alien to them—as they come "from across the seas" (3)—as well as their barbarian and violent nature. They are "merciless whalesback riders" (6) who thrust their foreign languages down her "virgin throat" (7), raping and destroying that way her "human voice" (9). But, above all, what characterises this imperialist *Celticism* is violence: to subjugate Ireland, she says they will break her neck, that is, murder her. This may be connected to Durcan's disgust for all the violence taking place in Ireland during the Troubles as well as the general attitude of the people of the Free State. In independent Ireland, a strong masculine behaviour was enhanced, and violence against women and minorities was common. This may be Durcan's way of showing that this violence might be inherited from all the intruders in the island, *Celts* included. Ireland represents a repeatedly raped woman and the aggressors, those who take violent advantage of the land. This act tarnishes the creation of the national myth, since the *virgin* land is no longer so.

In the third stanza, Ireland narrates how she survived all intruders. She considers them new comers and describes their culture in contrast with her own, and always in negative terms: "puritanical, totalitarian" (13). It is worth mentioning how the poetic speaker defines herself by creating opposites between her and the invaders—answering to the human necessity of defining themselves in terms of opposition and exclusion (Bhabha). The intruders are everything Ireland is not—including *humanity*. When she says the invaders destroyed "her human voice" (Durcan 9), she is also implying that

they are not human. In addition, by doing this, she is oversimplifying their culture and creating her own stereotypes in order to *understand* or define them. She states her culture is a "boulder" (14) rooted deeply into the land, while the attackers are "masses of sea-rolled stones reared up in mile-high ricks" (15) along her shores. This metaphor is yet another opposition: the big rock on the beach is everlasting and immovable; it belongs to the earth. In contrast, the sea-rolled stones pile high and seem threatening, but even if they cover the boulder, they are nothing but "ricks". They can easily be blown away, as they are not intrinsic to the land as the boulder is. Through this metaphor the poetic speaker is, once again, highlighting the alienness of Elizabethans, Vikings, Normans and Celts alike, while asserting the "folk's" right to the land and their culture as primordial—their primeval language "dripping fresh from geologic epochs […], ice ages" (17-18).

In the last stanza, Ireland states that she cannot be exterminated by any of the invader groups, which gives the Irish people another identity origin, a place and a time before the Celtic invasion, to return to. She is "palpable and inscrutable" (20), so the impossibility of locating her successfully in time, despite her being "palpable", makes it impossible to go back to that utopia. However, it leaves an open window to escape from the traditional *Celtic* identity and the violence that it brings. The following lines—"If you would contemplate me/ You will know the terror that an old man knows/ as he shrinks back from the grassy womb of his chirping mamma" (24-26)—are an exponent of that ideal escape from that which produces "terror"; the violent influence of the parents' culture: *Celticism*. In addition to urging the readers to reject it, she also wants them to abandon all connections to it, and go back to their old language, before the Celtic yoke, and talk like her. She declares that her people's identity was defined by their language, and that their language was something powerful and natural: "I was the

voice of Seeing/ And my island people's Speaking was their Being;/ So go now, brother – cast off all cultural shrouds/ And speak like me – like the mighty sun through the clouds" (27-30). It is interesting how the single word "shrouds" might evoke, not only the resurrection of a culture and language long lost, but also the belief that that said culture is not lost at all, just forgotten and susceptible to being remembered, since it is something inherent to the people inhabiting the island.

Another fascinating characteristic of these verses is the poem's structure itself. It belongs to a traditional Irish verse formula called *aisling* (an Irish word meaning *vision* or *dream*) which was developed in the late 17th century and 18th century. In this *vision*, the poet is visited by the personification of Ireland, which can appear as both a young or an old woman. As the *aisling*'s origin is pre-Christian, this woman was considered a (pagan) goddess—the spirit of the earth—and after Ireland's conversion to Christianity she started to be called *sky-woman* (*spéirbhean*) (Kiberd 318). She often appeared to talk about the state of the country, and later on this formula was used as a political tool to spread ideas or to parody them. What is most interesting is that Durcan is using a traditional Irish pre-Christian (i.e. Celtic) poetic formula to denounce the Celts themselves. So the use of the *aisling* in this context may originate a double interpretation: the conventional one, dealing with a political issue or criticising the state of the country, or an ironic one, the use of a pagan—Celtic—formula to criticise *Celticism*.

To conclude the poem analysis, I would like to reinforce the idea that Durcan, through these verses, is questioning the validity of the *Celtic* heritage as a starting point for Irish history and identity. *Celticism* is presented as a "yoke" that twists and alters the native land, and the Celts are depicted as brutal and savage outsiders; they are only another invader group such as the Vikings, the Normans or the English themselves.

Durcan's *Celts* are an imperialist force described with a highly violent lexis that have negatively influenced the people who have adopted their culture as their own, for they have inherited, this way, those same immoral and barbaric characteristics. In addition, Durcan is also presenting a possible alternative identity by the presupposition of the existence of another civilisation, prior to the Celts, to which Irish people can turn as an escape from the violence innate to *Celticism*. However, this primal society is impossible to define or locate, which turns it into an attainable utopia for the people inhabiting the island. Perhaps, how to appropriate this previous identity is not as important as escaping the violence of the current one. All in all, by reinventing the Irish past, Durcan is reacting—and making readers react—against the nationalist version of Irish history and the building of the national myth.

SHERMAN ALEXIE AND THE CONTEMPORARY *INDIAN*

In order to contextualise Sherman Alexie (1966-) and contemporary attitudes towards the *Indian*, and in contrast with those discussed above, I would like to mention Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968). This novel meant the inclusion of Native American literature in the mainstream and led to a literary tradition in the following years. The blooming of Native literature that took place after is known as the Native American Renaissance. However, there still exists the issue of presenting a culture—a high exponent of oral tradition—in the written form and, to even complicate it more, using the language of its oppressors, that is, English. This problem shall be addressed later on in connection with storytelling and hybridity.

Concerning Native American identity, there has been both a continuance and a rupture with old representations. Contemporary Native Americans rely on popular stereotypes as a starting point from which to begin to build, or rebuild, their own

identity; and this may produce a clash between what they are and what they feel they should be. A question arises: what does it mean to be *Indian*? In the 1998 independent film *Smoke Signals,* based on a collection of short stories by Sherman Alexie—with a screenplay by the same author—Victor, one of the characters, rebukes Thomas for not knowing how to be a real *Indian*. He states they have to look stoic, mysterious, dangerous, all in all, like warriors, if they want to be taken seriously by the whites: "You got to look like you just got back from killing a buffalo" (Alexie *Smoke* 62). To this, Thomas replies that they would not do that anyway, since in their tribe they were fishermen. This is a very clear reference to what a white person would expect the Natives to be like, and how this expectation is based on the traditional stereotypes of the *Indian*. The Natives find themselves in the position of meeting these expectations in order to look like *real Indians*.

According to writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor, this would be a "simulation" of the *Indian* ("simulations of the tragic primitive") due to the lack of "real natives" (vii). For the people in this situation he coined the term *postindian*. Vizenor argues that postindians are the new storytellers, who "observe natives, […] conversions, and reversions of tribal cultures, as postmodern survivance" (viii). For *survivance*, he understands the perpetuation of Native stories in order to cut with the domination, victimhood and tragedy that Native Americans have suffered during the last centuries, and keep suffering nowadays. These stories are a signal of modernity and the cultural changes that transform reality. As Vizenor puts it, the Native stories are stories of human motion; however, *Indians* are steady, permanent simulations that result of dominance (x). The postindian in literature implies the end of white domination in the field of representation; from a postmodernist point of view, it would put an end to the metanarratives of domination. According to Linda Hutcheon, the "representation of

history becomes the history of representation" (in Vizenor 63) and the way we understand the past answers to our "desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations" (67). Thus, as a conclusion, it could be said that the "postindian is the absence of the invention, and the end of representation in literature; the closure of that evasive melancholy of dominance" (11).

In Sherman Alexie's short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1994), the postindian figure—humorous and ironic—is always present, making fun of the traditional *Indian* stereotypes and reclaiming the Natives' own right to represent themselves. Some stereotypes such as *Indians* being in communion with nature will be accepted and embraced, and others such as *Indians* being slow or somewhat handicapped will be completely rejected and reversed. This process is clearly seen in "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation", characterised by the presence of storytelling and hybridity. The hybridity between European and Native American cultures and sets of beliefs is brought to the front by a parallelism with the Christian narrative, with a certain humoristic touch.

In the Spokane Reservation (Washington), a child is born to a virgin mother, or so she claims. Rosemary MorningDove—notice the similarity of the virgin mothers' names and the presence of the 'dove' in both stories—gives birth to what seems to be a dead baby boy, who, miraculously, starts breathing and lives. She names him something unpronounceable in both Indian language and English but the rest of the community ends up calling him only "James"—once again, the similarity between the two stories should be noticed in the children's names: James and Jesus, with the same first and final letters. A year after his birth, Rosemary's house catches fire and the only survivor is James, who is thrown out of the window by his alleged father. The narrator of the story runs to catch him, but the child hits the ground before the narrator can reach him.

However, he does not die, and he does not cry either. As both his parents die in the fire, the narrator takes James under his care: as his saviour, he must raise him. That deed will change him forever. That same day, he gets really drunk and can only stand the white colour of the hospital walls, but after seeing his reflection while holding the baby, he feels he is doing something good and worthy: "Today, the mirror will forgive my face" (Alexie *Lone Ranger* 113).

From the beginning James is predestined to be a strange child, he never cries and does not start to talk until he is seven; his silence during all those years worries his protector enormously. When James is two, the doctors say it is too early for him to talk, but he can see a voice in his eyes, and a "set of new words" which do not belong to either Spokane or English. The narrator describes it as what it is not, and he uses oppositions: "it ain't Indian or English […] and it ain't window or door" (Alexie *Lone Ranger* 115). This voice could be the creation of something new, something which is not Native American or European. For Bhabha, this hybridity is the "'third space' which enables other positions to emerge" (in Rutherford 211), and it integrates and merges the knowledge of both cultures. James's protector has the feeling that he is going to talk because he seems to take in air and looks at the sky, but it could also be that what he is doing is to absorb knowledge from, or being aware of, what surrounds him, and analyse it—which would explain his later behaviour when he finally talks. Later on, every time he takes James to the hospital to find an answer to his lack of speech, all he achieves is the statement "he's a little slow developing" (Alexie *Lone Ranger* 119), and he points out that that is what white people have been saying about *Indians* for five hundred years, and keep saying nowadays. The narrator thus shows his tiredness of what he considers a false stereotype, and in order to show what the child will be capable of doing he lists a set of other known stereotypes about *Indians* as pounding a drum or

being respectful to elders. But above all, he declares that James *is going to change the world* (120).

When James is seven he finally talks. The expected moment arrives at Christmas. That he chooses that precise moment to start to talk is very revealing and contributes to the hybrid nature of the story. It seems that the birth of Jesus marks the *birth* of James's speech, and from the very first moment he not only speaks but preaches. He talks about Indian life and its problems; he talks about nature and technology in relation to humans. From that moment on he guides his protector, and teaches him as well. It seems he gives direction to his life and turns it into something more pleasant and meaningful. James tells him to embrace his culture—"he tells me […] to grow my braids" (Alexie *Lone Ranger* 128), reinforcing the need for cultural pride—and he also tells him to get a job, to open a fireworks stand. This apparently unimportant job is actually very significant and even vital for the reservation: "Every day now there are little explosions all over the reservation" (128). The fireworks work as a torch of hope, they shine on the reservation sky for everyone to see and feel inspired by them. During the fairs in Spokane, James and his protector are in charge of a statue of an anonymous *Indian* chief which they make move and talk. It works as a preaching stand for James, spreading his knowledge to everyone who would listen, including white people. Due to the wisdom of his words, people tend to think that James is some wise elder—even when he was only a baby, the narrator points out that his eyes were ancient and old and could see people's heart and soul—and are genuinely surprised to know he is only a seven-year-old child.

Hybridity is also seen in the formal aspects of the story. It is presented in the way of what at first sight might seem a diary, since a date is provided at the beginning of each excerpt. However, the way in which the narrator expresses himself gives the

reader the impression of *hearing* the story rather than *reading* it. Some of the features that contribute to create this impression are the length of the sentences—some of them are 8 lines long—and the transcription of some grammatical forms only used in spoken English, such as "ain't". This would be an example of storytelling, since the narrator is telling a story, but influenced by European culture and its written tradition. Storytelling is by its own right a link to Native American tradition and a way of healing. It preserves their culture and wisdom and assures the tribal memories' endurance (Martínez "Reimaginando" 334). Most of the short stories' characters have lost their connection with their true self and feel astray. They drink to forget and they drink to bear life. The character Thomas Builds-the-Fire knows this, like his grandfather before him, and he keeps telling stories when no one listens, with the hope of leading them back to their path. Stories are their salvation. Nonetheless, even if a sense of orality has been preserved in the story, the problem of the loss of sound and body language are still present. This makes it impossible to reflect in the written page all the impact a good story could have in the hearer. The process of writing it down could be seen as a translation task, in which the story must be decoded and rearticulated in a different form. During this process, the loss of information is inevitable but, when adding the European element to the story, i.e. when writing it down, a bond between the two cultures is created, making literature work as a bridge between both.

The stories also structure the narrative. They are part of a short story cycle, which gives them a sense of unity, circularity and cohesion. The most frequent setting throughout the cycle is the Spokane Reservation in Washington, and it also works as a link between the different characters, who have been raised there and belong to the same community. This genre allows the writer to create parallelisms and contrasts, and to deal with many issues in a clever way. One of these issues would be the burden of

representation of a whole ethnic group. Alexie mentions different Indian tribes in his short stories—such as Lakota for example—yet, he uses the word *Indian* as an umbrella term and does not make much allusion to the diversity within the ethnic group. The short story cycle, through its "centripetal and centrifugal impulses may be useful to account for the contemporary world, but it cannot be univocally associated to one specific identity" (Martínez "Postcolonial Trauma"). Thus, it enables the writer to balance the representation. It contains different stories, with different situations and different people involved. Some of the descriptions are sad or pessimistic—like in the story "A Train Is an Order of Occurrence Designed to Lead to Some Result", in which the main character ends up dead as a result of his alcoholism—and other stories finish with a tone of undeniable hope, as for example in the already mentioned "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother". So this genre shows the different faces of the same community and exposes their problems, but also their good qualities.

As far as this short story's narrator is concerned, it is homo-diegetic: it is a character in the story and also the protagonist. However, it is anonymous; it lacks a name and could be any Indian of the reservation. The only thing the reader knows about him is that he is a young man who plays basketball and drinks heavily—and in fact, that description can be applied to almost every character of these stories. Yet, this ambivalence is by no means accidental. This character is a universal figure which is connected to the burden of representation discussed above. This man is the *umbrella Indian* who represents all the Natives, and it is my contention that this story in particular, with such an optimistic message—James will change the world—is aimed at giving hope to every Native in every reservation in the United States.

As a conclusion, the invention of the *Indian* is rejected through humour and irony while a self-definition is affirmed. This identity emphasises a sense of community

within this ethnic group, and also manifests an indestructible link with European culture and tradition. European stereotypes of the *Indian* appear everywhere throughout the stories—take as a way of example the *drunken Indian*. They keep reminding one another they do not drink anymore, and these passages carry with them a comic irony which is also characteristic of Alexie's works: "'How many times do I have to tell you? We don't drink anymore.' 'Shit' Adrian said. 'I keep forgetting. Give me a goddamn Pepsi'" (Alexie *Lone Ranger* 50). Likewise, as one of the main issues of this story I would like to underline the idea of hybridity; the mixing of Native American traditions, like fancydacing or tribal consciousness and organisation, with the European, like Christianity or the written tradition. Not only does the text make allusion to a cultural fusion, but to a biological one as well. The border between Native and white is blurred by James being Jesus Christ's *half*-brother, a partial brotherhood that simultaneously points at closeness and difference. This hybridity might be a bridge between the two cultures but, inevitably, it also implies one yielding to the other. The Natives are still subjugated by their invaders, and, in order to survive, they must adapt and save what remains of their culture, even if it has already been tainted by the European influence.

REVISION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY: REINTERPRETATION, HYBRIDITY AND HOPE

From the very beginning, I have been comparing both ethnic groups, Natives and Celts, as colonised peoples. Furthermore, I have narrowed the scope of *Celtic* to the Irish, who were colonised by the same imperial power than the Natives in North America. Likewise, I have established a link that goes beyond simple similarity into mutual support due to the sympathy of one oppressed people to another. However, this does not mean that their history or current situation is the same. It might seem that, since they were colonised and their stereotypes created, their images have undergone similar changes through history—from conquest to Romanticism, and from then to the 20th

century, when their process of self-definition gained strength. Nevertheless, due to their very different political circumstances, that process has resulted into something entirely divergent: while the Irish tried to find a new identity that would take them as far as possible from British identity, and becoming even more *Celtic* to emphasise their difference, the Natives had to merge their cultural identity with that of the whites in order to survive.

The two authors I have discussed also have different approaches towards their cultural identity: Irish Paul Durcan's poem is characterised by the rejection of everything the first nationalists adopted as their national identity, since it is based on an invention that, in addition, somehow perpetuates the vision the English have always had of Ireland: a mythical fairy-land. In the process of translating ancient sagas from Old Irish into English, the Irish experience becomes tainted by the English medium and Irish nationalism would still be influenced by the English culture and dominance. In other words "[in appropriating] the English language to resuscitate the unheard voices of the oppressed nation, the Victorian imperialist, in the same manner, reappropriated the translated experiences of the Irish" (Kim 23). In contrast, Sherman Alexie takes as a starting point the white stereotypes that *Indians* have been imposed through time in order to reverse them and rebuild their new identity from them. This allows him to embrace the few traditions they have left and survive in the new reality caused by the arrival of the colonisers to America. This way, the narrator in the short story discussed above turns into a postindian who presents his "final vocabulary". Through the story of his life—which may be the story of every *Indian*—he depicts himself as "an ironist who worries about names, manners and stories" (Vizenor 68).

Through literature, a sense of responsibility awakens in the readers' minds; a responsibility that goes together with a new vision of reality. In order to reshape the

dominant stereotypes about the culture one belongs to, one has to deconstruct the meaning attached to them, and construct a new definition in an attempt to describe what one thinks true of oneself. This way, the silenced voice is recovered, and the margins go to the centre, thus advancing towards a more decentred multicultural world. Durcan tries to find a new identity far away from the *Celticism* that has been the main characteristic of the Irish so far, and that for Durcan represents a search for racial purity and the violence of the Provisional IRA during the Troubles, as they imagined the Irish as a "historic community". However, many Irish texts show that identity is "a matter of negotiation and exchange" (Kiberd 1). Alexie belongs to a group which must adjust within the white culture of dominance. Because of this, purity is not possible and they must rely on hybridity. However, the past is still alive and, over the general tone of resignation characteristic of the short story cycle mentioned above, hope is there for everyone to see.

James is going to change the world.

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