

“The Sin Eaters” by Sherman Alexie: A Dystopian Island in a Mostly Auspicious Archipelago

“The Sin Eaters” de Sherman Alexie: Una isla distópica en un archipiélago más prometedor

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Abstract: The belated publication of Sherman Alexie’s story “The Sin Eaters” as part of the collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) is worthy of the interest of biographic-textual scholars for its singularity. Not only did the author delay its appearance due to the very sinister tone of the story, but he decided to include it at the very heart of a collection, which is very different both stylistically and thematically. Paradoxically, however, the dystopian vision of the United States in the late 1950s offered by “The Sin Eaters” is an effective “counterweight” to the rest of the materials compiled in the collection. Assisted by the ideas of experts in the field of dystopian fiction, the article analyzes the story as an adequate counterpart and complement to the other, more promising, pictures offered in the volume.

Keywords: dystopian fiction; “termination” policies; Native American fiction; biographic-textual analysis; narratorial voice.

Summary: Introduction: Genesis of the Story. “The Sin Eaters”: History and/or Allegory? Main Dystopian Elements in the Story. The Key Role of the Protagonist: Jonah Lot. Closing Remarks.

Resumen: La demorada publicación del relato “The Sin Eaters” de Sherman Alexie en su libro *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) es un interesante caso de estudio para los especialistas en crítica biográfico-textual. El autor no solo retrasó su publicación debido a su tono especialmente siniestro, sino que al final decidió incluirlo en una colección de relatos muy distintos tanto en aspectos estilísticos como temáticos. Sin embargo, la visión distópica que “The Sin Eaters” ofrece de los Estados Unidos a finales de los 50 del siglo pasado resulta un “contrapeso” muy efectivo al resto de los materiales recogidos en el libro. Con la ayuda de las ideas propuestas por expertos en

literatura distópica, el artículo analiza este relato como un complemento idóneo a los demás contenidos—que son más esperanzadores—de la colección.

Palabras clave: literatura distópica; políticas de “terminación”; literatura nativo-americana; análisis biográfico-textual; voz narrativa.

Sumario: Introducción: Génesis del relato. “The Sin Eaters”: ¿Historia y/o alegoría? Elementos distópicos principales del relato. El papel fundamental del protagonista: Jonah Lot. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION: GENESIS OF THE STORY

In his riveting and enlightening book, *The Fluid Text* (2002), John Bryant argues that variations in the text of a literary work often generate valuable records of the interactions taking place between the artist and the social milieu in which he is working. According to Bryant, the literary work is not a fixed object that can be approached without bearing in mind the protean transformations it undergoes before its final publication. Indeed, besides being “the means by which fixed texts are established,” textual scholarship also “reflects the judgments of the makers of texts, both the originating writer and subsequent editors; it is, therefore, inescapably critical” (Bryant 17). Relying on the seminal work of scholars such as Walter W. Greg (“Rational”), Fredson Bowers (*Textual*), and G. Thomas Tanselle (*Guide*), Bryant comes to the conclusion that, like most other cultural artifacts, literary works are a locus of private and public energies, since “through the processes of authorial, editorial, and cultural revision [they] evolve from one version to the next and emerge from time to time as documents to be read by readers” (112). Thus, as Tanselle has noted in his books and lectures, there is no way of separating the analysis of a literary work from the questions regarding its genesis and constitution, for the latter are integral to how they are finally reconstructed by readers and critics alike (*Rationale* 16).

The story under scrutiny in this article, Sherman Alexie’s “The Sin Eaters” (2000), seems like an apropos instance of a literary piece whose vicissitudes before publication lead us to read it as the kind of “fluid text” that Bryant so cogently discussed in his volume. As the author himself has declared in several interviews (see Purdy 38), the story had been conceived several years prior to its appearance in the collection *The Toughest Indian in the World*. Not only that, but Alexie had originally intended to develop the short narrative into a full-fledged novel exposing the conditions faced by Native Americans in the 1950s—albeit “an alternate 1950s” (Purdy 38). In fact, the story presents an acid critique of the assimilative policies of the

US government during the so-called “Termination” period. However, as Alexie explained to Jessica Chapel, the tone of the story turned “literally too dark and ominous to be sustained for the length of a book,” and so it sadly became a “failed novel” (Chapel 97). The short excerpt below provides ample evidence of the darkness and sinister atmosphere that prevail throughout the whole narrative:

‘There was so much blood,’ I said. ‘A whole river of blood. And the Indians were trying to swim through it. Trying to swim for home. But the soldiers kept pulling us out of the water. They skinned us and hung us up to dry. Then they ate us up. They ate every one of us. And they ate every part of us. Except our skins. They fed our skins to the dogs. And the dogs were fighting over our skins. Just growling and fighting. It’s true.’ (“Sin Eaters” 80)

It therefore comes as no surprise that, after writing the main body of the story, the author should decide to put the manuscript to rest for some time while he completed other projects that proved less emotionally onerous. At the time, Alexie was also writing *Reservation Blues* (1995), which, despite also referring to the trials of some young Native characters on a Spokane Indian reservation (see Andrews 225–26), does not present the extremely grim and dystopian picture of “The Sin Eaters.”

In the opening chapter of his book *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons* (1984), renowned textual critic Hershel Parker maintains that although “all authority in literature comes from the author, . . . that authority can be blurred or wholly lost and, paradoxically, it can persist even when the author thinks it has been removed” (16). Parker’s point is basically that different kinds of “accidents” may happen between the moment the text was first written and when it finally sees the public light that will somehow transform the intended meanings in the original work (Parker 3). These so-called “accidents” may typically be due to the type of expurgations or revisions that authors and editors are likely to incorporate to the original manuscripts; however, as this specialist admits, these changes may also happen because of format, generic or contextual transformations that will inevitably affect the relation of readers to texts. In this regard, it is fairly evident that “The Sin Eaters” shifting position from being the skeleton of a longer work of fiction to becoming a chapter in a short story collection has had important consequences for how the readership of the work has experienced and interpreted the text. Tanselle explains that, although we tend to think of literary works as “ineluctable entities,” in fact each new

reproduction of it is “an approximation, forever open to question and always tempting one to remedial action” (*Rationale* 14).

Despite the remarkably gloomy and foreboding elements in the story that prevented him from expanding it into a fully developed novel, Alexie still liked the topic very much, as well as the perspective of the innocent boy in the narrative. He realized that “The Sin Eaters” could act “as a very nice counterweight” to the rest of the stories in *The Toughest* (Chapel 97), so he decided to place it right in the middle of the collection, as some sort of caesura between the two halves—four stories in each—of the volume. It is important to clarify that two important events took place in the life of the author during those last few years of the twentieth century that somehow explain his final decision to include the short story in the collection. On the one hand, Alexie was making then the move between the reservation of his childhood and young manhood to the more urban context of Seattle, a fact that clearly had an impact on the contents of *The Toughest* (see Campbell 117; Doenges). As most critics have remarked, in this collection “Alexie primarily investigates Indians living in urban areas, a departure from his typical focus on the reservation” (Grassian 151). On the other hand, due to his short-lived adventures in the movie industry, he suffered from “a crippling case of writer’s block” for the first time in his career and was not able to write for almost two complete years (Sonneborn 49). Paradoxically, this sad occurrence gave him the opportunity to revisit some of his earlier work both as a source of inspiration and to figure out what new direction he wanted to give to his fiction. Although his production underwent a significant change with the turn of the century—involving the emergence of themes such as sexuality or class issues—, experts also agree that there is a degree of continuity with his earlier literary works, since his “extensions and reworkings” of topics and characters are evident in many of his narratives down the line (see Berglund xxiv). It is in light of this observation that the incorporation of “The Sin Eaters” to the 2000 collection of short stories makes complete sense, for it does function as a counterpoint or a reminder of where the origins of the identity problems of many of the characters lie. It could also be argued that those identity problems became already apparent in Alexie’s earlier novel *Indian Killer* (1996), in which the protagonist, John Smith, is also a victim of the transit many Native American underwent into urban contexts (see Krupat 98–122)

The body of this article is divided into three different sections that try to answer the following research questions: 1) What induced Alexie to

write "The Sin Eaters" to begin with?; 2) What are the main dystopian elements in the story?; 3) How important is the main character in the story? The key aim of the contribution is to demonstrate that, despite its apparent inconsistency with the other stories included in the collection, "The Sin Eaters," with its heavily historical and allegorical undercurrents, provides a suitable anchor for many of the issues tackled in the book: from identity crises and isolation, through loss and trauma, to family relations and morality. Although the story is plagued with much of the anger and outrage present in Alexie's earlier works—most notably in the aforementioned *Indian Killer* (1996)—, it also includes elements of hope and resilience that resonate with the other stories. Even if the dystopian character of "The Sin Eaters" is difficult to deny, one could also read the story as an inhospitable island in a mostly congenial enclave.

1. "THE SIN EATERS": HISTORY AND/OR ALLEGORY?

Although "The Sin Eaters" opens in a rather surrealist tone, with the young narrator waking up from a terrifying nightmare about war: "I dreamed about war on the night before the war began" ("Sin Eaters" 76), it is clear from the outset that the author decided to set the story at a very precise historical crossroads, one which was to determine the future of many Native Americans. By the third paragraph of the story, it is evident that we are being transported to the late 1950s, a time of great economic prosperity for mainstream U.S. society, but which did not have the same kind of impact on most of the ethnic minorities in the country:

Those were the days before the first color televisions were smuggled onto the reservation, but after a man with blue eyes had dropped two symmetrical slices of the sun on Japan. All of it happened before a handsome Catholic was assassinated in Dallas, but after the men with blue eyes had carried dark-eyed children into the ovens and made them ash. (76–77)

Indeed, since the early 1950s the U.S. government had begun to implement legislation and policies geared towards the "Termination" of federal relations with Indian tribes. As Vine Deloria, Jr. has explained, "The Congressional policy of termination, advanced in 1954 and pushed vigorously for nearly a decade, was a combination of the old systematic hunt and the deprivation of services" (54). Under the pretense of offering the tribes more freedom and self-determination, laws such as House

Concurrent Resolution 108 were in fact utilized to take away the sovereignty over their lands and to try to assimilate Indians into the lifestyle of WASP U.S. society. Deloria rightly concludes his discussion of the heated debates over the effectiveness of the policy by stating that termination was “used as a weapon against the Indian people in a modern war of conquest” (76). In “The Sin Eaters,” Alexie allegorically reimagines what that “modern war of conquest” could have looked like for some of the members of the Interior Salish Native tribes. The protagonist of the story, Jonah Lot, is swallowed by the whale of an opprobrious system and forced to live in the belly of that system that deprives him of everything he had—a home, a family, his body, and even his memories.

From the beginning of the story, it becomes clear that the narrative will be taken over by imagery related to warfare. One should also remember that these were the years when U.S. imperialism became particularly blatant in other parts of the globe—especially, in Southeast Asia. In fact, the arrival of the armed forces to the reservation does not differ substantially from what was happening at the time in countries such as Korea, the Philippines or Vietnam:

Together, my parents and I stepped into our front yard and stared up into the sky. We saw the big planes roar noisily through the rough air above the reservation. We saw the soldiers step from the bellies of those planes and drop toward the earth. We saw a thousand parachutes open in a thousand green blossoms. All over the Spokane Indian Reservation, all over every reservation in the country, those green blossoms fell onto empty fields, onto powwow grounds, and onto the roofs of tribal schools and health clinics. (“Sin Eaters” 82)

It is no surprise that the protagonist of the story should introduce himself as “a dark-eyed Indian boy” (“Sin Eaters” 77) and should refer quite often to the skin color of her people throughout the narrative. By doing so, he is drawing a clear parallel with a recurring theme in Civil Rights speeches and, later on, in those of the American Indian Movement. According to several of the leaders in these social crusades, Black and Native Americans had more in common with the Africans and the Southeastern Asians than they did with the Anglo-Saxon culture of the U.S. (see Carroll and Noble 409). Martin Luther King, Jr, Russell Means, and Cesar Chavez were convinced that they were heading some form of colonial rebellion against a government that was proving unable to deal with the problems that their

peoples faced after World War II. This failure was particularly clamorous in the case of Native Americans who were being displaced from and dispossessed of their lands by the “relocation” programs sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and sent to urban areas where most of them felt completely alienated. Donald Fixico (2000) has written extensively about the awful effects of the termination policies had on Native American populations and their identity (see also *Brave Heart* and Debrun 64).

Despite the mostly negative effects of the governmental policies on Native Americans during this period, most experts have underlined that the first stirrings of Pan-Indianism and other forms of tribal confluence found their roots in these difficult times (see Deloria 17–18). Assisted by the National Congress of American Indians (1944) and the newly founded National Indian Youth Council (1961), members of different tribes got together to combat different types of exclusion and discrimination, as well as to strengthen a common consciousness. “The Sin Eaters” includes a few scenes that could be easily read as reflections of these incipient moments in which Indians from various tribes become part of a single “body”:

I recognized none of the other Indian prisoners, or perhaps I recognized all of them. In the haze and heat of the desert, we all looked alike, although I knew intuitively that we could not all look alike, especially given the vast tribal and geographic differences among us. But, . . . [w]e could all have been siblings. We could all have been the same person. We could all have been a thousand vestigial reproductions of a single organ, all of us struggling to find a purpose, a space to stand and breathe, enough room to function within the large body of a thing, a person, a crowd called Indian. (“Sin Eaters” 99)

Interestingly, it is at those critical moments when the protagonist and his co-ethnics seem on the verge of losing significant parts of their Native identity and of yielding to the pressures of the “colonial” forces that they build up strength to resist by sticking together. Spicer has referred to these instances of tribal pride and Native convergence as the birth of a pseudo-nationalistic spirit that was to prevail in future generations of American Indians (145). Although these moments mark, of course, some of the few reassuring turns in a mostly gloomy narrative, it will be shown in part three of this article, when the main character takes the centerstage, that there are other elements in the story that provide glimmers of hope in an otherwise preeminently dystopian vision.

In spite of all those explicit and less explicit references to particular historical events and processes, it soon becomes clear that the story should not be read as a piece of historical fiction. On the one hand, there is of course the premature psychology of the twelve-year-old narrator, whose terror at the nightmare he endures early in the story and then at the real invasion and abduction that his people go through later tints the whole atmosphere of the narrative to make it very bleak and suffocating. Besides the gruesome aura that the protagonist's fears cast on most of the scenes, there is also the author's own proclivity to show his characters' "suffering and anguish" by means of inventive metaphors and images (see Berglund xvii). The reader encounters one emblematic example of this proneness to portraying his characters' worst fears in a quasi-lyrical style when the young protagonist realizes early in the story that he is going to be separated from his parents. Rather than simply complaining about the treatment they are receiving and the consequences that this separation is going to have on his future life and identity, the narrator resorts to a line of images that perfectly capture the angst of his current state of mind:

War is a church. / In my church, my mother and father were frozen in the stained-glass window above the altar. The red glass of my father's bloody face was cradled by the blue glass of my mother's dress. / Memory is a church on fire. . . . The glass darkened with smoke. / The glass melted in the fire. / The glass exploded in the heat. / My parents' faces fell to pieces in my mind only moments after those soldiers landed in our front yard. I began to forget pieces of my parents' faces only moments after I was taken from them. ("Sin Eaters" 85–86)

It is no coincidence that most of the images and metaphors which appear in the story are closely related to the instruments that the colonizing forces used to subjugate and acculturate the indigenous populations—whether it be religion, military aggression or education. What seems unquestionable is that, although these more allegorical parts of the narrative may not speak as directly about the traumas being inflicted on the Native tribes, they usually prove extremely revealing of the type of goals that this "modern war of conquest" was pursuing. Take, for instance, the myth or parable of the "sin eaters" that lends its title to the story and that is interpolated in the narrative once the Natives have been confined in military premises. The reference to this myth seems appropriate for at least two reasons: on the one hand, Native Americans could be easily seen as the scapegoats of a

system that forced them to bear the sins of the settlers; on the other hand, they carried the social stigma that came with the idea that they had to redeem their oppressors’ awful deeds. While most of the “prisoners” in the premises have realized by then that both the government and mainstream society are interested in their “blood” (“Sin Eaters” 104–5), a “small Indian man” (105), who appears to be endowed with prophetic qualities, holds a different theory, which is intimately related to the aforementioned myth of the sin eaters:

‘And do you know what they’re doing with all that food?’ he asked us. ‘They’re piling it on every one of those dead bodies. There’s a feast on the chest of every of those dead white people out there. And the food is soaking up all of the hate and envy and sloth in those white people. That food is soaking up all of the anger and murder and thievery. That food is soaking up all of the adultery and fornication and blasphemy. That food is soaking up all of the lies and greed and hatred.’ / . . . ‘Children,’ he said. ‘There is a white body in there for each of us. There’s a feast in there for each of us.’ (“Sin Eaters” 107)

Be it through fairly specific references to historical events that took place at the time the story covers or by means of allegorical tales that shed light on the harrowing experiences that Native Americans were facing, “The Sin Eaters” presents a dystopian picture of the situation of indigenous peoples in the mid-twentieth century, focusing primarily on their relocation in places very similar to concentration camps. The combination of these different forms and styles of storytelling is not unusual in the works of Alexie since, as he has often explained throughout his career, he is as likely to use forms and materials coming from his own culture as to dig into tropes and genres from other traditions (McNally 30; Berglund xxiv). As several reviewers have pointed out, what seems unique in this particular story is his heavy reliance on elements often found in dystopian fiction and which are not so typical in the rest of his oeuvre (Whittemore).

2. MAIN DYSTOPIAN ELEMENTS IN THE STORY

Before we delve into those aspects of “The Sin Eaters” that turn it into a fairly conventional piece of dystopian fiction, two important observations need to be made. On the one hand, there is a general tendency among scholars to relate this type of literature to “projected futures” in which both

human beings and, sometimes, the environment have been degraded under some form of autocratic rule. Due to this fact, like utopias, dystopias are often discussed as a subgenre of science fiction in which everything has gone as bad as it possibly can, in the case of the latter, or has been perfected, in the case of the former. However, a number of voices have been raised against the idea of thinking of dystopias as purely futuristic and speculative experiments, disconnecting them completely from historical realities. Carl Freedman, for one, has insisted on the critical need to study dystopian fictions in the light of a “concrete continuity” with the past and the present (50). Likewise, Fiona Maurissette warns us in her dissertation on (ethnic) dystopian literature of the dangers of “abstracting the very real lived dystopic experience of marginalized communities” (1) from speculations about the future. In this broader understanding of the dystopian brand of fiction, Alexie’s “The Sin Eaters” makes more sense, since the “alternate 1950s” that the author has referred to in interviews show a mixture of the two: an attempt to anchor the story in that historical period, while also enjoying the freedom to move into a longer historical perspective.

On the other hand, although some of the classics in the dystopian tradition—e.g., *Brave New World* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—depict the entirety of humankind as victims of disturbing aberrations of socio-political systems “by pointing out their potentially monstrous consequences in the future” (Gottlieb 13), more recent writers of dystopian fiction have preferred to concentrate on particular groups who have already endured the horrors of racial capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism or white settler colonialism firsthand. As Maurissette maintains, these historically rooted narratives “destabilize temporal and spatial specificity” (3) in order to challenge a genre originally dominated by white male authors who mostly disregarded the “historical subjugation” (4) of certain groups. It is little wonder in this sense that the few critical articles so far written on Alexie’s “The Sin Eaters” compare it to Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) rather than to other more canonical works in the tradition. Sabatier calls Alexie’s story a “petit frère du *Handmaid’s Tale*”¹ (124) because it also describes “des corps déchirés, isolés, manipulés, et des êtres en perdition”² (124) of an oppressed group who are enslaved and

¹ A “little brother of *Handmaid’s Tale*.” (Translation by the author)

² “the torn, isolated, and manipulated bodies, and the beings in perdition” (Translation by the author)

utilized by the dominant one. In this regard, "The Sin Eaters" proves to be a special type of dystopian fiction since, rather than as a warning of a dreadful future to come, it should be read as a symptom of the profound psychological wounds that experiences already lived through have left in a particular community (see *Brave Heart* and Debruyn 61).

In relation to the above-mentioned ideas, one first element in the story that powerfully draws the readers' attention is the number of images that are reminiscent of the Jewish Holocaust and the hideous crimes that the Nazi regime perpetrated during World War II. Besides explicit references to Anne Frank ("Sin Eaters" 80) and racial "contamination" ("Sin Eaters" 93), the way Natives are treated by the federal forces are full of echoes of how Jews were rounded up, imprisoned, and executed by the Third Reich:

We were forced into cattle chutes and led from station to station. / At the first station, we were shaved bald. / . . . / At the next station, we were stripped of our clothes. Old men and women, young boys and young girls, powerfully built fathers and beautiful mothers, all naked. . . . Sickly people were led away, through another door, and into what I was sure were the ovens. ("Sin Eaters" 96–97)

To some extent, the parallels drawn in the story between the treatment received by the two minorities are not that surprising because by the last decade of the twentieth century numerous scholars were delving into those possible analogies. David E. Stannard (1992) and Ward Churchill (1997), among others, were particularly engrossed in showing those similarities and that, as had happened with the Holocaust, many Americans were still denying the existence of the Native genocide: "All citizens of the United States (and, to a lesser extent, of Canada) are subjected to indoctrination to this perspective through the elementary and secondary school systems" (Churchill 2). As Alexie has declared in several interviews, what is worrying about this denial is that it deprives his people of the possibility of dealing with those collective traumatic memories—of separation and loss of their tribal lands and of honoring their dead. So, he has no problem in writing about the American Indian genocide as a Holocaust: "I realize the term was generated to mean something specific, but I want it to mean more. They had the same ambition, and the end result is the same" (Nygren 154).

A second dystopian element that has a significant presence in the story and that troubles the narrator and his co-ethnics a great deal is the repeated

references to medical experiments and eugenics. The fact that from early in the story the invading forces show a great deal of concern about the “contamination” of Indian blood already partly reveals the intention of the ruling group to subject Natives to a literal form of corporeal exploitation. Although no definite explanation is offered in the story for the white man’s interest in Indian blood, the author advanced a possible reason for it in an interview: “I don’t want to give too much of it away, basically scientists have discovered the cure for cancer involves the bone marrow of Indians” (Purdy 38). Whether it is to procure the cure for a fatal disease or to use their body parts for other types of purposes—as is hinted at in other passages of the story—, what is important, and what frightens the life out of the narrator, is the realization that their bodies are no longer their own: “Son corps, lui, demeure la propriété de la société. Par l’observation de la destruction produisant un mythe, concrétisant l’imaginaire en passant par la violence, le corps ‘étranger’ du garçon passe d’objet de souffrance à celui de connaissance”³ (Sabatier 125). Indeed, as *Brave Heart* and *Debruyne* have underlined, the Indian Relocation Program, administered by the BIA in the 1950s, pursued the goal of moving large Native populations “into urban areas to live and work as assimilated citizens” (64). Perhaps this process was not as violent and inhuman as the forced displacement and imprisonment that we are privy to in “*The Sin Eaters*,” but the social, material, and spiritual outcomes of both policies were not that dissimilar: full assimilation. What made it worse in both cases was the fact that these displacements were presented under the cloak of a political effort to protect and improve the conditions of Indian tribes:

‘Citizens,’ said large nose, ‘you are here to perform a great patriotic service for your country. The sacrifices you have made and are going to make have been and will be greatly appreciated by your fellow Americans. And remember, please, that you’re here for your own safety and we plan to take good care of you. Now, I wish you all a good night.’ (“*Sin Eaters*” 106)

This duplicitous and paternalistic use of the language is one of the staple ingredients in some of the classics of dystopia—e.g., Zamyatin’s *We* or Orwell’s *1984*—and closely related to the third dystopian element in “*The*

³ His body, itself, remains the property of society. By observing the destruction that creates a myth, concretizing the imagination in passing through violence, the “foreign” body of the boy transforms itself from an object of suffering into one of knowledge. (Translation by the author)

Sin Eaters” to be discussed here: surveillance and close control of a given population. Most theorists of dystopian fiction have agreed that one of the cornerstones of any state or social system to subdue its people is to have a sway over the language and ideas ingrained in its citizens (Claeys 124–25; Gottlieb 85–90). Historically, in the case of Native Americans and up to the Termination period, this function of control and indoctrination was played by the BIA’s boarding school system, which as Brave Heart and Bruyn explain, sent the destructive message that “American Indian families are not capable of raising their own children and that American Indians are culturally and racially inferior” (63). The picture presented in “The Sin Eaters,” however, is even darker and more brutal, since Natives of all ages are abducted from their homes and taken to some underground military premises where they are uncertain about how their bodies are going to be used:

I suddenly wondered if we were going to be slaughtered. I wondered if we were going to be eaten. I wondered if rich white men were going to turn the pages of books that were made with our skins. / . . . / Once we were off the bus, the soldiers divided us into three groups, each destined for a different building. (“Sin Eaters” 94)

The overwhelming presence of the military in the story and the violence they use against their prisoners speak of a system that no longer views them as human beings but merely as “blood slaves” (Doenges) who are being herded and classified like cattle to serve the needs of the ruling group. Although the profusion of references to blood and contamination adds a foreboding twist to the unknown experiments to which the Natives are going to be subjected, what seems most disturbing is that, as the story moves on, it becomes clearer that the kind of enslavement and exploitation they are going to suffer transcends that of their bodies (see Sabatier 125–26):

I felt a hot pain as a needle slid into my left hip, through the skin, through the muscle and into the hip socket, into the center of the bone. But more than that, I felt the pain deep in my stomach. I felt the needle bite into me, heard the impossibly loud hiss of the hypodermic syringe as it sucked out pieces of my body, sucked out the blood, . . . sucked out pieces of all of my stories, sucked out the marrow, and sucked out pieces of my vocabulary. I knew that certain words were being taken from me. (“Sin Eaters” 115)

Baccolini and Moylan have discussed at some length the “critically voiced fears and anxieties of a range of new and fragmented social and sexual constituencies” who have been oppressed and ill-treated by postcolonial powers (4–7). In the case of “The Sin Eaters,” the mechanisms of terror and subjugation used by the dystopic society reach their zenith when the young protagonist-narrator, already deprived of everything he cherished, is forced to have sex with a much older Native woman in order to harvest new Indian blood:

Beyond the glass, doctors and soldiers watched me. I was afraid. I was without words. I was small and would not grow again. Arrested. The door opened. Two soldiers pushed a naked Indian woman into the room. The door closed. / She stood there, tall and proud. Perfect brown skin. Large breasts. Shaved head. She threw obscene gestures against the mirrors that were really windows. Then she looked at me. She saw me. / ‘You’re just a boy,’ she whispered. . . . ‘Please commence,’ said the disembodied voice. (“Sin Eaters” 115–16)

3. THE KEY ROLE OF THE PROTAGONIST: JONAH LOT

Most experts in the dystopian brand of fiction have concurred that a critical turn took place when in the mid-1980s it began to incorporate first-person narrators who questioned what was happening to them in the dystopian society (Freedman 76–78, Ferns 377–78). Baccolini and Moylan observe that in this type of narratives “we identify a deeper and more totalizing agenda in the dystopian form insofar as the text is built around the construction of a narrative of hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance” (5). This is precisely the role played by the protagonist-narrator of “The Sin Eaters,” Jonah Lot, a twelve-year-old Coeur d’Alene/Spokane Indian boy who from early in the story is depicted as a victim and survivor of the nightmare in which his people are caught:

‘Jonah,’ she said to me and laughed. My mother had named me after a man who’d survived a miracle. Because of that, she seemed to regard every action of mine, no matter how ordinary, as a miracle of its own. . . . She said my name again and laughed, as if I had truly just emerged from the belly of a whale, and not from the belly of a dream where the enemy soldiers wore surgical gloves and white smocks. (“Sin Eaters” 79)

Not unlike Offred in Atwood’s dystopian classic, Jonah can scarcely be conceived as a plucky opponent of the ironhanded regime. Nevertheless, it is also clear from the start that, like Atwood’s unlikely heroine, Jonah is very critical of the practices of the system, and, in the privacy of his mind, seeks ways to try to undermine those practices (see Ferns 377). Although he is often befuddled by the ruthless events taking place around him and can hardly oppose much of an effective resistance to them, the fact that his perceptions and feelings are highlighted in the narrative has a remarkable effect on how readers interpret the story: “Suddenly, everything looked dangerous [as they were abducted from the Reservation]. Sharp stars ripped through the fabric of the morning sky. Morning dew boiled and cooked green leaves. Sun dogs snarled and snapped at one another. The vanishing point was the tip of a needle” (“Sin Eaters” 87).

One of the few weapons that the protagonist can count on in his unequal battle against the oppressive forces is his storytelling and song-making skills. Jonah is convinced that his power to turn his experiences into songs and stories endows him with the ability to somehow keep control and make the best of those experiences: “Because I was a maker of songs, young men gave me small gifts, . . . I taught those young men the love songs that forced horses to bow their heads and kneel in the fields, the love songs that revealed the secrets of fire, the love songs that healed, the love songs that precipitated wars” (“Sin Eaters” 77). As Sabatier has argued, in relating his arduous adventures through the prism of his critical consciousness, the narrator is offering us both a story of conquest, but also one of liberation:

En créant cette fable pour le moins déstabilisante, le narrateur prône des valeurs essentielles telles que la tolérance, la fraternité, l’égalité et la liberté. . . . La nouvelle devient donc un conte initiatique où l’enfermement de Jonah lui permet de comprendre comment en étant lui-même, avec son passé, ses histoires, ses souvenirs, il peut échapper aux militaires, de façon symbolique, et faire de son intériorité une évasion.⁴ (130)

⁴ By creating this story to say the least destabilizing, the narrator advocates essential values such as tolerance, fraternity, equality, and liberty. . . . The story thus becomes a journey of initiation in which Jonah’s confinement allows him to understand how by being himself, with his past, his stories, his memories, he can escape the military, at least symbolically, and make his own interiority an escape. (Translation by the author)

Truly, despite the distress and anxiety that govern most of his experiences, Jonah always finds a way to color them with those values that, in Sabatier's opinion, are important to him. Of course, this is not always easy because the kind of horrors he comes across are not always easy to digest: "Stories had always kept me safe before. I had always trusted stories. Frightened and tired, I wrapped my arms around myself and tried to tell myself a story. But I could think of nothing but the blood on that dead soldier's face" ("Sin Eaters" 93). Even in cases such as this, where he is confronted with extreme human pain and mortality, he resorts to the rituals and values he has been taught so as to try transform an awful experience into something else:

With all my strength, I pushed his body [of the dead soldier] to the floor. He was a young man, barely older than me, and I mourned his death as I had been taught to mourn, briefly and powerfully. / 'I'm sorry,' I said to him. I kneeled beside him, touched his face, and closed his blue eyes. / I prayed for him, the enemy, and wondered if he had prayed for me. ("Sin Eaters" 91)

Besides the exceptional capacities that the narrator shows to closely capture his realities and then render them in often amazing images and metaphors, one other feature that stands out in the protagonist's personality is his incredible resilience. No matter how harsh and inhuman the kind of abuse and exploitation to which Jonah is subjected, he is invariably able to reinterpret the situation so that he can make it through the tribulations. For example, when the prisoners are already underground in the eerie military facilities, he finds ways to cope with the sinister circumstances:

At the mouth of every dark tunnel, more and more Indians were separated from the rest and marched into the darkness beyond. I wondered when it would be my turn to walk into the darkness. I was not afraid of it, the dark. I wanted to give it a name, so I called it Mother. / . . . With our shaved heads, in our red jumpsuits, we looked like we had been in a concentration camp for years, though we had been prisoners for only a matter of hours. . . . We marched through darkness until we could see a bright light in the distance. The light grew larger and larger. I was afraid of it. I wanted to give it a name, so I called it Father. ("Sin Eaters" 100)

Maurissette rightly notes that this capacity on the narrator's part to endure the most traumatic experiences and, still, be able to come out of them more knowledgeable and willing to confront "the enemy" is typical in works of

dystopian fiction by writers of marginalized groups (4–5). It is probably in the closing scenes of the story when, as mentioned above, the narrator is brutally compelled to have sexual intercourse with an Indian woman that his resilient gifts become more evident:

‘Close your eyes,’ she said. ‘Pretend we’re alone. Pretend I’m not me. Pretend you’re somebody else. Don’t let them touch you. Don’t let me touch you.’ / We made love. / I closed my eyes and saw my mother. I saw her bring a cup of water to my lips. / . . . My mother kissed my forehead. Her breath smelled of coffee and peppermint—the scent of forgiveness, of safety and warmth. / . . . Inside of her, I breathed in the dark. I was warm; I was safe. / . . . ‘Mother,’ I whispered. ‘Mother, mother, mother.’ (“Sin Eaters” 119–20)

Although it could be argued that Jonah Lot, the Native boy, loses his innocence and dies when he is forced to have sex with a woman much older than him, it is also clear that some sort of rebirth happens in him as those comforting images of his mother take shape in his mind. As pointed out earlier on, despite the harrowing experiences that the protagonist goes through, the reader is still made aware of his resilient capacities and his ability to be reborn into new selfhoods.

CLOSING REMARKS

In an article published in *The New Yorker* a few years ago, Jill Lepore complained that “Dystopia used to be a fiction of resistance; it’s become a fiction of submission, the fiction of an untrusting, lonely, and sullen twenty-first century, the fiction of fake news and info wars, the fiction of helplessness and hopelessness.” As this article hopes to have shown, no such thing could be said about Sherman Alexie’s “The Sin Eaters,” which in spite of including several of the seminal characteristics of the apocalyptic genre, also incorporates a number of features that save it from the “despair-filled” picture that Lepore paints. One first consideration to bear in mind is, of course, that this story is just an inauspicious “island” in a collection where the mood is by no means so sinister. This does not mean that the story is completely out of tune with the other chapters but, rather, that it functions as a complement and counterweight to them. Monika Siebert has written very favorably about these indigenous experiments that require an effort on our part “to experience cultural otherness” (183). “The Sin Eaters” wisely uses the estranging capacity of a dystopian vision of a

particular historical period to make us aware of the kind of legacies and traumas that contemporary Native Americans have inherited from their past (Johnson 225–28).

This article has demonstrated that the driving force of “The Sin Eaters” is deeply rooted in the grievances that Native Americans suffered during the “Termination era.” Like the characters in the story, not only were many American Indians displaced from and dispossessed of their lands, but the damage inflicted on their identities was irreparable. Brave Heart and Debruyne have remarked that “Like the transfer of trauma to descendants from Holocaust survivors, the genocide of American Indians reverberates across generations” (66). It is not surprising, therefore, that Alexie should decide to borrow many of the dystopian images in the story from the traumatic experiences of the Jews. Besides those, he also relies heavily on some of the key motifs in the dystopian literary tradition, such as government control and surveillance of the population or the subjection of certain groups to medical experiments and eugenics (see Claeys 111–12). Nevertheless, despite the prominence of these dismal elements, it has also become clear that the story is not without some glimmers of hope—via the protagonist or some of the relationships built among the characters—that endow it with the capacity “to inscribe a space for new forms of socio-political opposition and progress” (Baccolini and Moylan, *Dark Horizons* 8). In short, as Maurissette rightly concludes, while this type of fiction reveals the true horrors of the dystopic realities lived by colonized groups, they also offer potential “visions of liberation” by resorting to several of their cultural values and traditions, “although they always do so with the recognition that achieving change will be an extremely difficult process” (4).

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