

(DIS)EMPOWERMENT OF NATIVE AMERICANS IN ORSON SCOTT CARD'S *THE TALES OF ALVIN MAKER*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze the portrayal of Native Americans in Orson Scott Card's *The Tales of Alvin Maker* (1987-2003), an alternative history of the US, in which the author condemns the country's colonial history. However, in spite of his obvious sympathy for Native people, Card does not manage to avoid the traps awaiting a non-Native author writing about tribal communities. The following article demonstrates how Card both empowers his Indigenous characters and undermines their empowerment. The framework for the analysis is provided by Gerald Vizenor's theories regarding the simulation of Native presence in the dominant culture, persistence of stereotypical *indians*, concept of survivance, and possible retrieval of Native sovereignty.

Keywords: Orson Scott Card; *The Tales of Alvin Maker*; Native Americans; Gerald Vizenor

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Among the many fantasy narratives which incorporate Native American peoples and cultures into their imaginary worlds, Orson Scott Card's *The Tales of Alvin Maker* (1987-2003)¹—an alternative history of the US in the early 19th century, written by one of the most renowned American fantasists—deserves particular attention. The series depicts the gradual growth into manhood and power of Alvin Miller, a boy whose innate abilities allow him to reshape the world. Alvin is an exceptional character in American fantasy fiction for several reasons. Firstly, much of his story is loosely based on the life of the Mormon leader Joseph Smith (Oziewicz 2008, 202), yet this is not surprising given that Card is an active member of the LDS Church and has continued to incorporate religion into his novels throughout his career (Card “OSC Answers Questions” 2000). Secondly, the protagonist's status of a Maker and his quest to build the mystical Crystal City mark him as “a kind of American demigod” (Attebery 1992, 62)—a mythic hero whose destiny affects the future of the entire America and its inhabitants. Thirdly, Alvin's adventures are a revision of the country's colonial history, in which Card openly condemns the institution of slavery and the plight of Native Americans.

Readers might wonder to what extent this criticism is informed by Card's genuine support of Native people, particularly given the fact that, in recent years, the author has become notorious for his comparison of President Barack Obama to Hitler (Card “Unlikely Event” 2013) and for his repeated criticism of homosexuality and same-sex marriage (Martin 2013). Many of Card's readers were unpleasantly surprised by his political views because they have come to cherish his works for their emphasis on tolerance and opposition to violence. While some readers responded with indifference, others demanded a boycott of the screen version of *Ender's Game* (Jazayerli 2013). Given Card's controversial public image, it now seems somewhat risky to engage in a critical evaluation of his work. However, though his political views cannot be dismissed, it seems equally wrong to dismiss the entirety of his literary output as deeply flawed. As Rod Dreher succinctly argues: “I don't read science fiction, but if I did, I wouldn't care what Card's cultural politics were, unless they showed up in his fiction and were preachy — in other words, if his politics caused him to make bad art” (Dreher 2013). According to Rany Jazayerli, Card's works are in stark contrast with his disturbing political manifestos:

He has written eloquently about the evils of racism and the courage of the civil rights movement. He has written with passion and compassion about the plight of illegal immigrants. He has expressed his growing unease with rising income disparities in America. But at some point, he took a drive down Conspiracy Lane and got lost. [...] It's not just that if we're going to boycott a work of art because of the behavior of the artist, there are better places to start than with a man who has expressed hateful words but hasn't broken any laws. No, the main reason boycotting *Ender's Game* is counterproductive is that the theme of the story itself is the best repudiation of everything for which Card has come to stand. (Jazayerli 2013)

Thus, while this article does not intend to justify or support Card's political views, it attempts to look beyond his current reputation and offer a critical reading of one of the most original works of American fantasy fiction.

Several factors suggest that Card's portrayal of Native people is more than just a desperate attempt to capitalize on Indigenous affairs. For one thing, while Card has not revealed any interest in contemporary Native literature (e.g., the works of N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich or Sherman Alexie),² he is well-versed in both American and world history, and this knowledge has provided a background for many of his works (Mittelmark 1989). These works have allowed Card not only to experiment with alternative histories, but to address some of the most pressing problems of the American society (Porsch 1998), including Indigenous affairs. Card's sympathy for Native people might also stem from his religious affiliation. Though the Mormons did engage in slave trade and other activities which hurt Indigenous communities (Blakemore 2018), they were, arguably, among those most concerned about the fate of Native people (Attebery 66). This concern was grounded in their belief that the Natives are a lost tribe of Israel, hence the attempts to convert America's Indigenous population (Murphy 2003). Elder Marlin K. Jensen (2011) explains that, according to Mormon teachings, "neither group would be able to completely fulfill their destiny without the other" (20). This conviction, as Elder Jensen claims, prompted the development of friendly relations between the Mormon settlers and Utah's Indigenous inhabitants (23), until the influx of immigrants and exploitation of resources destroyed their coexistence. This complex and, inarguably, problematic historical relationship might have inspired Card's interest in Native issues. Still, in spite of his attempt to depict the unjust suffering of the tribes, Card does not manage to avoid the traps awaiting a non-Native author writing about Native people. To join the continuing discussion on race and ethnicity in fantasy fiction, the following article is going to examine the portrayal of Native Americans in *The Tales of Alvin Maker* in order to prove that the series simultaneously empowers its Indigenous characters and undermines their empowerment.

It should be noted that a similar problem is present in another of Card's alternative history novels—*Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus* (1996). On the one hand, the novel implies that the genocide of Natives was a necessary evil because Columbus's conquest prevented the rise of the Tlaxcalan Empire which would conquer the world and threaten it with practices of human sacrifice. On the other, by its end, *Pastwatch* offers another alternative reality: the Natives are prepared for Columbus's arrival and become a force which the Europeans have to acknowledge—though their growth is indebted to the help of the time-traveling protagonists and Columbus's leadership. Another ambiguous case of empowerment appears in the short story "America" (1987; reprinted in *The Folk of the Fringe*): the white protagonist has a child with an Indigenous woman from Brazil,³ who prophesizes that their son will become the leader of America. Though the thought-provoking and controversial premises of *Pastwatch* and "America" also deserve analysis, this article will focus only on the *Alvin Maker* series and its multi-faceted portrayal of Native people.

Gerald Vizenor and the simulation of Native presence

The framework for the proposed analysis is provided by Gerald Vizenor's theories regarding the simulation of Native presence in the dominant culture and the possible retrieval of Indigenous sovereignty. In his works, Vizenor argues that the dominant culture and non-Native artists have historically misrepresented Native Americans and transformed them into *indians*, i.e., the product of colonial discourses, which masks the absence of genuine Native peoples, identities, and experiences (Vizenor 1999, 80-84). The very word *indian*—"a casual, and later calculated, colonial name" (Vizenor 84)—is a symbol of manifest manners, i.e., white civilization's belief in its superiority and mission, as well as a commodity produced by the dominant group for its own purposes (Yu 2008, 89-90). The images of *indians* are grounded in the stereotypical and romanticized tropes of noble savage warriors, beautiful Indian maidens, children of the forest, vanishing race, and others, which strongly marginalize Indigenous people by their clandestine refusal to acknowledge their existence in the postmodern world (Stedman 1982, 6-173). The concept of *indians* is detrimental to Indigenous communities because it denies their presence and participation, and thus undermines their attempts to establish self-government and reclaim their sovereignty in different spheres of life. As Vizenor uncompromisingly declares: "The misrecognition of natives as *indians* is both oppressive and a prison of false identities" (1998, 22). That is why the narratives depicting *indians* need to be substituted with the emergence of postindians, i.e., Indigenous figures who move beyond the numbing state of victimry, recognize their own agency and responsibility, and use their heritage to reject mainstream dominance and secure a better future (Madsen 2008, 68). Vizenor links Native sovereignty with the concept of survivance—the survival of and opposition to oppression as well as the preservation of the tribes' cultural heritage (Vizenor 2008, 11)—which, in the case of literature, "creates a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihilism, and victimry" (Vizenor 2009, 1). Vizenor's critique of the dominant culture's simulation of Native presence can be easily applied to the portrayal of Indigenous people in fantasy fiction.

The visibility of Native people in the *Alvin Maker* series

On the whole, there are a few reasons why *The Tales of Alvin Maker* deserves some praise for its treatment of Native people. The premises of alternative history allow writers to dismiss or discredit groups which they see as redundant or inconvenient for their narratives. Yet Card never discredits Indigenous people in his creative retelling of America's past. On the contrary, he acknowledges their presence in American history, vividly depicts their suffering, and argues in favor of their significance for the past and future development of the United States. Of course, readers will quickly notice that, throughout the series, Native people are repeatedly called "the Reds," described by settlers as "heathen" and "savage" (*Seventh Son* 1987, 35, 39), and treated as a threat lurking in the wilderness

(*Seventh Son* 5, 7, 55; *Red Prophet* 1988, 1-10). Still, since such language and imagery are rooted in the historical reality of 19th century America, Card should not be criticized for recreating the dominant mood of that period. Though the tribes are generally regarded with suspicion and fear, the ways in which individual characters approach Native Americans deliver a very clear message: in *The Tales of Alvin Maker*, those who find pleasure in the suffering of Indigenous people or see their suffering as justified by the politics of manifest manners are either completely detestable or morally ambiguous at best. In contrast, the positive protagonists (Alvin, Peggy, their companions) sympathize with Native Americans, firmly oppose racial oppression, and advocate in favor of peaceful co-existence.

Moreover, the protagonist's growth is inextricably linked to his relationship with Native people, here represented mainly by Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa. Tecumseh (1768-1813) is recorded in American history as one of the greatest Native leaders. His goal was to create a confederacy of tribes, which would successfully oppose white settlers and form the foundation for a Native American nation. Remembered today as a man of great wit and leadership skills, Tecumseh extensively promoted his resistance movement among the tribes and fought against the United States for several years. Tenskwatawa (1775-1836), who in his early years dealt with depression and alcoholism, in 1805 experienced a series of visions which transformed him into a powerful spiritual leader and one of Tecumseh's greatest supporters. As the Prophet, Tenskwatawa taught his followers to reject European goods and traditions in favor of Indigenous customs. Together with Tecumseh, he established a Native village called Prophetstown, which quickly gained many inhabitants attracted both by Tenskwatawa's teachings and Tecumseh's plans. Prophetstown was eventually destroyed in the Battle of Tippecanoe, in 1811, after the tribes suffered a defeat from the hands of Governor William Henry Harrison—it needs to be noted that the first to attack was Tenskwatawa who assured his warriors that they would be protected from death. Though the Battle of Tippecanoe had a negative impact on Tecumseh's plans and Tenskwatawa's reputation, they did not stop in their resistance and formed an alliance with the British. It was Tecumseh's death in the Battle of the Thames, in 1813, that put an end to his confederacy. Tenskwatawa, who spent several years in exile, eventually returned to the US and died in 1836 (Sturgis 2008).

Amy H. Sturgis argues that “no other single representative of Indigenous America has so consistently captured the imaginations of mainstream writers over the past two centuries” as Tecumseh has (2017). In Card's retelling, Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa are introduced as Ta-Kumsaw and Tenskwa-Tawa. This change is justified by the premises of the series: by modifying the names of historical figures and places, Card creates the illusion of an alternative reality which is both recognizable and estranging. While both Native leaders reappear throughout the series, *Red Prophet* (1988) is the most Native-oriented volume since it casts Ta-Kumsaw and Tenskwa-Tawa as the main point-of-view characters and merges their campaign with Alvin's quest—often relegating the latter to the background. Thus, Card invites his readers to focus on the history and concerns of Indigenous

people, which is something seldom done by most fantasy fiction. Nevertheless, several aspects of Card's narrative are ambiguous, if not outright problematic, because they transform his Indigenous characters into Vizenor's *indians*—a simulation of Native presence.

Appropriation of Native voices

The first major problem appears in the volume *Red Prophet* in which several chapters are written from the perspective of Ta-Kumsaw and Tenskwaw-Tawa, offering glimpses of their memories, desires, and fears. Since Card does not belong to an Indigenous community, he does not possess first hand experiences of an Indigenous way of life, which he could employ in his depiction of these protagonists. Thus, he has to rely on external sources (at the beginning of the volume he thanks Carol Breakstone for “American Indian lore”), images offered by popular imagination, and his own assumptions about tribal cultures. However, the latter two are not the most reliable sources on which to build the portrayal of Indigenous people—rather, they reinforce stereotypes and contribute to the creation of the simulated Native identities criticized by Vizenor. While some might argue that it is only natural that writers address experiences remaining beyond their immediate surroundings, such matters require more consideration in the case of authors who do not belong to ethnic groups whose experiences they intend to recreate—postcolonial critique adamantly condemns artists who appropriate Indigenous voices. When asked about his portrayals of religion, Card replied: “whenever anybody who's not a Mormon writes about Mormons, they just get it so laughably, hopelessly wrong. What this tells me is that whenever I write about a culture that I don't belong to, I'm undoubtedly doing the same thing, making so many mistakes that to a member of that culture, I'm embarrassing myself” (qtd. in Nicholson 1998). Though otherwise admirable, Card's recognition of his limitations does not dismiss accusation of cultural appropriation—the author has never claimed extensive knowledge of Indigenous cultures and literatures, now widely available to postmodern readers. While it is obvious that without Ta-Kumsaw's and Tenskwaw-Tawa's perspective, the conflict described in *Red Prophet* would be less dramatic and reinforce another popular trope (the Indian as the alien Other), perhaps it would have been better to present them from the outside rather than imitate their voices.

What is more, the very fact that Ta-Kumsaw's and Tenskwaw-Tawa's inner thoughts are delivered in proper English, the language of the oppressor, rather than in their own tongue, should strike the reader as artificial. Of course, Card had to use English in order to reach his target audience even if that contradicts the authenticity of his protagonists—a problem which other American writers faced before him (Stedman 1982, 58-73). If the (pre-modern) Native character speaks English, what kind of English is it: proper or “broken”? The former would need to be validly supported by the character's background (e.g., prolonged contact with the English), whereas the latter became another stereotype

associated with Vizenor's *indians*, particularly those appearing in dime novels about the Wild West. Even Card's Tenskwa-Tawa, when he is still the drunken Lolla-Wossiky, uses broken English, as in e.g., "Likker very bad for Red man" and "True-talking White man, how come White Murderer Harrison not kill you yet?" (*Red Prophet* 1988, 55). But if English is not available, in what other way can Native and white characters communicate? Again, these questions touch upon the issue of authentic ethnic voices, and it might have been better if Card refrained from imitating them as they undermine the credibility of his characters and only simulate Native presence as indicated by Vizenor. Their credibility is particularly tested when Ta-Kumsaw and Tenskwa-Tawa think of themselves as "Red men," which suggests that they internalized the language of the oppressor. It is also noticeable that both characters ground their thoughts in references to the natural world, which is, of course, plausible since a person's surroundings will always condition their perception of the world. However, this taps into another stereotype associated with Native Americans—their image of a people universally attuned to the natural world (Vizenor 1999, 86).

Superiority of whiteness and Native victimry

The second major problem in the series' depiction of Native people appears in Alvin's relationship with Tenskwa-Tawa. Similarly to his authentic predecessor, Card's protagonist suffers from severe depression and addiction to alcohol, becoming almost a stereotypical "drunken *indian*" (Vizenor 1999, 88). However, Card presents the man's addiction as a coping mechanism: Tenskwa-Tawa, who possesses great spiritual powers, uses alcohol to numb himself so that he does not experience the suffering of the natural world. In a final act of resistance, Tenskwa-Tawa goes in search of his "dream beast," i.e., a spiritual entity which will allow him to reclaim his self: "Lolla-Wossiky will never have children, this old one-eyed whisky-Red. But Lolla-Wossiky will find his dream beast. Lolla-Wossiky will wake up. Lolla-Wossiky will have his woke-up name. Then Lolla-Wossiky will see if he should live or die" (*Red Prophet* 1988, 49). Eventually, his dream beast proves to be the boy Alvin. On the one hand, Card should be praised for acknowledging the roots of one of the most pressing concerns of contemporary Indigenous communities. He challenges his readers to recognize the damage done to the tribes by the settlers who deliberately cultivated the Natives' addiction to alcohol. One of the characters, Hooch, rejoices when he sees Native people humiliated by their addiction and when he realizes that he can earn his own fortune by continuing to sell them more liquor—"Now their tongues just hung out waiting for likker. And they'd drink and drink and drink [...] They'd drop down dead before they'd ever stop drinking, which was the best thing of all, best thing of all. Only good Red's a dead Red" (*Red Prophet* 1988, 5). Hooch is not alone in his attitude, since Card's version of Governor William Henry Harrison repeatedly entertains the thought that he will destroy the tribes with alcohol. Such images emphasize the inhuman treatment which Indigenous communities suffered

from the settlers. On the other hand, readers might question the fact that it takes Alvin, a white child, to heal Tenskwa-Tawa of his addiction. Of course, Alvin's role can be plausibly explained by his extraordinary powers inaccessible to others regardless of their ethnic affiliation. It should also be noted that the moment of healing is a significant spiritual experience for both heroes: Tenskwa-Tawa begins his transformation into the Prophet, whereas Alvin learns a crucial lesson about his responsibilities towards the rest of the living world. Nevertheless, the image of a white boy healing a ruined Native man and reshaping his identity inarguably evokes the trope of "the white man's burden," which diminishes Tenskwa-Tawa autonomy and self-responsibility in favor of white superiority, and thus reinforces the trope of Indigenous powerlessness. As a result, in spite of his resistance to trauma and despair, it is difficult to recognize Tenskwa-Tawa as an embodiment of Vizenor's postindians, i.e., Native characters that reject scripts of the dominant culture and "create a native presence, and that sense of presence is both reversion and futurity" (1999, 84).

Card's further depiction of Tenskwa-Tawa and Ta-Kumsaw raises other concerns. Though both men are generally presented in a positive way, which allows readers to sympathize with them, their portrayal is indebted to certain roles and features stereotypically ascribed to Indigenous characters. For instance, in *Red Prophet*, both men become Alvin's mentors. Though this role can be justified by the requirements of the plot (to create the ideal American community, Alvin has to learn about the needs of various groups, particularly those oppressed by the mainstream society), it is typical for Indigenous characters of popular fiction to be cast as spiritual leaders who introduce the white protagonist to the mysteries permeating the natural world and to a more wholesome life than that offered by their original community. Such roles, even if well-intended, reduce Indigenous people to token characters and plot devices. Moreover, though Card uses *Red Prophet* to explore the motivation behind Ta-Kumsaw's and Tenskwa-Tawa's actions, his portrayal of these men verges on the tropes of the noble savage and wise shaman, which are inscribed in the simulation of Native presence (Vizenor 1994a, 45-46). Ta-Kumsaw, the embodiment of a Native warrior, is depicted as proud and taciturn, strong and agile, honest and fierce—features which writers of frontier romance and adventure stories routinely used to describe their positive Indigenous characters (James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* is a case in point). Similarly, Tenskwa-Tawa often acts as a cryptic medicine man who reveals less than he knows. Such portrayal diminishes the autonomy of both characters and further transforms them into *indians*.

Moreover, Card has a liberal approach to the biographies of both men. Of course, his omission or recombination of some events (e.g., Tenskwatawa's family life, Tecumseh's relationship with Becca—possibly modeled on the figure of Rebecca Galloway from William Galloway's *Old Chillicothe: Shawnee and Pioneer History*, 1934) might be justified by the premises of his work. However, some changes are clearly aimed at increasing the readers' sympathy for the Natives. In Card's retelling of Prophetstown's destruction, Tenskwa-Tawa is a pacifist

who urges his followers to suffer the attack without retaliating, which results in a massacre of defenseless people: “They weren’t screaming. They weren’t fighting back. They were just standing there, men and women and children, just looking out at the White men who were killing them. Not a one even turned his back to the hail of shrapnel. Not a parent tried to shield a child from the blast. They just stood, waited, died” (*Red Prophet* 1988, 188). Though some might argue that this retelling is a symbolic representation emphasizing the unjust suffering of all tribes, such exaggerated imagery strengthens the concept of Native victimry, which contradicts Vizenor’s call to replace such narratives with stories of survivance (2009, 1). As Vizenor declares, “natives are ever and again the national allegories of discoveries, decimation, dispossession, dominance, and tragic victimry” (1998, 70).

In fact, the specter of victimry hovers over the entire series. Ta-Kumsaw wants to chase all white people out from America, though he refuses to resort to killing until the massacre of Prophetstown. Tenskwa-Tawa sees the futility of that plan—for a return to the past is never possible—and instead argues that the tribes should move West and preserve what they can of traditional life: “Red man will go west of the Mizzipy. White man will stay east. Red part of land will live. White part of land will be very dead, cut off” (*Red Prophet* 1988, 132). Though both men have their supporters, in the end they are overpowered by the colonists, and then forced to forsake their ancestral lands. In the course of the series, Alvin occasionally needs Tenskwa-Tawa’s help and wishes to build a community which will embrace all people, but the Prophet is visibly relegated to the secondary role of a helper, and Ta-Kumsaw, who survives the Battle of the Thames only thanks to Alvin’s healing, almost entirely disappears from the tale. The tribes are removed from the reality of the settler-colonial United States together with their leaders, and Card’s depiction of Native people is clearly indebted to the tropes of victimry and the vanishing race. His Native Americans are the threatening Other that the fictional colonists, similarly to their historical antecedents, destroy for their own benefit. Even characters such as Armor-of-God Weaver, otherwise an honest man who recognizes the importance of cooperation between communities, assume that the tribes will have to adopt the white way of life if they are to participate in the creation of the United States: “I reckon the Reds might go either way. Might try to kill us all, or might try to settle down and live among us. Living with us wouldn’t be exactly easy for them [...]. But fighting us has got to be worse, cause if they do that they’ll end up dead” (*Seventh Son* 1987, 85). Though Armor’s comment is well-intended, it is grounded in the fallacy of white supremacy and manifest manners.

Of course, since *The Tales of Alvin Maker* is not a revisionist historical narrative meant to show the triumph of Native Americans (for this is never Card’s intention), it is not surprising that the fictional tribes share the fate of authentic Indigenous people. Still, such a portrayal strongly affects the overall message of the series: for all of their strength and rightful claims, the tribes are doomed to yield and remain culturally and historically disempowered—as Vizenor ironically declares, Natives are “the eternal creatures of victimry” (1999, 83). Perhaps the long-promised volume *Master Alvin* will depict the development

of a self-sufficient and self-reliant Indigenous community, which will reflect the demands for tribal sovereignty. There is but one problem. Even if *Master Alvin* depicts its Native characters as a prominent component of Alvin's Crystal City, they will still be subjected to the ambitions of a white man. Regardless of how noble Alvin's ideas are, it is yet to be seen if his City will be able to accommodate Indigenous people and offer them an opportunity to integrate their heritage with a modern way of life according to their own wishes.

Appropriation of Indigenous cultural heritage

This question of integration is all the more important since several elements of the series suggest that Indigenous communities will indeed be indispensable for the creation of the ideal American society. The very fact that Alvin is mentored by Tenskwa-Tawa and Ta-Kumsaw proves that Card recognizes Native knowledge and perspective of the world as valuable, precisely because they are different from the worldview offered by the white Christian society. For instance, it is due to his meeting with Tenskwa-Tawa that young Alvin decides never to use his powers in a way which would hurt other living beings (*Seventh Son* 1987, 66). Tenskwa-Tawa rebukes the boy for the death of insects which Alvin persuaded to attack his sisters out of a petty desire for vengeance (*Seventh Son* 1987, 66). Tenskwa-Tawa also teaches him that all forms of life deserve to be respected and that the natural environment should not be exploited by men for their own goals. This marks the beginning of Alvin's education in an Indigenous way of life, which is an essential part of his journey towards the Crystal City. To understand the needs of the land and all of its inhabitants, Alvin needs a Native teacher, because his own Christian community, conditioned by the biblical belief in man's dominion over the world, would not be able to deliver similar lessons (Vizenor 2008, 5). In *The Tales of Alvin Maker*, indigeneity, contrary to the realities of 19th-century America, is not presented as a primitive state, but as an alternative to Western culture. Interestingly, it is also Tenskwa-Tawa who reveals to Alvin his mission of building the City. Afterwards, the protagonist stays with the Prophet for weeks, listening to stories and visions to deepen his new understanding of the world. His journeys with Ta-Kumsaw, during which he has to adapt to Indigenous customs, complement his education. Paradoxically, though it is the third volume that is entitled *Prentice Alvin* (1989), because it features Alvin learning the skills of a smith, the hero's true apprenticeship in the role of a Maker begins with the Native leaders.

At this point, it should be noted in Card's defense that he does not attempt to depict any rituals considered sacred by Indigenous communities or to retell Indigenous myths, and in that way appropriate a tribe's cultural heritage. His portrayal of Native people is mostly based on elements traditionally associated with tribal cultures such as their belief in the spirit world and unity with the nature. Of course, this practice is also a part of simulated Native presence as it leads to the creation of stereotypical images which rely on the dominant group's (flawed) perception of another community—in this case, the mistaken assumption that

there is a “universal” Indigenous culture whose elements authors can safely use to develop their fictional characters. Still, this seems less problematic than the act of appropriation in which a non-Native author “creatively” changes an authentic custom or myth so that it will fit their imaginary world—J.K. Rowling’s strongly criticized retelling of the Navajo belief in skin walkers is a case in point (Fallon 2016). Moreover, though Alvin embraces his mentors’ perception of the world, he never appropriates a Native identity. This is particularly visible in Alvin’s approach to “the greensong.” In Card’s world, the greensong denotes Native people’s inborn unison with nature. The natural world responds to their needs (e.g., plants ease their journeys and animals offer themselves as sustenance), and Native people approach the natural world with respect and avoid exploitation. Whenever the protagonists “hear the greensong,” they become attuned to the world around them. Amy H. Sturgis (2017) rightfully highlights the ambiguity of this concept:

Some critics might point to such Othering as a modern instance of romanticizing the Noble Savage; others might argue that environmental ethics is a necessary component in a series dedicated to the moral instruction of a young hero, and few figures from history and legend better represent a connection to and fierce defense of the land than Tecumseh. Both sides probably have a point.

Though the skill is inherent only to Indigenous people, Alvin—either thanks to his own powers or his budding understanding that all life is sacred and interconnected—is able to hear the greensong and then match the pace of his Native companions. Astonished, they ask Alvin if he is “red” or “white,” to which the boy immediately replies that he is the latter (*Red Prophet* 1988, 200). Even after Ta-Kumsaw’s defeat, when Alvin recognizes that the settlers are killing the land with their exploitation of its resources, he thinks: “But I’m a White man, not a Red, whatever anybody might say. And rotting underfoot or not, this land is all the land we have, and our people all the people that we’ve got” (*Red Prophet* 1988, 306). Thus, though the time spent with his Native mentors temporarily transforms Alvin into a “Red Boy” (as one chapter is revealingly entitled), the protagonist does not appropriate an Indigenous identity as a substitute for his original one—if anything, he acquires a hybrid identity stemming from his experience of both worlds and mixed education. As Peggy notes later: “Alvin learned the greensong of the Reds because he became like a child to Tenskwawatawa and Ta-Kumsaw” (*Heartfire* 1998, 115). Fortunately, Card never promotes “Native wannabes” who voice arbitrary claims to a Native identity—a practice which Vizenor adamantly condemns when he writes: “The insinuation of authenticity by adoption is obscure, passive, and indecorous; the pose is a renaissance language game” (*Shadow* 1994, 179)

Instead, Card argues in favor of mutual respect and cooperation between both cultures, exemplified not only by Alvin’s relationship with his mentors. A stronger image appears when Alvin visits a sacred Native place: the Eight-Face Mound. Before they arrive at the site, Ta-Kumsaw, who takes Alvin to the Mound

only because he was instructed to do so by a vision, shares with him the lore associated with the place so that the boy will approach it with respect. There are many paths leading to the top, and the visitor does not know which path, if any, will be open for him. The path awaiting Alvin is one acknowledging his hybrid identity. That is why, when the boy needs help, neither Ta-Kumsaw (Native) nor Taleswapper (white) can use that path. Only when they embrace one another and approach the Mound as “one body” are they able to climb the top:

Their legs were tangled; Taleswapper for a moment imagined how they must look, if there had been anyone to see them [...]. He felt the Red man's heart beating, its rhythm more commanding within Taleswapper's body than the unsensed beat of his own hot pulse. “We are not two men,” whispered Ta-Kumsaw. “Not Red and White men here, with blood between us. We are one man with two souls, a Red soul and a White soul, one man.” (*Red Prophet* 1988, 199)

The message is clear: respectful cooperation will be beneficial for both sides. Michael R. Collings notes, in reference to this episode, that “Card uses landscape to force an image of the unity that Reds and Whites both deny” (1990, 139). Soon, Ta-Kumsaw, enraged by the massacre of Prophetstown, prefers to struggle with a lone descent from the Mound rather than embrace a white man. In turn, Taleswapper is quick to respond with anger and fails to grasp Ta-Kumsaw's emotional torment. Since neither man is able to reach beyond his own feelings, their fragile alliance collapses. Regrettably, the concept of Alvin's hybrid identity is then left unexplored, and in subsequent volumes the protagonist seldom reflects on anything other than his ability to hear the greensong, which is reduced to a useful skill. It is unfortunate that after allowing Alvin to transcend the racial boundaries of the 19th century, Card fails to explore how the boy's experience of Indigenous life might have affected his maturation and result in something more than the respect he feels for Native people. Alvin could have become a white character suspended between two cultures, but perhaps Card decided against complicating his path towards the Crystal City.

The issue of Indigenous sovereignty

Though Card seems to forsake the motif of Alvin's hybrid identity, he becomes involved in the discussion of Indigenous survivance and sovereignty when he describes Prophetstown's destruction. The massacre is the result of Governor Harrison's plot to discredit Ta-Kumsaw and Tenskwa-Tawa. When the colonists attack the village, Tenskwa-Tawa advises his followers to yield to death rather than engage in battle. Card's version of Prophetstown's fate is much different from the authentic event, and it allows him to create a powerful image of non-violent resistance, suffering, and injustice. When the colonists finally see their actions for what they are—i.e., slaughter of the innocent—only a fraction of the villagers remains alive. Tenskwa-Tawa then uses the blood of his people to curse

the perpetrators: they need to tell the story of their deed to everyone they meet, unless they want their hands to drip with blood.⁵ Thus, their punishment—which falls in line with Indigenous storytelling traditions—is to bear the testimony of the massacre and it is administered not for the sake of revenge, but historical truth. Alvin also decides to bear the testimony:

Not that blood would appear on Alvin's hands if he refused to tell. He just felt like the same burden was on him like it was on all the Whites who beheld the massacre at Tippy-Canoe. The story of Tippy-Canoe was true, and if every Red who heard that tale became filled with hate and wanted vengeance, wanted to kill every White man who didn't sail back to Europe, why, would that be a reason for Alvin to try to keep them from knowing? Or wasn't that their natural right, to know the truth so as to be able to let the truth lead them to do good or evil, as they chose? (*Red Prophet* 1988, 272)

Historical truth is another pressing concern for contemporary Indigenous communities, since their past is frequently misrepresented by the dominant culture (the tragic life of Pocahontas, which was adapted into a popular Disney movie, is but one example).

After their village is destroyed, Tenskwa-Tawa and his followers move West where they recreate their community. Marek Oziewicz argues that the Prophet “establishes a civilization which lives in harmony with the land and will grow in strength until it is ready to absorb white settlers, teaching them the ways of peace with the people and the land” (2008, 222). While it still remains to be seen if the Indigenous community really absorbs white people, it is clear that their sovereign civilization can surpass the settlers' expectations. These expectations are well expressed by Arthur, Alvin's companion, who unconsciously divides Native people into two stereotypical categories: either they are savage and violent drunkards despised by everyone or members of the Irrakwa and Cherrick nations who are prosperous and sovereign, but cut away from the natural world by their involvement in heavy industry (*Crystal City* 2003, 285). The Prophet's people fit neither category as they are both traditional and modern: “you sort of thought they'd be living the old way, hunting and fishing and living in wigwams. Thus, it plain irritated Arthur Stuart at first to find out that they built log cabins and laid out their towns in streets, and that they planted acre after acre in maize and beans” (*Crystal City* 2003, 286). Tenskwa-Tawa argues that his people cannot remain isolated for ever; they need to be prepared to live among the settlers (e.g., by building up their tolerance to alcohol) and, at the same time, retain their identity, culture, and connection to the natural world (*Crystal City* 2003, 287). Such a vision of the future does tap into Vizenor's concepts of survivance, sovereignty, and postindians (1999, 84-85): by integrating their history and heritage with opportunities for the future, the Prophet's people might achieve a form of independence desired by contemporary Native people. However, Alvin's *Crystal City* might be a potential threat to their sovereignty. The City, similarly to the existing American society, seems to be based on multiculturalism, whereas

Native sovereignty—described as self-government, internal jurisdiction, and preservation of Native culture—contradicts that notion (D’Errico 1999, 9). Thus, Alvin’s City might prove to be a utopian idea which will not solve the racial tensions underlying the American society.

The concepts of survivance and postindians are also evoked when Tenskwa-Tawa is asked by Alvin to remove the curse. In spite of the Prophet’s best intentions, the truth about the massacre is eventually distorted: Harrison claims that he attacked the village to save the settlers and facilitate colonization. The implicit message is that those silenced by the mainstream culture can do little to protect themselves from historical falsehood. Tenskwa-Tawa eventually agrees to remove the curse, but only when all survivors of the massacre freely offer their consent and forgiveness. In exchange, the Prophet asks Alvin that the culprits and their families commemorate every anniversary of the event by retelling the true story of the village’s destruction: “He asks that we do that, but there’ll be no punishment if we don’t. No punishment except that our children will forget, and when they forget, there’s always the chance that it might happen again” (*Alvin Journeyman* 1995, 391). Such restorative justice, again delivered in the form of storytelling and which is implicitly presented as a source of historical truth, is better than acts of revenge since it breaks the cycle of violence. In that way, Tenskwa-Tawa’s people become a reflection of Vizenor’s postindians: they are able to move beyond their traumatic past not by rejecting or diminishing their grief, but by refusing to shape their future according to its dictates (Madsen 2008, 66-68). Their suffering is transformed into wisdom—“the tragic wisdom” of past suffering and injustice, which Vizenor associates with stories of survivance that repel the specter of victimry (Vizenor 1999, 38). Such a choice facilitates Native progress towards agency and sovereignty.

The Red Christ

The final element in the series’ portrayal of Indigenous people that needs to be analyzed is Card’s depiction of Tenskwa-Tawa as a figure reminiscent of Jesus Christ. Since critics such as Russell W. Dalton have noted the presence of Christ figures in contemporary fantasy fiction (2003, 138-140) and since Card is a practicing Mormon, it is not surprising that Christian imagery reappears in his work. Nevertheless, the creation of a Native savior figure resembling Jesus Christ is quite rare, and as such deserves attention—all the more given the fact that Collings, who analyzes several Christ figures and Christian references appearing in Card’s novels (1990, 75-93), does not provide any comments on this “Indigenous Christ figure.” Only Marek Oziewicz notes, in reference to Ta-Kumsaw and Tenskwa-Tawa, that “the land raises up its savior from among the Indians” (2008, 211).

Tenskwa-Tawa’s similarity to Christ is visible both in his roles and deeds. As far as the former is concerned, the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* accounts for multiple images contributing to the portrayal of Jesus, including the images of a prophet, a person scorned by others, a controversialist contesting his

surroundings, and a liberator whose sacrifice restores humankind (Ryken et al. 1998, 438-451). Tenskwa-Tawa fulfils similar roles for his people. Recognized after his spiritual transformation as the Prophet, he instructs the tribes to preserve their traditional way of life and seek spiritual enlightenment. Before his transformation, he is scorned due to his addiction to alcohol and humiliating behavior; yet he is scorned also after becoming the Prophet because his call to a life in peace, away from white settlements, is rejected by those favoring Ta-Kumsaw's military campaign. Thus, Tenskwa-Tawa becomes a controversialist because he both openly challenges the oppression from the hands of the settlers and questions the feasibility of Ta-Kumsaw's plans to remove all white people from America. Finally, he is a liberator who encourages his followers to reject their addiction to alcohol and reliance on white-made goods, and who reestablishes the community after the massacre of Prophetstown (during which he is ready to sacrifice his life if need be). It is largely due to Tenskwa-Tawa's success with Prophetstown and his ability to influence others that Governor Harrison, here the representative of the ruling establishment, plots the destruction of the village.

As for Tenskwa-Tawa's deeds, some of them parallel the miracles performed by Christ. In the New Testament, Christ's blood is universally presented as mankind's path to atonement and salvation (Ryken et al. 100-101). In *Red Prophet*, Tenskwa-Tawa's blood literally becomes a path which his followers can take to achieve enlightenment. First, the Prophet uses his blood to create a bridge over a river in order to reach the place where he will build Prophetstown. Later, he pierces his hands and feet (the wounds resemble those of Christ during the crucifixion) to create a bridge over the surface of a stormy lake and provide safe passage for Alvin and his companions. This scene is reminiscent of the episode in the New Testament, where Jesus walks over the surface of a stormy lake to reach his disciples. Finally, the Prophet uses his blood to create a vision of the Crystal City, a place that is "light without dark, clean without dirty, healthy without sick, strong without weak, plenty without hungry, drink without thirst, life without death" (*Red Prophet* 1988, 165)—in other words, a place reminiscent of the Kingdom of God, which someday will be created by Alvin, the series' ultimate Christ figure. All of these images are quite powerful and emphasize the spiritual nature of Tenskwa-Tawa's mission and Alvin's quest. Still, though the series does not directly suggest that the Natives should convert to Christianity (in *Pastwatch* they do adopt a Christian-like religion),⁴ many readers might find the series' Christian imagery disturbing, because Card superimposes it over Indigenous spirituality. Vizenor would object to such practice since he associates monotheism with the politics of manifest manners (*Manifest* 1994, vii) and identifies it as "hearsay" (2008, 3). His criticism of monotheism is evident when he writes in *Native Liberty* that "[a]n estimated hundred million natives perished from fatal diseases delivered by the breath and blood of monotheism and civilization" (2009, 105). Thus, Card's reinvention of a Native leader as a Christ-like figure contradicts Vizenor's stories of survivance, which should be embedded in Native heritage and trickster consciousness.

Conclusion

In an interview with David Larsen, Orson Scott Card described *The Tales of Alvin Maker* in the following way:

It's my "great American novel". The essence of what it means to Americans to be Americans. The deep rifts caused in the American soul by the relationship between whites and Indians and between whites and their black slaves. Those are really the two great themes in American history, and both of them still colour our national identity, they're the bleeding wounds in the internal organs of our society. (Larsen 2013)

Sadly, *The Tales of Alvin Maker* does not help to heal those wounds. Though the series' sympathetic portrayal of Native people draws the readers' attention to the historical suffering of the tribes and the concepts of survivance and reclaimed sovereignty, it also operates with tropes of noble savages, vanishing tribes, and passive victimry, which produce an ambiguous combination of empowerment and simulated Native presence. Card's Indigenous characters are suspended in a transition from *indians*—those "derisive signifiers of manifest manners" (Vizenor 2009, 5)—into postindians, and Alvin, who initially is a promise of reconciliation between the conflicted communities, can in the end threaten Native sovereignty with his Crystal City. Paradoxically, the author's supposedly revisionist portrayal of Native Americans in the early 19th century emulates the politics of frontier romance, a genre popular among American writers and readers of the 19th century.

Louise K. Barnett describes the frontier romance, of which Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) is a key example, as a mixture of trials depicted in captivity narratives and a romantic plot (1975, 48). Moreover, "the frontier romance exhibits the major characteristics of the English historical romance: against the backdrop of a significant historical moment, a genteel hero and heroine experience adventures which temporarily separate them before the resolution dispels whatever obstacles to their union existed" (Barnett 49). Other characteristic features of the frontier romance are heroic white protagonists, prominent Native characters who are worthy opponents or valuable friends, adventures and suspense, and usually a happy ending (Barnett 50-54). All of these elements are present in Card's portrayal of Alvin, his quest, and his relationship with Peggy and Indigenous characters.

Barnett argues that the development of the frontier romance was facilitated by the demand for national literature after the American Revolution. Some scholars, writers, and reviewers saw Native Americans, their heroic struggle against the whites, and their great leaders as an appropriate subject matter, though other voices argued that Indians are of little interest to sophisticated American readers and that American writers—lacking first-hand experience with Indians—can only recreate a finite number of plots (Barnett 22-26). Yet the genre prevailed, because the noble victimry of the Native characters emphasized the racial, cultural, and military superiority of white people. Though the frontier romance

could be sympathetic towards Indigenous people, it still depicted white victory as inevitable and desirable for America, and the efforts of settlers as praiseworthy (Barnett 27-28). The Native American of the frontier romance is the Other, and the gap cannot be bridged regardless of the white protagonist's efforts. The requirements of American nationalism—to glorify and justify its forefathers—was too important a task for authors of the 19th century to actually condemn the treatment of Native people. At best, the Natives could be praised for their bravery, and then glorified in their death. Assessing white people's appropriation of tribal cultures, Deborah Root explains: "We were exposed to colonial tales that reinforced the notion of Native people as heroic victims or, perhaps more accurately, as people who are heroic precisely because they have been victimized" (1997, 227). This colonial politics of heroic victimry present in the frontier romance is visible also in Card's series, e.g., in *Prophetstown's* destruction, when the Natives valiantly forfeit their lives in refusal to fight the colonists. Barnett notes that the frontier romance lost popularity before the Civil War (190), yet *The Tales of Alvin Maker* summons its ghost with the image of Native Americans as noble and victimized Others.

Card's failure to properly address Native issues might stem from the fact that as a non-Native writer he lacks awareness of certain nuanced aspects of racial discrimination. It is also possible—and it is an alarming possibility—that his conservative views, visible in his condemnation of homosexuality and same-sex marriages, might be indicative of his latent leanings towards the ideology of white supremacy and manifest destiny (hence the recurring trope of Native victimry). Yet since the latter cannot be, at least now, proved unequivocally, perhaps it is better to look at *The Tales of Alvin Maker* from a different perspective. In the introduction to *Race and Popular Fantasy: Habits of Whiteness* (2016), a critical study which examines the representations of race in fantasy fiction, Helen Young writes that fantasy "has a reputation for being a Eurocentric genre, that is, one which is by, for, and about White people" (1). She argues that the genre "formed habits of Whiteness early in the life of the genre-culture, and is, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, struggling to break them" (20). By analyzing Card's work through the prism of Young's comment and taking into consideration its attempts to cast Native Americans in an overall positive light, it can be argued that *The Tales of Alvin Maker*, particularly the volume *Red Prophet* published in 1988, anticipates the cultural transformations which the genre is undergoing in the 21st century. Today, readers and writers of fantasy fiction can no longer pretend to be oblivious to the genre's default racial preferences, which need to be challenged for the sake of opening space for other voices, experiences, and identities. Orson Scott Card's *The Tales of Alvin Maker*, though inarguably flawed in several areas, can be recognized as one of the works which initiated the deconstruction of the genre's prevalent habits of whiteness and its settler-colonial structures.

Notes

1. The series consists of the volumes *Seventh Son* (1987), *Red Prophet* (1988), *Prentice Alvin* (1989), *Alvin Journeyman* (1995), *Heartfire* (1998), and *The Crystal City* (2003). A volume provisionally entitled *Master Alvin* has been in the making for years.
2. Arguably, if Card were familiar with the works of these and other Native writers, who delve into the nuances of Native heritage and life in modern America, he might have delivered a more complex and sensitive portrayal of Native people and their relations with the white protagonists of *Alvin Maker*.
3. Card spent two years in Brazil as a missionary of the LDS Church.
4. In *Pastwatch*, Columbus is an ambiguous figure that brings genocide, Christianity, and salvation to Indigenous people (depending on which timeline is discussed), yet Alvin is responsible neither for genocide (destruction of Prophetstown happened regardless of his actions) nor conversion (he never attempts to Christianize his Native companions). Whether the salvation offered by his Crystal City will not ultimately turn into the doom of Indigenous people is yet to be seen in the volume *Master Alvin*.

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Recebido em: 23/02/2020

Aceito em: 22/07/2020