

University of Pardubice

Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

Identity in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*

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Bachelor Thesis

2018

Univerzita Pardubice  
Fakulta filozofická  
Akademický rok: 2016/2017

## ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(PROJEKTU, UMĚLECKÉHO DÍLA, UMĚLECKÉHO VÝKONU)

Jméno a příjmení: **Šárka Štěpánková**  
Osobní číslo: **H15292**  
Studijní program: **B7310 Filologie**  
Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro odbornou praxi**  
Název tématu: **Identita v díle Indian Killer Shermana Alexieho**  
Zadávací katedra: **Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky**

### Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Závěrečná bakalářská práce se bude věnovat dílu amerického indiánského autora Shermana Alexieho. V úvodu práce studentka stručně charakterizuje tvorbu zvoleného autora a zasadí ji do literárně-historického kontextu, tedy vysvětlí, co se v literární historii označuje jako "indiánská renesance", nastíní některé otázky týkající se literární tvorby amerických Indiánů obecně a Alexieho díla specificky. Dále bude definovat základní pojmy, s nimiž bude ve svých analýzách pracovat, především identita či etnicita.

Jádrem práce bude analýza zvoleného románu, v níž se studentka zaměří jednak na použité literární posty a žánrové zařazení díla, jednak na způsoby, jimiž autor v díle pojednává o problematice indiánské identity v současném světě (např. tzv. Urban Indians, téma Red Rage, Pretend Indians, apod.). Analýzu studentka opře o relevantní sekundární zdroje a své závěry vhodně doloží ukázkami z primárního textu. Závěrem studentka své analýzy shrne a pokusí se vyslovit obecnější závěr o způsobu, jímž Alexie k etnicitě a identitě současných amerických Indiánů prostřednictvím literárního díla vyjadřuje.

Rozsah grafických prací:

Rozsah pracovní zprávy:

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná**

Jazyk zpracování bakalářské práce: **Angličtina**

Seznam odborné literatury:

1. Alexie, Sherman. *Indian Killer*. New York: Atlantic Inc., 1996.
  2. Gleason, Philip. *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
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<http://interamerica.de/volume-4-2/mariani/>.
- a další.

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Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **30. dubna 2017**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **31. března 2018**



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V Pardubicích dne 31. října 2017

Prohlašuji:

Tuto práci jsem vypracovala samostatně. Veškeré literární prameny a informace, které jsem v práci využila, jsou uvedeny v seznamu použité literatury.

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Šárka Štěpánková

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor doc. Mgr. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D. for her guidance and valuable advice.

## **ANNOTATION**

The bachelor thesis focuses on the topic of identity of Native Americans in the novel *Indian Killer* by the Native author Sherman Alexie. The paper provides literary context of Native American writing and in more detail explains the terms “identity” and “ethnicity”. The thesis subsequently analyzes the novel *Indian Killer* and examines how the author portrays the issue of identity and ethnicity of Native Americans in modern society.

## **KEYWORDS**

Native American, Alexie, identity, ethnicity

## **NÁZEV**

Identita v díle *Indian Killer* Shermana Alexieho

## **ANOTACE**

Bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na téma identity amerických Indiánů v románu *Indian Killer* od indiánského autora Shermana Alexieho. Práce poskytuje literární kontext indiánské literatury a blíže vysvětluje pojmy „identita“ a „etnicita“. Práce poté analyzuje román *Indian Killer* a zkoumá, jak autor vyobrazuje problematiku identity a etnicity amerických Indiánů v moderní společnosti.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

americký Indián, Alexie, identita, etnicita

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
1 Native American Renaissance.....	3
2 Work of Sherman Alexie.....	7
3 The Issue of Identity.....	9
3.1 Lost Birds .....	11
3.2 Urban Indians .....	16
3.3 Mixed-blood Native Americans .....	20
3.4 Pretend Indians .....	23
4 Ethnicity .....	29
4.1 Red Rage.....	33
5 Genre and Symbolism .....	40
6 Conclusion.....	42
7 Resumé .....	45
8 Bibliography.....	48

## Introduction

Native Americans have been frequently misrepresented in literature written by white people. Due to the misrepresentation, white society's perception of Native Americans has been distorted by various stereotypes, which Native people commonly have to deal with. Native American authors, therefore, rectify in their work the stereotypical views of white society regarding Native Americans and offer a more realistic portrayal.

In his novel *Indian Killer*, the Native author Sherman Alexie explores issues related to Native American identity in order to portray the manner in which Native people deal with the misrepresentation, as well as their struggle to define their identity in white society. The novel also examines the topic of ethnicity and the treatment of Native Americans by white people and their response to it.

This bachelor thesis focuses on the issue of Native American identity as portrayed by the author Sherman Alexie. The issue is examined through a detailed analysis of Alexie's novel *Indian Killer*. In *Indian Killer*, Alexie deals with different topics, such as authenticity, lack of identity, urban Indians, mixed-blood status and misrepresentation of Native culture, as well as racism and Native Americans' anger. The aim of the thesis is to analyze Alexie's depiction of the problems and to summarize his views on identity and ethnicity of Native Americans.

The first chapter of the bachelor thesis is entitled "Native American Renaissance" and focuses on the rise of literary work written by Native Americans in the second half of the 20th century. In this chapter, oral tradition and the general history of Native American writing are explained. In addition, the chapter introduces common features of the works of Native American Renaissance and defines how Sherman Alexie's own work differs from other Native authors.

The second chapter "Work of Sherman Alexie" introduces the author Sherman Alexie and his writing. This chapter provides a brief biography of the author, lists his most influential works and characterizes topics and features of Alexie's writing.

The third chapter "The Issue of Identity" analyzes the manner in which the characters of *Indian Killer* deal with their identities. First of all, the chapter provides a definition of the terms "identity" and "Native American identity". The chapter is then divided into four subchapters. The first subchapter "Lost Birds" examines the problem of Native children adopted into white families and the identity problems which might occur in such individuals. To introduce the topic, the issue of "lost birds" is discussed. The analysis is then conducted through the novel's character John Smith, a young Native man who struggles with identity crisis



due to his “lost bird” status. The next subchapter “Urban Indians” focuses on Native Americans who live outside their reservation, in the city, and the economic and identity problems which they have to deal with. The topic is analyzed through the urban Indian characters in *Indian Killer*, particularly Marie Polatkin. In the following subchapter “Mixed-blood Native Americans”, the bachelor thesis focuses on Native Americans who have a white parent. This subchapter thoroughly analyzes the character Reggie Polatkin, who exemplifies the issues of mixed-blood Native Americans. The last subchapter “Pretend Indians” examines the issue of white people who claim to understand Native Americans and belong among them. This subchapter explores the topic by analyzing the characters Dr. Clarence Mather, a white professor of Native American literature, and Jack Wilson, a white mystery writer.

The fourth chapter “Ethnicity” deals with how Native Americans are perceived and treated by the white majority in Alexie’s *Indian Killer*, as well as their reaction to it. To introduce the topic, the term “ethnicity” and related terms “ethnic group”, “race” and “minority” are defined. Subsequently, the thesis explores the white characters’ perception of Native Americans and the tension between white people and Native people. The chapter further includes a subchapter “Red Rage”, which examines the Native characters’ anger at white society and their subsequent need for revenge.

In the last chapter “Genre and Symbolism”, the thesis attempts to classify the literary genre of the novel *Indian Killer* and explores its use of symbolism.

In the conclusion of the bachelor thesis, the knowledge obtained through the analysis of the novel is summarized.

# 1 Native American Renaissance

The term “Native American Renaissance” was first used in 1983 by professor Kenneth Lincoln in his book *Native American Renaissance*. It described the rise of literary work written by Native American authors, which began in 1968 when N. Scott Momaday published his novel *House Made of Dawn* and as the first Native American won a Pulitzer Prize in 1969. However, it could be argued that the term describes also social change that occurred during the 1960’s in politics, economics and culture and other areas of Native Americans’ lives.<sup>1</sup>

Before the Native American Renaissance, most literary work about Native Americans was written by non-Native people. Louis Owens, a Professor of Literature and a Native author of several novels, states that the way Native Americans were portrayed in these works was very different to the real people.<sup>2</sup> Native Americans were often pictured either as evil demons or as “noble savages”.<sup>3</sup> The dictionary definition of the noble savage character is “an idealized concept of uncivilized man, who symbolizes the innate goodness of one not exposed to the corrupting influences of civilization.” In fact, the author Joshua David Bellin suggests that the idea of the noble savage is common even today: “Founded by Columbus and confounded by Montaigne, the theme of the Noble Savage persists in colonial America.”<sup>4</sup>

In history, Native Americans passed their beliefs and knowledge through oral traditions, using indigenous languages. The oral traditions included stories, songs, prayers, histories, ceremonies and rituals.<sup>5</sup> Native American oral traditions were authorless, and the storytellers were usually considered to be merely their conveyors.<sup>6</sup> Professor Joseph L. Coulombe explains that since oral traditions were often specific to individual tribes and clans, storytellers could depend on their audience’s understanding of language use and cultural context without explaining it.<sup>7</sup> In fact, according to Owens, the main difference between oral traditions and written texts is the receiving group, as Native authors’ readers include Native Americans who

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<sup>1</sup> Alan R. Velie and Robert Lee, “Introduction” in *The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement*, ed. Alan R. Velie and Robert Lee (U.S.A.: University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2013), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (U.S.A.: University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1992), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Joshua David Bellin, *The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph L. Coulombe, *Reading Native American Literature* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Owens, *Other Destinies*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Coulombe, *Reading Native American Literature*, 29.

understand the tribal context, Native readers who may not be familiar with it but are able to understand it, and non-Natives who have entirely different values.<sup>8</sup>

Native Americans began writing and publishing their work long before the Native American Renaissance. The first published Native American author was Samson Occom, whose *Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul* was printed in 1772. Samson Occom was a converted Christian, and, in his text, he criticized drunkenness and the fact that alcohol was introduced to Native Americans by colonizers.<sup>9</sup>

A common theme of Native American texts during the first half of the 19th century was losing land.<sup>10</sup> In the 1820's, a Cherokee Elias Boudinot published a speech called *An Address to the Whites*, in which he spoke about Cherokee rights and expressed his concerns about losing territories to the American government. Still, the Indian Removal Act was passed in 1830, and the Cherokee were moved out. In 1854, John Rollin Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta* became the first novel written by a Native American author. In the following period, many Native authors wrote about the so-called Indian Wars and after the passing of the General Allotment Act in 1887, Native authors such as Laura Tohe, Zitkala-Sa and Luther Standing Bear wrote about the mandatory attendance of Native people at boarding schools.<sup>11</sup>

The first novel written by a Native American woman was *Wynema: A Child of the Forrest* by S. Alice Callahan and it was published in 1891.<sup>12</sup> In 1927, it was followed by Morning Dove's novel *Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range*. Other authors from that period include Simon Pokagon, John Milton Oskison, John Joseph Matthews and D'Arcy McNickle.

Despite the long literary history, Native American literature began to truly peak in the 1970's after the success of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. According to professor Coulombe, the Pulitzer prize which Momaday won for the novel was "the historical moment when white America – and others – began to acknowledge the great value of Native writing".<sup>13</sup> Due to the novel's positive reception, mainstream publishers such as Viking and Harper & Row started to pick up work by other Native American authors.<sup>14</sup> A wave of criticism from white scholars followed, but as Alan Velie and Gerald Vizenor explain, the critics often did not

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<sup>8</sup> Owens, *Other Destinies*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Coulombe, *Reading Native American Literature*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Coulombe, *Reading Native American Literature*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Coulombe, *Reading Native American Literature*, 24-28.

<sup>12</sup> Coulombe, *Reading Native American Literature*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Coulombe, *Reading Native American Literature*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Velie and Lee, "Introduction", 6.

understand the Native context: “In attempting to understand the culture of the writers and their subjects, the critics usually depended on the works of white anthropologists.”<sup>15</sup>

Native American Renaissance authors include novel writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, James Welch or Louis Owens, poets such as Simon Ortiz and Paula Gunn Allen and autobiographers such as Momaday and Gerald Vizenor. Sherman Alexie is also listed as a Native American Renaissance author, although he is younger than the “first wave” of writers following Momaday.

Native American Renaissance texts typically include topics of tragedy, the issue of identity and ethnicity, relocation and the relationship of characters with their reservations. The protagonists are also often of mixed-blood origin.<sup>16</sup> The authors frequently use literature as a tool to educate their readers on indigenous issues and the Native American identity. As Gerald Vizenor said in an interview: “I’m still educating an audience. For example, about Indian identity I have a revolutionary fervor.”<sup>17</sup> Coulombe adds:

Indigenous writers inform and influence a varied readership while empowering themselves in the process. Writing to teach is as natural as reading to learn. Great literary texts disseminate facts and opinions about history, philosophy, religion, art, politics, sociology, and psychology. [...] Readers are formed (or reformed) by their connections to the story and to the text, and as a result their relationship to the world is forever altered.<sup>18</sup>

Professor Kenneth Lincoln describes incorporation of oral traditions into written texts as another hallmark of the Native American Renaissance, as it has been typical for the work of Momaday, Silko and Erdrich and other authors.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, many Native authors refrain from describing tribal traditions in their texts. As Sherman Alexie pointed out in an interview:

We shouldn’t be writing about our traditions, we shouldn’t be writing about our spiritual practices. Not in the ways in which some people are doing it. Certainly, if you’re writing a poem or story about a spiritual experience you had, you can do it. But you also have to be aware that it’s going to be taken and used in ways, that you never intended for it to be.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Alan R. Velie and Gerald Vizenor, “Introduction” in *Native American Perspectives on Literature and History*, ed. Alan R. Velie (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>16</sup> John Gamber, “‘We’ve Been Stuck in Place Since House of Made of Dawn’: Sherman Alexie and the Native American Renaissance” in *The Native American Renaissance*, 189.

<sup>17</sup> Coulombe, *Reading Native American Literature*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Coulombe, *Reading Native American Literature*, 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> Alan R. Velie, “The Use of Myth in James Welch’s Novels” in *The Native American Renaissance*, 88.

<sup>20</sup> Sherman Alexie, “Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie”, interview by John Purdy, October 4, 1997, <http://faculty.wvu.edu/purdy/ALEXIE.html>.

Alexie further separates himself from other Native authors in his criticism of the idealization of reservation life, which was common for the first generation of Native American Renaissance, according to John Gamber, author of the essay “We’ve Been Stuck in Place Since House Made of Dawn”.<sup>21</sup> Authors of the Native American Renaissance also tend to celebrate mixed-blood Native Americans. Alexie, however, does not share this view.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gamber, “We’ve Been Stuck in Place Since House of Made of Dawn”, 194.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold Krupat, “Red Matters”, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 20-21.

## 2 Work of Sherman Alexie

Sherman Joseph Alexie was born on October 7, 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in the town of Wellpinit in Washington. Alexie's father was of Couer d'Alene origin, while his mother was a Spokane Indian. Alexie attended a reservation school and after the eight-grade transferred to high school in Reardon. The students of his new school were mostly white children, as Alexie's mother believed that he would most likely succeed with a mainstream education.<sup>23</sup> After graduation, he attended college at Gonzaga University and dropped out after two years. He returned to education later at Washington State University.

During his university studies, he signed up for a poetry class, where he read his first book of Native American poetry, *Songs from this Earth on Turtle's Back*. The book inspired him to write his own poems.<sup>24</sup> In an interview, Alexie says about the book: "It captured for me the way I felt about myself, at least then. It was nothing I'd ever had before. I thought to myself: I want to write like this! So that's where it began."<sup>25</sup> In 1992, his first collection of poems, *The Business of Fancydancing*, was published. Alexie wrote two more poetry books and turned to short stories and novels with *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and *Reservation Blues* (1995).

*Indian Killer*, Sherman Alexie's second novel, was published in 1996. In *Indian Killer*, Alexie explores issues such as identity, ethnicity and racism and focuses on Native Americans living in the city, so-called urban Indians. Reactions to the book were mixed, as it deals with rage and violence.<sup>26</sup> Alexie explained that his main motivation for writing *Indian Killer* was his own frustration towards critics and readers who insisted that his previous works were depressing, which he disagreed with, therefore he completely left out his typical humor in the novel.<sup>27</sup>

His later work includes for instance a short story collection *Ten Little Indians* (2003) and a young-adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), which won a National Book Award for Young People's Literature. Alexie sees himself as primarily a poet and writer of short stories<sup>28</sup>, despite the success of his novels.

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<sup>23</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Åse, Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," *MELUS* 30, no. 4 (2005): 152, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029639>.

<sup>26</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 104.

<sup>27</sup> Gamber, "'We've Been Stuck in Place Since House of Made of Dawn', 199.

<sup>28</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 7.

Alexie's work is predominantly autobiographical. For instance, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, he writes about his experiences as a Native American child among white classmates. In *Reservation Blues*, he wrote about his experience with alcoholism, for which he was criticized and accused of portraying Native Americans in stereotypical way.<sup>29</sup> His writing frequently takes place on the Spokane Indian Reservation where he was raised, and he admits that his tribe heavily influenced his world views.<sup>30</sup>

In his work, Alexie deals with topics such as life on reservation, alcoholism, poverty, ethnicity and identity. He often refers to popular culture, as he says that one of his main goals is to reach Native American children living on reservations.<sup>31</sup> As he said in an interview with John Purdy: "If Indian literature can't be read by the average 12-year-old kid living on the reservation, what the hell good is it? You know, I've been struggling with this myself, with finding a way to be much more accessible to Indian people."<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, Alexie is well-known for his humor and use of irony and satire, despite writing about serious topics. According to Alexie, humor allows him to reach his readers. He explains: "I think being funny breaks down barriers between people. [...] Making fun of things or being satirical doesn't make me feel better about things. It's a tool that enables me to talk about anything."<sup>33</sup> He also claims that humor is a form of self-defense on the reservation.<sup>34</sup> The notion that humor is an important part of Native American identity is further confirmed by the Chippewa author Gerald Vizenor who also incorporated humor into his work and artist Sam English, who said that humor is what helped Native Americans get through difficult times.<sup>35</sup>

Alexie is considered to be the second generation of the Native American Renaissance authors, following Native authors such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko and Louise Erdrich. He believes that an issue with Native literature is that many authors do not describe their real life but what they wish it was as opposed to being realistic.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, he is influenced by many of them and lists authors such as James Welch, Simon Ortiz and Louise Erdrich as his inspirations. Moreover, he states that he was inspired by non-Native authors as well, for instance John Steinbeck and Stephen King.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke", 152.

<sup>30</sup> Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke", 155.

<sup>31</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Alexie, "Crossroads".

<sup>33</sup> Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke", 160-161.

<sup>34</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Owens, *Other Destinies*, 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> Alexie, "Crossroads".

<sup>37</sup> Gamber, "We've Been Stuck in Place Since House of Made of Dawn", 191.

### 3 The Issue of Identity

Identity is a topic which is frequently explored in Native American literature. As Louis Owens mentions in his book *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*: “[...] in their fiction American Indian novelists confront, inevitably and absorbingly, this question of identity”.<sup>38</sup>

According to the Britannica dictionary definition, identity can be described as “both group self-awareness of common unique characteristics and individual self-awareness of inclusion in such a group”. Identity can be based on ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and gender. Philip Gleason suggests that sociologists perceive identity as constructed by society:

Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to view identity as an artifact of interaction between the individual and society – it is essentially a matter of being designated by a certain name, accepting that designation, internalizing the role requirements accompanying it, and behaving according to those prescriptions.<sup>39</sup>

A Kiowa author Perry G. Horse further defines Native American identity: “It is a particular way one feels about oneself and one’s experience as an American Indian or tribal person.” According to Horse, Native American identity is closely tied to an individual’s tribe.<sup>40</sup> In fact, to be legally recognized as a Native American in the United States, one must be first determined by tribal governments as such. Therefore, Horse lists enrollment in a tribe as a principal factor influencing Native American consciousness. The other factors are person’s cultural identity, genealogy, traditional Native American philosophy and a self-concept as a Native American.<sup>41</sup>

There are many stereotypes about who “authentic” Native Americans are. The issue affects especially mixed-blood people, who are often not seen by others as “real Indians”. Michelle R. Jacobs and David M. Merolla from the Wayne State University show that in the last few decades, the number of American citizens who identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native has risen from 800,000 in 1970 to slightly over 5 million people in 2010. They contribute

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<sup>38</sup> Owens, *Other Destinies*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America* (United States of America: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 131.

<sup>40</sup> Perry G. Horse, “Native American Identity”, *New Direction for Students Services*, no. 109 (Spring 2005): 65, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.154>.

<sup>41</sup> Horse, *Native American Identity*, 65.



the rise to mixed-blood people who used to identify as another race.<sup>42</sup> However, many of these people are not seen by others as authentic Native Americans due to the remaining stereotypes about “real Indians”. As Jacobs and Merolla write:

Racializing projects create Indian “ideal types” who live on reservations and remain untouched—biologically and culturally—by contemporary Western society. “Authentic” Indians, therefore, are imagined to be full-blooded, primitive folk with brown skin and black hair. This collection of racial meanings creates an interactional environment in which reclaimers are dismissed as imposters or “wannabes” because they do not fit political or popular molds cast for Indians in the United States.<sup>43</sup>

According to Owens, for people to believe that an individual is an authentic Native American, the person needs to have a recognizably Native name and appearance and lead a corresponding life-style. He also notes that the problem of people not recognizing Native Americans as authentic is partly caused by their belief that real Native Americans do not exist anymore, since their idea of Native Americans is not based on real people, but on literature, art and history.<sup>44</sup> As Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. suggests, the stereotypical image of Native Americans is a historical one: “In spite of centuries of contact and the changed conditions of Native American lives, Whites picture the ‘real’ Indian as the one before contact or during the early period of that contact.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Merolla and Jacobs note that due to fictional Native Americans, people tend to imagine real Native people as “warlike, savage, stoic, and/or nature loving”.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, Alexie explains that Native Americans are also frequently influenced by the stereotypes, which might consequently lead to poor self-image as they are not able to live up to them:

You can never be as strong as a stereotypical warrior, as godly as a stereotypical shaman, or as drunk as a drunken Indian. You can never measure up to extremes. So you're always going to feel less than the image, whether it's positive or negative. One of the real dangers is that other Indians have taken many stereotypes as a reality, as a way to measure each other and ourselves.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Michelle R. Jacobs and David M. Merolla, “Being Authentically American Indian: Symbolic Identity Construction and Social Structure among Urban New Indians”, *Symbolic Interaction* 40, no. 1 (2017): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.266>.

<sup>43</sup> Jacobs and Merolla, “Being Authentically American Indian”, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Owens, *Other Destinies*, 3-4.

<sup>45</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 26.

<sup>46</sup> Jacobs and Merolla, “Being Authentically American Indian”, 66.

<sup>47</sup> Nygren, “A World of Story-Smoke”, 158.

For these reasons, the issue of identity is a common topic in literature written by Native Americans. James Cox explains that Native authors use literature as a means of correcting the stereotypical view people have on Native Americans: “These authors and their characters are involved in a narrative construction or reconstruction of a Native American-identified self that counters a racist historical context and the conquest narratives that are often sustained by the ubiquitous white man's Indian.”<sup>48</sup>

Identity is also profoundly explored in Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer*. The novel deals with identity issues of different Native characters, including so-called “lost birds”, urban Indians and mixed-blood Native Americans. Furthermore, Alexie focuses on so-called Pretend Indians, non-Native people who believe that they belong among Native Americans and are able to understand them. The novel also examines the characters' struggles to compare to the stereotypes imposed on Native Americans.

### 3.1 Lost Birds

In *Indian Killer*, the main protagonist, John Smith, is the character that suffers the most from issues concerning defining his identity. John was adopted as a baby by white parents and for this reason struggles to determine where he belongs. Alexie calls John a “lost bird”, a term used for Native Americans who were adopted into white families. Alexie says about “lost birds”: “The social problems and dysfunctions of these Indians adopted are tremendous. Their suicide rates are off the charts, their drugs and alcohol abuse rates are off the charts”.<sup>49</sup>

Adopted Native Americans are also sometimes called “split feathers”. During the 1950's and 1960's, the Indian Adoption Project placed approximately 84% of Native American children into white families. The high number eventually led to the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, which gave responsibility over the children to their tribes.<sup>50</sup>

In 1998, Carol Locust, a Training Director for the Native American Research and Training Center, conducted a pilot study on Native Americans who were adopted into white families and came to the conclusion that they were prone to the so-called “Split Feather Syndrome”. Among others, the syndrome includes feelings of a loss of Native American

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<sup>48</sup> James Cox, “Muting White Noise: The Subversion of Popular Culture Narratives of Conquest in Sherman Alexie's Fiction”, *Studies in American Indian Literature* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20739425>.

<sup>49</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 105.

<sup>50</sup> Arnold R. Silverman, “Outcomes of Transracial Adoption”, *The Future of Children* 3, no. 1 (Spring, 1993): 107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1602405>.

identity, culture, language, heritage and tribal affiliation, as well as feelings of being different. The adoptees might also feel discriminated from the non-Native culture. In her study, Locust also mentioned that reclaiming Native culture typically had a positive effect on the adoptees.<sup>51</sup>

In *Indian Killer*, John seems to fit Locust's description of Split Feathers, as he manifests most of the symptoms. He feels as if he has lost his Native identity and culture, he does not have a tribe to belong to and cannot relate to Native Americans nor non-Native people.

John's issues with defining his Native identity arise primarily from his lack of knowledge about what tribe he is from, as there is no information about his biological parents: "John's mother is Navajo or Lakota. She is Apache or Seminole. She is Yakama or Spokane."<sup>52</sup> According to Perry G. Horse, Native American identity is closely tied to a person's tribe.<sup>53</sup> As John does not know where he is from, he tends to lie about what he is:

John only knew that he was Indian in the most generic sense. Black hair, brown skin and eyes, high cheekbones, the prominent nose. Tall and muscular, he looked like some cinematic warrior, and constantly intimidated people with his presence. When asked by white people, he said he was Sioux, because that was what they wanted him to be. When asked by Indian people, he said he was Navajo, because that was what he wanted to be.<sup>54</sup>

John looks as a stereotypical Native American, but he does not belong to any tribe and has a name which does not sound Native. In fact, a character in the novel describes John's name as "kind of a funny name for an Indian".<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, Professor Margaret Homans suggests that John's name serves as a symbolism for his unclear identity: "He knows nothing about his origins except that his birth mother was fourteen; his generic, founding-father name ironically signifies his lack of any stable origin or identity."<sup>56</sup>

John's adoptive parents, Olivia and Daniel, take John to Native social gatherings and attempt to teach him about his Native American heritage:

After John arrived, [Olivia] spent hours in the library. With John sleeping beside her, she would do research on Native American history and culture. She read books about the Sioux, and Navajo, and Winnebago. Crazy Horse, Geronimo,

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<sup>51</sup> Carol Locust, "Split Feathers Study", *Pathways* 13, no. 4 (September/October 1998), <https://splitfeathers.blogspot.com/p/split-feathers-study-by-carol-locust.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Sherman, Alexie, *Indian Killer* (New York: Atlantic Inc., 1996), 4.

<sup>53</sup> Horse, "Native American Identity", 65.

<sup>54</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 340.

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Homans, "Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins", *Narrative* 14, no. 1 (January 2006): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107378>.

and Sitting Bull rode horses through her imagination. She bought all the children's books about Indians and read them aloud to John.<sup>57</sup>

However, despite Daniel and Olivia's efforts to educate John about Native American culture, he does not know how to create relationships with Native Americans, primarily because he feels as if he does not belong among them. Moreover, he does not relate to white people either, since he has been treated differently by them his whole life, including his adoptive parents and teachers, who were more benevolent to him than to other students. As a child, he was also ashamed of having darker skin than his parents and wanted to look more like them.

Even though some white people, such as John's teachers and Olivia and Daniel, might have meant well with their actions, they apparently did not understand the effect they would have on John. As Daniel Grassian states: "But like Daniel and Olivia, John's teachers' seemingly good intentions actually evince a stereotypical and demeaning attitude towards Indians, whom they dehumanize in their generalized pity."<sup>58</sup>

Daniel shows a certain level of self-awareness when he realizes that John might be unhappy about being adopted: "If Olivia and Daniel could not forget that John was adopted, then John must have carried that knowledge even closer to his skin."<sup>59</sup> In reality, the fact that John has white adoptive parents creates a trauma for him and he never feels as if he belongs with other Native Americans due to it.

John's inability to relate to Native Americans is influenced also by his tendency to idealize them. In his analysis of the novel, Grassian suggests that Olivia and Daniel might have done more harm than good to John by educating him about his culture, as the books were probably written by non-Native people and only contributed to John's idealization of Native Americans.<sup>60</sup> In fact, when Daniel and John go to an all-Native basketball tournament for the first time, John is disappointed in the Native Americans: "John felt like crying. He did not recognize these Indians. They were nothing like the Indians he had read about. John felt betrayed."<sup>61</sup>

It is obvious throughout the novel that John has developed a very particular idea about Native Americans. Unfortunately, it is mostly based on stereotypes. For instance, he imagines that Native Americans all feel ancient and wise, hunt and trap and have an ability to summon

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<sup>57</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 109.

<sup>59</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 114.

<sup>60</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 106-107.

<sup>61</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 22.

the wind.<sup>62</sup> John shows a lack of understanding of Native people, which is evident also in his idealization of their lives: “They were talking, telling jokes, and laughing loudly. So much laughter. John wanted to own that laugh, never realizing that their laughter was a ceremony used to drive away personal and collective demons.”<sup>63</sup>

Notably, John tends to glorify life on reservation. He believes that if his natural mother did not give him up and raised him on reservation, he would be happy: “It is a good life, not like all the white people believe reservation life to be. There is enough food, plenty of books to read, and a devoted mother.”<sup>64</sup>

His ideas clash with real-life experience of Marie, a student at university in Seattle, who moved to the city to escape the Spokane reservation. Grassian notes about John’s idea of reservation life: “Missing from John’s portrait, of course, is violence, alcoholism, rage, extreme poverty, and humor, all hallmarks of reservation life as Alexie details it in his previous works.”<sup>65</sup> However, John is convinced that if he had grown up on the reservation with his tribe, his life would be much better. In fact, he describes his adoption as a crime, he feels stolen by white people:

“Everything had gone wrong from the very beginning, when John was stolen from his Indian mother. That had caused the first internal wound and John had been bleeding ever since, slowly dying and drying, until he was just a husk drifting in a desert wind.”<sup>66</sup> As is evident, John sees his adoption as the primary reason for his unhappiness and personal struggles.

Overall, John feels ashamed of having been adopted by white people and not knowing his own tribe. Even though Marie takes an interest in him and tries to befriend him, he does not reciprocate out of fear that she would realize that he does not belong to any tribe:

John knew that his silence was acceptable, but he also knew that he could have asked about her tribe, that Indians quizzed Indians about all the Indians friends, family, lovers, and acquaintances they might have in common. He was afraid she would discover that he was an Indian without a tribe.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, John does not see himself as a “real Indian”. Instead, he is convinced that he only appears to be one: “Though he knew he wasn’t a real Native American, John knew he looked

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<sup>62</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 41, 30, 24.

<sup>63</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 43.

<sup>65</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 108.

<sup>66</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 379.

<sup>67</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 35.

like one. His face was a mask”.<sup>68</sup> Because of his lack of connection to Native Americans, John feels as an imposter at traditional Native dances and believes that he needs to pretend to be an authentic Native American: “Through years of observation and practice, he had learned how an Indian was supposed to act at a powwow. When he got old enough to go without Daniel and Olivia, he could pretend to be a real Indian.”<sup>69</sup>

John’s notion that he has to pretend to be a Native American is partly influenced by his fear of other Native Americans’ reaction to his situation. Alexie mentions in the novel that Native Americans tend to judge each other based on identity: “Indians were always placing one another on an identity spectrum, with the more traditional to the left and the less traditional Indians to the right.”<sup>70</sup> For this reason, John is afraid to tell anyone about being adopted and not knowing his tribe. However, Marie is not considered a typical Native American either. She does not speak tribal language and does not sing or dance traditionally. As such, she wishes to meet other untraditional Native Americans. As Grassian states in his analysis:

It is important to recognize that John is not the only Indian struggling with how to achieve a sense of individual authenticity. Not only is Marie involved in the same struggle, so are all Indians, Alexie suggests, by obsessively ranking each other on the basis on how authentically Indian each is, determined not only by ethnicity, but by knowledge of cultural traditions and purposeful isolation from the white world.<sup>71</sup>

John’s situation as an adopted Native American is further complicated by his schizophrenia. A crucial part of it is his obsession with Father Duncan, a Native American Jesuit who baptized him and later disappeared. John sees Father Duncan as his guide and he is a frequent part of his dreams and hallucinations.

When John commits suicide and the police convicts him of being the Indian Killer, a serial killer of white men, Marie claims that he did not kill anybody but was mentally torn: “He was hurting. He didn’t know up from down. He got screwed at birth. I don’t care how nice his white parents were. John was dead from the start.”<sup>72</sup> Marie sees John’s adoption by a white couple negatively and shares John’s belief that it was the reason for his issues.

Overall, John’s problems with defining his identity arise primarily from his lack of a tribe and his shame of having white adoptive parents. Even though Daniel and Olivia had for

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<sup>68</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 276.

<sup>69</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 35.

<sup>70</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 39.

<sup>71</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 112.

<sup>72</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 417.

the most part good intentions, they were unable to understand John. Daniel and Olivia's special treatment of John due to his race alienated him from them. Moreover, their attempts to teach him about Native culture by presenting him with literature likely written by white people resulted in John having stereotypical views on Native Americans. In consequence, he cannot relate to Native Americans, since he feels that he is not a "real Indian", due to not being able to measure up to the stereotypes. Through his character, Alexie shows that stereotypes can be harmful to Native Americans and may result in feelings of inferiority.

### 3.2 Urban Indians

In *Indian Killer*, Alexie focuses on urban Indians, Native Americans who reside in urban areas. J. Matthew Shumway and Richard H. Jackson write in their report that the number of Native Americans who lived in urban areas significantly rose after 1950. According to the authors, about 13 percent of Native people lived in cities before 1950. In 1990, it was already 53 percent. Shumway and Jackson contribute the increase in number to more people identifying as Native Americans and especially to the Bureau of Indian Affairs relocation program, which began in 1952.<sup>73</sup> In her article on urban Indians, Gwen Carr described the Relocation Program as "designed to assimilate Indians into mainstream culture, thereby lessening the government's treaty responsibilities". According to Carr, urban areas with the largest Native populations are for instance Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, Chicago, Minneapolis or San Francisco.<sup>74</sup>

Even though many Native Americans move to urban areas as there are more working opportunities, Shumway and Jackson suggest that they also encounter various problems:

Relocation to urban areas removes Native Americans from the support services provided by the BIA, tribe, or other organizations. Loss of medical care, education, or other services may result in a significant cost to the migrants. Native Americans in urban areas are diffused throughout a much larger non-Indian population, which means the loss of the cultural support of tribal or other group members and of family. The potential for acculturation and related decline of traditional Indian heritage increases in such settings.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> J. Matthew Shumway and Richard H. Jackson, "Native American Population Patterns", *Geographical Review* 85, no. 2 (April, 1995): 192-193, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/216062>.

<sup>74</sup> Gwen Carr, "Urban Indians: The Invisible Minority", *Poverty & Race*, (March/April, 1996), [http://www.pprac.org/full\\_text.php?item\\_id=3563&newsletter\\_id=25](http://www.pprac.org/full_text.php?item_id=3563&newsletter_id=25).

<sup>75</sup> Shumway and Jackson, "Native American Population Patterns", 200.

Moreover, Carr notes that urban Indians have a higher dropout rate, infant mortality rate, suicide rate and risk of deaths due to health issues than any other group. She also adds that the number of Native patients with mental health issues has risen by 200 percent from 1988 to 1990.<sup>76</sup>

In *Indian Killer*, many Native characters wish to leave their reservation and move to the city. The urban Indian community is represented mainly by Marie Polatkin, a student at the Washington University in Seattle. Marie grew up on the Spokane reservation as a talented child, but she did not want to stay on the reservation, which alienated her from her peers:

Marie felt more and more isolated. Some bright kids were more interested in Spokane Indian culture than in a public school education. [...] They could speak Spokane as fluently as many elders, but they could barely read English. They were intelligent and humorous, and they never wanted to leave the reservation. They had chosen that life and Marie both resented and envied them.<sup>77</sup>

Marie's envy of those who wanted to stay on the reservation was likely caused by her feelings of not belonging among the Spokane people due to her ambitions. She was supported in her decision to leave by her parents who believed that she would be able to lead a better life outside of the reservation. Once Marie manages to move to the city, she starts visiting her reservation infrequently and secretly due to her fear of having to return back:

Through her intelligence and dedication, Marie had found a way to escape the reservation. Now she was so afraid the reservation would pull her back and down her in its rivers that she only ventured home for surprise visits to her parents, usually arriving in the middle of the night.<sup>78</sup>

Marie's perception of reservation life is apparently so grim that she does not visit her own family. Similarly, Reggie's mother Martha married a racist white man to escape: "She'd wanted to have a big house, a nice car, green grass, and, no matter how cruel Bird was, she'd known he could provide her with all that."<sup>79</sup> Clearly, Martha would rather deal with a cruel husband than stay on the reservation. Furthermore, her son Reggie is admired for being an urban Indian. Homans notes that even John, who idealizes life on reservation, in his dreams decides to go to the city: "Similarly, in one of John's imagined scenes, life on the reservation leads to yearning to move off it."<sup>80</sup> As is evident, many Native Americans in the novel believe that life in the city

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<sup>76</sup> Carr, "Urban Indians: The Invisible Minority".

<sup>77</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 33.

<sup>78</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 34.

<sup>79</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 92.

<sup>80</sup> Homans, "Adoption Narratives", 21.



is more desirable than reservation life and are convinced that they will be able to achieve happiness as urban Indians.

However, while idealization of the life outside of the reservation is common among the characters, many of the urban Indians deal with financial problems. For instance, the character of King went to the city for education, but because of money issues became homeless:

He had made it through one semester before he ran out of money. Too ashamed to return to the reservation, he'd worked on a fishing boat for a few years, then was struck by a hit-and-run driver while on shore leave. Too injured to work, without access to disability or workers' compensation, King had been homeless for most of the last ten years.<sup>81</sup>

King is not the only homeless Native American in the novel and likewise Marie and Reggie struggle financially. With reference to Carr, issues with money are common in the urban Indian community.<sup>82</sup> Alexie's characters of the urban Indians thus serve as examples of Carr's point.

The urban Indians in the novel also feel as outcasts from their tribes. As Stacey Berry notes in her analysis: "John, Marie, and Reggie, and the various urban Indian street-dwellers introduced throughout the novel, find themselves without tribes and without a sense of home."<sup>83</sup> In Marie's case, she feels isolated from her tribe, since she does not practice her tribe's traditions. Marie's parents refused to teach her about the Spokane culture and language, since they were convinced that she would not need it outside of the reservation. In consequence, Marie feels alienated from the Spokane tribe.

At the same time, however, the urban Indians feel as part of their people, even though they do not live on the reservation. While Marie does not want to return to the reservation and perceives herself mainly as an urban Indian, she feels connected to the Spokane tribe and considers it to be an important part of her identity: "But somehow, most every urban Indian still held closely to his or her birth tribe. Marie was Spokane, would always be Spokane."<sup>84</sup> Donald Lee Fixico explains that urban Indians tend to identify with their tribes despite living in the city:

The urban Indian does not want to alienate himself from his native culture and his people. [...] After migrating to urban areas, Indians attempt to avoid dismembering themselves from their kinship community since they are

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<sup>81</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 233.

<sup>82</sup> Carr, "Urban Indians: The Invisible Minority".

<sup>83</sup> Stacey Berry, "Beyond the Margins: The Novel of Protest And Production", *Sic* 2, no. 1 (01 December 2011), <https://doi.org/10.15291/sic/1.2.lc.6>.

<sup>84</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 38.

frequently alone in the city. They consider themselves as a part of the people even though they live hundreds of miles away from the traditional homeland.<sup>85</sup>

Through the characters in the novel, Alexie demonstrates Fixico's suggestion that urban Indians still see their tribe as an essential part of themselves, in spite of the separation from their people.

Since Marie also feels strongly connected to other urban Indians, she attempts to help them. She is an active member of various Native American organizations as well as the urban Indian community and cares for homeless people, many of whom are Native Americans. Hollrah observes that Marie is able to improve the situation for herself and the urban Indian community with her actions:

“In fact, [Marie's] political work allows her to create lines of communication that mediate among the communities of Native students, homeless people, and urban Indians with mainstream institutions of power represented by the university, the police, and the press.”<sup>86</sup>

The novel suggests that urban Indians create their own tribe<sup>87</sup> and Marie's dedication to other Native Americans residing in the city seems to prove that she, indeed, perceives them as her tribe. Generally, Marie could be considered the most empathetic character in the novel.

In *Indian Killer*, Alexie shows that many Native Americans wish to escape the reservation. In fact, Marie is so scared that she will have to return to the reservation that she scarcely visits her family and Martha marries an abusive white man in order to leave. Moreover, urban Indians are seen by those who stay on the reservation as ambitious and accomplished, as is the case for Reggie. When King has to end his studies, he does not want to go back to the reservation out of shame. However, despite the idealization of the life in the city, urban Indians typically deal with financial issues and many of them are homeless. Furthermore, the characters suffer from feelings of alienation from their tribes and thus tend to hold onto each other. However, in spite of the separation, they still feel connected to their people and consider their tribe a crucial part of their identity.

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<sup>85</sup> Donald L. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (United States of America: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>86</sup> Patrice Hollrah, “Sherman Alexie's Challenge to the Academy's Teaching of Native American Literature, Non-Native Writers, and Critics”, *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 13, no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2001): 31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20737011>.

<sup>87</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 38.

### 3.3 Mixed-blood Native Americans

In the novel, Alexie demonstrates that also mixed-blood Native Americans may struggle with identity issues. The characters of mixed-blood Native people are common in works of the Native American Renaissance. The author Louis Owens even dedicated his book *Other Destinies* to them with the words: “For mixedbloods, the next generation”, and many other writers, such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor or Paula Gunn Allen, portrayed them in a positive light for the first time, as Owens notes in *Other Destinies*. For instance, Owens says about Silko’s novel *Ceremony*: “[...] Silko makes it clear for the first time in American Indian literature that the mixedblood is a rich source of power and something to be celebrated rather than mourned.”<sup>88</sup>

However, Alexie does not participate in the same celebratory attitude towards mixed-blood Native people as other writers of the Native American Renaissance, as he believes that even if they are half-Native, they are still Native Americans. As Arnold Krupat notes in *Red Matters*: “Sherman Alexie, as I have noted, has mocked mixedblood identification as fussy and pretentious; an Indian is an Indian, Alexie said.”<sup>89</sup>

In *Indian Killer*, Alexie portrays Reggie Polatkin, Marie’s cousin, as the character which struggles with being a mixed-blood. Reggie’s mother Martha is from the Spokane tribe, while his father Bird Lawrence is white. Reggie grew up in Seattle and was idealized on the Spokane reservation as the Native American who would become successful due to his urban mixed-blood status: “Reggie was the mysterious urban Indian, the college student, the ambitious half-breed, the star basketball player, the Indian who would make a difference.”<sup>90</sup> As is apparent, other Native Americans in the novel see Reggie’s identity as a mixed-blood in a positive light.

Reggie is described as easily recognizable as a mixed-blood due to his blue eyes. Consequently, he tries to appear more Native: “In an attempt to look more traditionally Indian, he braided his long black hair into two thick ropes.”<sup>91</sup> Jacobs and Merolla suggest that it is ordinary for biracial and multi-racial people to try affect people’s opinion of their race: “Ultimately, the literature suggests that bi- and multi-racial people engage in identity work aimed at closing the gap between their racial identities and others’ perceptions of their race.”<sup>92</sup> In order to be seen as a Native American, Reggie attempts to highlight his Native side.

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<sup>88</sup> Owens, *Other Destinies*, 26-28.

<sup>89</sup> Krupat, *Red Matters*, 21.

<sup>90</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 90.

<sup>91</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 91.

<sup>92</sup> Jacobs and Merolla, “Being Authentically American Indian”, 64.

However, Reggie grew up ignoring his Native roots. Bird, his abusive white father, taught him to despise his Native heritage, calling Native Americans “hostiles” and “dirty Indians”<sup>93</sup>. According to Reggie’s father, there were two types of Native Americans, those that caused problems and those he called “good Indians”, who assimilated into white society. Bird raised Reggie to become the second type and even forced him to use his mother’s surname, believing that Reggie needed to deserve his name.<sup>94</sup> Reggie was, therefore, ashamed of having a Native American mother and used to believe that his problems were caused by being a mixed-blood. Consequently, he tried to ignore his Native side:

Over the years, Reggie had come to believe that he was successful because of his father’s white blood, and that his Indian mother’s blood was to blame for his failures. Throughout high school, he’d spent all his time with white kids. He’d ignored his mother, Martha. He hadn’t gone to local powwows. He hadn’t danced or sang. He’d pretended to be white, and had thought his white friends accepted him as such. He’d buried his Indian identity so successfully that he’d become invisible.<sup>95</sup>

As is evident, Bird’s racist views resulted in Reggie feeling inferior and pretending to be white. Reggie begins to accept his Native side only when he befriends Dr. Clarence Mather, a white professor of Native American Literature. Mather desires to belong among Native people and uses Reggie’s help to access their gatherings. Alexie describes Mather and Reggie as similar, since they are both discontent with their identities and want to be who they are not:

Though Reggie couldn’t have said as much, he’d immensely felt a strange kinship with the white man who wanted to be so completely Indian. Reggie was a half-Indian who wanted to be completely white, or failing that, to earn respect of white men. Mather and Reggie were mirror opposites. Each had something the other wanted, and both had worked hard to obtain it.<sup>96</sup>

As Mather and Reggie attend Native events, Reggie discovers that white people respect him for being Native and decides to take advantage of it. Consequently, he begins to behave “as an Indian was supposed to behave, acting as an Indian was supposed to act.”<sup>97</sup> Grassian notes that such behavior is common among Native people: “Alexie suggests that Reggie’s experiences are not unique and that many Indians subscribe to mainstream codes for identity,

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<sup>93</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 91.

<sup>94</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 92.

<sup>95</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 94.

<sup>96</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 136.

<sup>97</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 136.

which supplant their real identity, for doing so offers them rewards from non-Natives.”<sup>98</sup> Since Reggie’s main desire is to be accepted by white people, he acts as a stereotypical Native American to earn their respect. The author Bonita Lawrence explains that many urban mixed-bloods try to embody the stereotypes to be perceived as Native in white society, similarly to Reggie:

Most urban mixed-bloods have therefore had to contend, at some point in their lives, with the fact that they do not fit the models of what has been held up to them – by whites – as authentic Nativeness. The response of many individuals has been to struggle to measure up to the images before them and to feel their identities tainted and diminished because they cannot be the “real Indians” they feel they are supposed to be.<sup>99</sup>

In Reggie’s case, he is able to use the stereotypes to his advantage. However, by behaving as a stereotypical Native American, he is again pretending to be something that he is not, instead of accepting his identity as a mixed-blood.

Reggie’s friendship with Mather is destroyed when the professor refuses to erase a collection of tapes with Native stories. Mather tells Reggie that he destroyed the tapes and when Reggie learns the truth, he becomes convinced that all white men are liars, which is a belief he shares with Marie: “For Reggie, Mather’s lie had become the breaking point after which he believed all white men were lying all the time”.<sup>100</sup> Reggie is eventually expelled from university after he attacks Mather for telling him that he does not behave as a “true Spokane”<sup>101</sup>. With his words, Mather implies that Reggie does not fit the stereotypical image of an authentic Native American and Reggie consequently turns violent.

Unlike the positive attitude of other Native authors of Native American Renaissance, Alexie perceives the status of a mixed-blood as a predicament the character finds difficult to deal with. Initially, Reggie feels inferior due to having a Native mother and desperately wishes to be completely white. Later, he starts behaving as a stereotypical Native American to impress white people, instead of accepting his own identity as a mixed-blood. He begins to fully identify with his Native side only after the argument with Mather. As a result, he attempts to appear more traditionally Native so that people would perceive him as a Native American.

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<sup>98</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 117.

<sup>99</sup> Bonita Lawrence, *“Real” Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 135.

<sup>100</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 138.

<sup>101</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 139.

### 3.4 Pretend Indians

In the novel, Alexie criticizes non-Native people who claim to understand Native Americans' lives, or even claim to be Native Americans. In *Indian Killer*, Alexie focuses especially on non-Native professors and writers. Through the characters of Dr. Clarence Mather, a professor at university, and Jack Wilson, an author of mystery novels about Native Americans, Alexie explores the issue of non-Native people appropriating Native American culture. He explained in an interview about *Indian Killer* his reasons for writing about the topic in the novel: "Non-Indian authors enjoy a success that is not determined or critiqued by American Indians. So I want to make sure they're aware of an Indian critical response to their work."<sup>102</sup>

Dr. Clarence Mather teaches Introduction to Native American Literature at the university in Seattle. Marie decides to sign up for the class so that she can argue with him, as she believes that he is a "Wannabe Indian", a non-Native person who romanticizes Native Americans and wants to be one of them:

She'd signed up for the class because she's heard that Dr. Clarence Mather, the white professor, supposedly loved Indians, or perhaps his idea of Indians, and gave them good grades. But he was also a Wannabe Indian, a white man who wanted to be Indian, and Marie wanted to challenge Mather's role as the official dispenser of "Indian education" at the University.<sup>103</sup>

Mather is described as a person who wants to be a part of the Native community and who is proud of having been adopted into a Lakota Sioux family, but whose views on Native people are based on stereotypes: "He always wants to sweat with Indian students, or share the peace pipe, or sit at a drum and sing."<sup>104</sup> Marie is disdainful of Mather mainly because he believes he can imagine what it is like to be a Native American: "She found an emotional outlet in the opportunity to harass a white professor who thought he knew what it meant to be Indian."<sup>105</sup>

Mather indeed thinks he understands Native Americans more than they understand themselves as he claims that Marie "failed to behave like a true Spokane", as did her mixed-blood cousin Reggie, and that he could "teach both of them a thing or two about being Indian".<sup>106</sup> Mather is clearly convinced that he knows how true Native American should behave. As John Gamber notes about Mather: "Mather is acquainted with two Spokane Indian people

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<sup>102</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 104.

<sup>103</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 58.

<sup>104</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 58.

<sup>105</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 61.

<sup>106</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 135.

we are aware of, and neither one of them fits his highly romanticized and subservient model of a 'true' Spokane".<sup>107</sup> Marie eventually tells Mather that his opinions on Native Americans are, in fact, formed by stereotypes in literature: "You think you know more about being Indian than Indians do, don't you? Just because you read all those books about Indians, most of them written by white people."<sup>108</sup> Mather seems to believe that he knows what Native people are going through and he tells Marie that he understands her: "...you and I, we are on the same side of this battle", to which she replies: "Who are you to tell me what battles I'm fighting?"<sup>109</sup>

Another of Marie's complaints about her professor is his choice of books for the class. Her issue is mostly with the fact that some of the selected books were written by non-Native people and others were co-written or edited by them.<sup>110</sup> The problem of non-Native authors who write about the lives of Native American people, pointed out by Marie's character, is one that Sherman Alexie frequently talks about. As he explained in an interview, white people cannot understand the Native Americans' experience:

I don't think anybody who's not Indian has any right to write about being Indian. If I want to find out about what it's like to be Irish in New York City, I'm not going to read a book written by a Jew or a black man. I'm going to read a book written by an Irishman living in New York City. It takes a real genius to write about things he or she doesn't know about, and there are very few geniuses.<sup>111</sup>

Marie tries to speak up about the books on the syllabus, but Mather dismisses her complaints, as he believes that the books are essential for understanding Native Americans. His reasoning is that they show the issue from both Native and non-Native people's point of view.<sup>112</sup> For instance, he believes that a book by Jack Wilson, an author of mystery novels who claims to be a Native American, is more realistic than Native authors: "Unlike many other Native writers whose work seems to exaggerate the amount of despair in the Indian world, Wilson presents a more authentic and traditional view of the Indian world."<sup>113</sup> Marie counters his opinion by arguing that Wilson cannot possibly understand Native Americans when he is not one: "He isn't even Indian at all. How would he know about the despair, or happiness in the Indian world?"<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Gamber, "We've Been Stuck in Place Since House of Made of Dawn", 196.

<sup>108</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 247.

<sup>109</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 85.

<sup>110</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 58-59.

<sup>111</sup> Sherman Alexie, "Columbia Talks With Sherman Alexie", *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, no. 26 (Spring 1996): 186, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41807297>.

<sup>112</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 60.

<sup>113</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 66.

<sup>114</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 66.

Moreover, Marie criticizes the fact that the class on Native Americans is taught by a white person. As she tells the principal:

“Why isn’t an Indian teaching the class?”  
“Why would you ask that?” asked Faulkner.  
“Well, when I take a chemistry course, I certainly hope the teacher is a chemist. Women teach women’s lit at this university, don’t they? And I hope that African-Americans teach African-American lit.”<sup>115</sup>

Marie’s issue with Mather’s teaching, therefore, lies with the fact that Native American literature is taught by someone who does not have a direct experience with being a Native American and thus cannot fully understand the issue. However, Alexie’s complain, voiced by Marie, is criticized by the author Patrice Hollrah for its lack of solution:

[...] Alexie does not seem to offer anything more beyond his critique of white-man arrogance. Nothing can be inferred as a solution to poor choices by either unknowingly or willfully ignorant professors. He does not offer any solutions or suggestions for white scholars. His only advice recommends deferring to Native scholars and writers because they have the authority of cultural insider status.<sup>116</sup>

*Indian Killer* also raises the issue of white people who believe that they belong among Native Americans. Jack Wilson is described as a “pretend Indian”, a non-Native person who presents himself as a Native American. He is a writer of mystery novels, which feature a Native American detective called Aristotle Little Hawk. While Native Americans such as Marie and Reggie consider his writing unrealistic, some white people praise his work as authentic. Wilson claims to be a Shilshomish Indian, based on his unfounded belief that his relative might have been a Native American. Marie attempts to verify his claims by searching for his name in records and asking about him in reservations, but she fails to find any mentions about him.<sup>117</sup> It is, therefore, implied that Wilson’s claims are untrue.

Through Wilson, Alexie examines the issue of white writers claiming to have Native American ancestors. Marie argues with Mather: “Don’t you find it highly ironic that all of these so-called Indian writers claim membership in tribes with poor records of membership?”<sup>118</sup> Marie also believes that Wilson is making money off Native people and calls him a

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<sup>115</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 312.

<sup>116</sup> Hollrah, “Sherman Alexie’s Challenge”, 32.

<sup>117</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 67.

<sup>118</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 66.



“scavenger”.<sup>119</sup> Alexie said on that matter: “A book written by a non-Indian will sell more copies than a book written by either a mixed-blood or an Indian writer.” He also proposed that white authors who write about Native Americans should at the very least donate some money to them.<sup>120</sup> This suggestion is reflected in the novel, when Marie informs Mather that Wilson did not give any money to the American Indian College Fund.<sup>121</sup> Wilson, however, believes that by writing about Native Americans, he is helping them: “He was a real Indian himself and had done all he could to help other real Indians.”<sup>122</sup>

In a way, he is similar to Mather, as both of them believe that they are changing the perception of people on Native Americans. As Mather says to Marie: “I’m trying to present a positive portrait of Indian peoples, of your people. Of you.”<sup>123</sup> Wilson has a very similar motif: “Wilson knew that he was writing more than a novel. He would write the book that would finally reveal to the world what it truly meant to be Indian.”<sup>124</sup> Wilson and Mather are convinced that they know who “real Indians” are even after being confronted about their assumptions. Remarkably, they both claim to be on Native Americans’ side, but choose to ignore their opinions. For instance, Wilson refuses to stop writing novels about Native Americans. Stacey Berry notes: “Although he is aware of the problem, Wilson continues to contribute to the false accounts of Native life in his white-centered and popularly read publications”.<sup>125</sup> While Wilson declares that he wants to help Native Americans, he does not listen to their pleas to stop misrepresenting them. In Mather’s case, Reggie urges him to destroy recordings of Native people and he declines.<sup>126</sup> Wilson and Mather’s unwillingness to listen to Native Americans seem to stem from their belief that they completely understand Native American culture.

Unfortunately, their idea of an authentic Native American is based on stereotypes. As in Mather’s case, Wilson’s image of Native Americans is based on books he has read: “He knew about real Indians. He’d read the books, had spent hours meditating, listening to the voices from the past.”<sup>127</sup> Moreover, Wilson is so certain that he is a member of the Native American community that he fails to realize that Native people do not share his opinion: “Most importantly, though, Wilson did not understand that the white people who pretend to be Indian

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<sup>119</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 67.

<sup>120</sup> Hollrah, “Sherman Alexie’s Challenge”, 31.

<sup>121</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 67.

<sup>122</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 264-265.

<sup>123</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 84-85.

<sup>124</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 338.

<sup>125</sup> Berry, “Beyond the Margins”.

<sup>126</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 137.

<sup>127</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 178.

are gently teased, ignored, plainly ridiculed, or beaten, depending on their degree of whiteness.”<sup>128</sup>

According to Marie, the issue with white people pretending to be Native Americans is that while they are free to do so, Native Americans cannot so easily say that they are white:

After all, [Marie] had a little bit of white blood, but that damn sure did not make her white. [...] She could not be white if she wanted to be white. [...] Only white people got to be individuals. They could be anybody they wanted to be. White people, especially those with the most minute amount of tribal blood, thought they became Indian just by saying they were Indian.<sup>129</sup>

Eventually, John identifies Wilson as the white man responsible for the suffering of Native Americans due to misrepresenting them. When Wilson pleads for his life, he appeals to what he perceives as a shared hardship between them: “Talk to me, John. Indian to Indian. Real Indians. I’ll understand.”<sup>130</sup> He calls them both “real Indians”, although Wilson is a white man who believes he is a Native American and John is a Native American who does not believe he is a real one. In fact, Grassian sees Wilson as John’s alter ego in that they share similar features:

Like John, Wilson is an orphan, isolated as an adult, and while Wilson is white and John Indian, they both overly romanticize Indian life and culture because they both believe that it offers a nurturing, supportive environment in which all are welcomed (in contrast to how they view mainstream American society).<sup>131</sup>

In the end, John scars Wilson’s face so that everyone can see that he has committed crimes against Native Americans.<sup>132</sup> Wilson, however, continues to write about Native Americans and the whole experience does not change his belief that he is able to understand them. As Lydia R. Cooper explains, even after his encounter with John, Wilson does not realize that he might be hurting Native Americans by misrepresenting them:

In *Indian Killer*, John contemplates the possible redemption to be found in killing Wilson, the pseudo-Native American novelist who consistently caricatures and misrepresents the Indian community. [...] But neither Wilson’s wounding nor John’s suicide result in any penitence or regeneration.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 179.

<sup>129</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 232.

<sup>130</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 397.

<sup>131</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 121.

<sup>132</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 411.

<sup>133</sup> Lydia R. Cooper, “The Critique of Violent Atonement in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* and David Treuer’s *The Hiawatha*”, *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 22, no. 4 (Winter, 2010): 47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/studamerindilite.22.4.0032>.

In *Indian Killer*, Alexie demonstrates that the main issue with white people who proclaim to understand Native Americans and their lives is that they lack the first-hand experience of being Native and thus cannot comprehend their problems. Moreover, the white characters in the novel are heavily influenced by stereotypes but refuse to listen to Native people's opinions and ignore objections against their actions and views. Instead, they continue to misrepresent Native American culture. Their assertion that they belong among Native people is also problematic, since Native Americans cannot easily claim to be white, whereas it is considered acceptable for white people to declare that they have Native roots.

## 4 Ethnicity

The issue of ethnicity is an important topic in the novel *Indian Killer*. The author Hal B. Levine defines ethnicity as related to person's origins: "I propose the following simple and minimalistic definition: ethnicity is that method of classifying people (both self and other) that uses origin (socially constructed) as its primary reference".<sup>134</sup> The sociologist John Milton Yinger further describes ethnic groups:

In a general definition, an ethnic group is a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients.<sup>135</sup>

Moreover, Yinger points out that the term "ethnic group" may often overlap with the term "race", which is the case for Native Americans:

In many cases, race – as well as language, religion, and ancestral homeland – helps to mark the boundaries of an ethnic group. The extent of racial homogeneity within an ethnic group can range from nearly complete to slight. Whatever the degree of homogeneity, the race factor helps to define an ethnic boundary only if it is correlated with ancestral culture or with lingual or religious differences. Such is the case, for example, among Asian Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans.<sup>136</sup>

Similarly to race, the term "minority" is also closely related to "ethnic group". The sociologist Louis Wirth describes minority groups as those which are disadvantaged in society due to physical or cultural differences:

We may define a minority as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination. [...] Minority status carries with it the exclusion from full participation in the life of the society.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Hal B. Levine, "Reconstructing Ethnicity", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 2 (June, 1999): 168, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/266069>.

<sup>135</sup> John Milton Yinger, *Ethnicity: Source of Strength? Source of Conflict?* (United States of America: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994), 3.

<sup>136</sup> Yinger, *Ethnicity*, 20.

<sup>137</sup> Yinger, *Ethnicity*, 21.

Racial discrimination is a core issue in Alexie's *Indian Killer*. Native American characters in the novel frequently have to deal with racism and prejudices. In fact, Grassian describes Seattle, as portrayed by Alexie, to be a city "largely ethnically segregated, with minorities residing in one part of the city and whites living in another."<sup>138</sup>

In the novel, Native Americans are perceived by white people as alcoholics who take advantage of the welfare and deliberately remain in bad living conditions, despite being given various social advantages. Truck Schultz, a radio talk-show host, encourages such view of Native Americans:

Well, citizens, we keep giving Indians everything they want. We give them fishing rights, hunting lands. We allow them to have these illegal casinos on their land. They have rights that normal Americans do not enjoy. Indians have become super citizens, enjoying all the advantages of being Americans while reveling in the special privileges they receive just for being Indians. [...] And despite all these special advantages, Indians still live in poverty.<sup>139</sup>

Grassian describes Truck Schultz as "representing far-right conservatism at best and a vicious, cold-blooded racist at worst".<sup>140</sup> Schultz is convinced that Native Americans are all violent and refuse help from white people. Similarly, Buck Rogers, father of David and Aaron Rogers, notes that Native Americans are all the same, regardless of gender or age: "Indian is Indian".<sup>141</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. explains that the belief that Native Americans are all the same is not uncommon for white people and is evident also in their opinion that all tribes are identical: "Not only does the general term *Indian* continue from Columbus to the present day, but so also does the tendency to speak of one tribe as exemplary of all Indians and conversely to comprehend a specific tribe according to the characteristics ascribed to all Indians."<sup>142</sup>

On the other hand, Reggie's father Bird divides Native people into two groups, "hostile Indians", who refuse to assimilate into white society, and "good Indians".<sup>143</sup> The white characters, therefore, either see Native Americans as all bad without discriminating among them, or they believe that the only tolerable Native Americans are those who assimilate.

On the contrary, some people, such as David Rogers, are fascinated by Native Americans. David asks Marie out, but is rejected, as she concludes that he wants to date a

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<sup>138</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 120.

<sup>139</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 208.

<sup>140</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 119.

<sup>141</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 65.

<sup>142</sup> Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian*, 26.

<sup>143</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 92.

minority woman so that he can “colonize her”<sup>144</sup>. According to Hollrah, David perceives Marie as “the exotic Other, like Pocahontas”<sup>145</sup>, and thus not as equal. However, David’s reason for trying to befriend Marie is primarily his guilt for shooting at Native Americans as a child. He even tries to apologize to Marie about what Native Americans went through: “[...] I’m really sorry for what happened to Indians. It was a really bad deal.”<sup>146</sup> Even though David is not openly racist as his father or Bird, his attempts to befriend Marie stem from his guilt and fascination with Marie as a Native woman. All in all, he still perceives her as different.

Generally, white people in the novel see Native Americans as unequal and unimportant. When a homeless Native woman is murdered, Jack Wilson is told that her case is a low priority for the police: “One dead Indian doesn’t add up to much. [...] You ask me, it’s pest control.”<sup>147</sup> The situation, however, dramatically changes when the Indian Killer starts to target white people: “Nobody in the police department cared when an Indian was killed, but everybody cared now that an Indian might be killing white men.”<sup>148</sup> While the police does not care about the Native woman, perceiving her as one of many, they see every white victim as an important individual.

In order to pit his listeners against Native Americans, Schultz lies about David Rogers’s murder and claims that he was a victim of the Indian Killer.<sup>149</sup> He appeals to his white listeners to look for the killer and manages to raise a wave of violence against Native Americans. Grassian notes that the number of Schultz’s listeners is disturbing, since even Daniel Smith listens to his talk show.<sup>150</sup> Schultz’s popularity only shows that many white people in Seattle have prejudices against Native Americans. Among Schultz’s listeners is also Aaron Rogers who wants to avenge his brother’s death and proceeds to brutally attack several Native Americans.

Consequently, Native Americans, particularly Reggie and his friends, start violently attacking white men and the racial tension between white people and Native Americans increases. As Kyle Wiggins suggests, both white people and Native Americans believe that by hurting an individual, they will get revenge on the entire race:

In each case, the vengeful perpetrators believe that their violence carries a metaphoric power. They aggrandize carnage so that a blow against one racialized

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<sup>144</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 69.

<sup>145</sup> Hollrah, “Sherman Alexie’s Challenge”, 27.

<sup>146</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 87.

<sup>147</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 160.

<sup>148</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 241-242.

<sup>149</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 207.

<sup>150</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 120.

subject strikes the entire race. The way to get even with a disaggregated enemy is to spectacularly damage one of its representatives.<sup>151</sup>

One of Reggie's victims declares that he does not understand why Reggie would target him, since he did not do anything to Native Americans: "It's, like, those Indians guys hurt me just because I'm white. But I haven't done anything bad to Indians. I like Indians, man." He also comments on the fact that the Indian Killer kidnapped a white child: "Yeah, well, he certainly didn't do anything bad to Indians. I mean, not every white guy is an evil dude, you know?"<sup>152</sup>

The character's suggestion that white people are not all the same contrasts other white characters' opinion that Native Americans are all similar. Moreover, the violence between white people and Native Americans is mutual, as Aaron is violent to defenseless Native Americans as well as to John, who is physically strong. As Grassian notes: "[...] Reggie assaults whites as mercilessly as Aaron Rogers does Indians."<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, Janet Dean writes that Sherman Alexie himself referred to the parallels between the violence of both races: "In fact, the novel is constructed of parallel acts of violence as the author points out in response to critics: 'there was an Indian kid being kidnapped and a white kid being kidnapped. Everyone failed to see any ambiguity'."<sup>154</sup>

The parallelism is indicated also in the title of the novel. Marie points out that the nickname given to the murderer does not mean that the killer is Native: "I mean, calling him the Indian Killer doesn't make any sense, does it? If it was an Indian doing the killing, then wouldn't he be called the Killer Indian?"<sup>155</sup> According to Berry, the ambiguity of the title Indian Killer implies that, in fact, both white people and Native people are killed in the novel: "Alexie's narrative complicates the term Indian Killer through double meaning. While the surface meaning refers to a serial killer who murders and then scalps his victims, the white misappropriation and representation of native culture, in essence, also kills the Indian."<sup>156</sup>

As the attacks increase in brutality, many characters become scared of the violence that they started and turn themselves in to the police. For instance, one of Aaron's friends tells the police officers: "I mean, uh, it's like this white-Indian thing has gotten out of control. And the

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<sup>151</sup> Kyle Wiggins, "The New Revenge Novel", *Studies in the Novel* 45, no. 4 (Winter, 2013): 679-680, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23594826>.

<sup>152</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 273.

<sup>153</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 120.

<sup>154</sup> Janet Dean, "The Violence of Collection: Indian Killer's Archives", *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 20, no. 3 (Fall, 2008): 32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20737423>.

<sup>155</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 247.

<sup>156</sup> Berry, "Beyond the Margins".

thing with blacks and Mexicans. Everybody blaming everybody.”<sup>157</sup> Reggie’s friend Harley also decides to stop with the attacks when he witnesses Reggie’s brutality. While white people and Native Americans attack each other to symbolically punish the other race, they usually do not want to kill the victims.

In general, Native Americans in Seattle as portrayed by Alexie have to regularly deal with prejudices and racism from white people. White characters in the novel tend to perceive Native people in an overall negative light and often do not discriminate between them, believing that they all share the same characteristics. Native Americans are for the most part considered to be unequal to white people, as is evident from the behavior of the police. There is also tension between the races, encouraged by Truck Schultz’s racist speeches. The tension rises after the murders committed by the Indian Killer and eventually results in a wave of mutual violence.

#### 4.1 Red Rage

One of the main subject matters depicted in the novel is Native Americans’ anger at white people. In fact, as Janet Dean notes, reviews of *Indian Killer* have described violence towards white people as the main element of the novel, even though the aggression is mutual:

While the physical violence of *Indian Killer* is inter- and intraracial, with both white and Native American characters inflicting pain on others, critics and reviewers of the novel have focused on physical violence against whites as a kind of authenticating act for indigenous characters.<sup>158</sup>

The rage of Native Americans, so-called “red rage”, is characterized by Jon Reyhner as resulting from the “impact of generations of trauma, violence and oppression” that colonialism had on Native people. He also maintains that many Native Americans refuse to assimilate into white society and may start acting in an opposing way.<sup>159</sup> In *Indian Killer*, “red rage” is a central topic. In fact, Arnold Krupat describes *Indian Killer* as the first novel to openly focus on red rage: “*Indian Killer* is the first Native American novel I know to take a very particular sort of Indian rage, *murderous* rage, as its central subject – and, it would seem, to encourage its expression.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 386.

<sup>158</sup> Dean, “The Violence of Collection”, 32.

<sup>159</sup> Jon Reyhner, “Creating Sacred Places for Children”, *Indian Education Today*, (March, 2006): 19-20, <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/AIE/IETplaces.htm>.

<sup>160</sup> Krupat, *Red Matters*, 103.



In the novel, particularly the characters of John, Marie and her cousin Reggie are depicted as dealing with rage and need for revenge. For this reason, it is difficult to determine the true identity of the Indian Killer, a murderer who chooses white victims, scalps them and leaves owl feathers on the crime scene. At the end of the novel, Alexie does not reveal who the murderer is, even though the police closes the case with John as the Indian Killer.

John has struggled with his rage since early age and initially attempted to hide his anger: “He didn’t want to be angry. He wanted to be a real person. He wanted to control his emotions, so he would often swallow his anger.”<sup>161</sup> However, his anger grows stronger, until he concludes that he needs to kill a white man who is responsible for what happened to Native Americans: “John knew he could kill a white man, but he was not sure which white man was responsible for everything that had gone wrong. [...] Which white man had done the most harm to the world? Was it the richest white man? Was it the poorest white man?”<sup>162</sup>

As Lydia R. Cooper explains: “In a horrifying yet perhaps reasonable leap of logic, John believes that murdering a white man will provide Indians with a sacrificial victim on which to displace their anger, enabling them to move beyond the unbearable pain of their history.”<sup>163</sup> In other words, John wants to murder a white man so that Native Americans can have their revenge on white people for the injustice and violence which was committed on them throughout history.

Furthermore, John is frustrated that white people are not scared of Native Americans: “White people no longer feared Indians. Somehow, near the end of the twentieth century, Indians had become invisible, docile. John wanted to change that. He wanted to see fear in every pair of blue eyes.”<sup>164</sup> As is evident from the excerpt, John’s anger is caused by the fact that Native Americans have been silenced by the white majority. He, however, does not know how to deal with his rage and confesses to a priest about feeling angry: “All the anger in the world has come to my house.”<sup>165</sup> Despite John’s violent fantasies, he usually does not defend himself. At the end, he even spares Wilson’s life.

Another character in the novel who deals with rage is Marie. Unlike John, Marie does not flee from fights. As Grassian writes: “At one point in the novel, two white men threaten John and Marie and then attack John. While John at first threateningly waves a golf club at the

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<sup>161</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 18-19.

<sup>162</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*,

<sup>163</sup> Cooper, “The Critique of Violent Atonement”, 44.

<sup>164</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 30.

<sup>165</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 200.

white men, he inexplicably gets frightened, screams, and runs away. In contrast, Alexie portrays Marie as more capable of violence.”<sup>166</sup>

As a consequence of having been bullied during high school, Marie learned to strive for revenge: “She always wanted revenge, and would wait until the perfect moment, which could be months later, to ambush her enemies.”<sup>167</sup> She is socially engaged and frequently organizes protests in order to change the situation of Native people. She also enrolls in Dr. Clarence Mather’s class so she can oppose his stereotypical views on Native American literature and channel her need for conflict:

For Marie, being Indian was mostly about survival, and she’d been fighting so hard for her survival that she didn’t know if she could stop. She needed conflict and, in those situations where conflict was absent, she would do her best to create it. Of course, conflict with whites didn’t need much creating.<sup>168</sup>

Eventually, Marie is forced to leave Dr. Mather’s class for disrupting it. As Berry explains, Marie’s efforts to improve the situation are mostly ineffectual since white people will let her demonstrate only as long as she is peaceful:

The systems of power allow Marie’s protests to continue, because she does not pose a viable threat. When her attempts become more forceful – she openly disagrees with her white professor about the way he teaches Native American literature – the university administration silences her.<sup>169</sup>

At one point, Marie promises to herself that she will continue to oppose white people and get her college degree as a revenge on them.<sup>170</sup> In fact, she ponders whether a need for revenge is the main motivation for all of her actions: “Sometimes Marie wondered if she worked so hard at everything only because she hated powerful white men.”<sup>171</sup> For the most part, Marie turns her anger into determination to change the situation and channels her need for revenge through activism and academical achievements.

Similarly to John, Marie also imagines hurting white men. She tells Mather that if famous dead Native Americans such as Pocahontas, Geronimo or Sitting Bull came back to life and saw how Native Americans live, they would want revenge:

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<sup>166</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 123.

<sup>167</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 34.

<sup>168</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 61.

<sup>169</sup> Berry, “Beyond the Margins”.

<sup>170</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 329.

<sup>171</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 146-147.

“If those dead Indians came back to life, they wouldn’t crawl into a sweathouse with you. They wouldn’t smoke the pipe with you. They wouldn’t go to the movies and munch popcorn with you. They’d kill you. They’d gut you and eat your heart.”<sup>172</sup> With this declaration, Marie seems to suggest that white people tend to wrongly assume that Native Americans do not feel angry at white people’s behavior towards them.

Berry maintains that Marie’s violent thoughts stem from her knowledge that the situation of Native people could be changed only by radical measures: “Marie knows, as does John, that drastic acts must be taken in order to achieve awareness and change. Her rage with the white power structure exists as an imaged response rather than something she might one day realize.”<sup>173</sup>

Berry’s point that Marie is angry at white authorities due to how they treat her is evidenced by her rage towards Dr. Mather. When he rudely dismisses her, Marie feels strong hatred: “She wanted every white man to disappear. She wanted to burn them all down to ash and feast on their smoke. Hateful, powerful thoughts. She wondered what those hateful, powerful thoughts could create.”<sup>174</sup> As Grassian notes, Marie’s anger is an example of how many Native Americans feel due to white people’s attitude towards them: “Even if Marie is not the Indian Killer, Alexie’s intention is to show how Indians commonly experience violent rage and anger due to marginalization, discrimination, and unequal power struggles.”<sup>175</sup> Moreover, Giorgio Mariani also admits that the violence of Native Americans is not unexpected: “Alexie is obviously aware that violence ignites violence, though he also knows that, however morally objectionable, the temptation to resort to violent means on the part of a people who has been oppressed, colonized, and decimated should be hardly surprising.”<sup>176</sup>

Nevertheless, Marie is surprised by the intensity of her rage. After she participates in a fight with Aaron and his friends, she is frightened by how much she wanted to hurt them: “She was shocked by her anger, and how much she had wanted to hurt those white boys. Nearly blinded with her own rage, she had wanted to tear out their blue eyes and blind them.”<sup>177</sup> In that respect, her experience is similar to John’s own uneasiness about his anger.

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<sup>172</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 314.

<sup>173</sup> Berry, “Beyond the Margins”.

<sup>174</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 85.

<sup>175</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 116.

<sup>176</sup> Giorgio Mariani, “Negotiating Violence and Identity in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*”, *Forum for Inter-American Research* 4.2, (2001), <http://interamerica.de/volume-4-2/mariani/>.

<sup>177</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 375.

Marie's cousin Reggie also strives for revenge. When the author Jack Wilson claims that a real Native American would never do what the Indian Killer did, Reggie argues that the Indian Killer's actions are understandable:

"I think an Indian could do something as that. Maybe the question should be something different. Maybe you should be wondering which Indian wouldn't do it. Lots of real Indian men out there have plenty enough reasons to kill a white man. Three at this table right now."<sup>178</sup> Reggie maintains that most Native Americans, including him and his friends, share the Indian Killer's desire to kill white men and get their revenge.

Reggie channels his need for revenge by attacking white people. However, he is violent also towards other Native Americans. When his friends confront him about it, he argues that many Native Americans helped European colonizers:

"You know the name of the Cavalry soldier who killed Crazy Horse?"

Harley shook his head.

"Well, I don't know either, but I know the name of the Indian who was holding Crazy Horse's arms behind his back when that soldier bayoneted him."<sup>179</sup>

For Reggie, Native Americans who help white men are as bad as white people. Despite this opinion, he tells his mother that he believes that Native Americans are generally kinder than white people:

"Yeah, well, we Indians had them white guys trapped. Had them surrounded and what did we do? Those white guys were completely and totally helpless. And then we let them go."

"What are you trying to say, Reggie?"

"I don't know, Mom. Maybe Indians are better people than most."<sup>180</sup>

Reggie is convinced that white people are cruel, unlike Native Americans, and his anger seems to stem from this knowledge. In the end, Reggie decides to go to a different city, even though he observes that "every city was a city of white men"<sup>181</sup>. He declares that he will never give up opposing white people, which is a similar notion to Marie's resolution to continue to contradict them.

In the novel, red rage is further expressed through the character of the Indian Killer. Some Native Americans perceive the Indian Killer as a representation of revenge on white

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<sup>178</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 184.

<sup>179</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 320-321.

<sup>180</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 352.

<sup>181</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 409.

people: “Within a few hours, nearly every Indian in Seattle knew about the scalping. Most Indians believed it was all just a racial paranoia, but a few felt a strange combination of relief and fear, as if an apocalyptic prophecy was just beginning to come true.”<sup>182</sup> In fact, Nancy Van Styvendale suggests that the killer is a symbol of the rage that the Native American characters experience: “[...] the Indian Killer is all yet none of the novel's Indian characters”. She further elaborates: “The killer... gives an ineffable form to the pain and rage felt by Alexie’s Indians as individuals, at the same time as it gives shape to a collective trauma that is larger than any of them.”<sup>183</sup> For this reason, while the police is convinced that the murders are over after John’s death, Marie believes that it is only a beginning:

“I know that John Smith didn’t kill anybody except himself. And if some Indian is killing white guys, then it’s a credit to us that it took over five hundred years for it to happen. And there’s more.”

“Yes?”

“Indians are dancing now, and I don’t think they’re going to stop.”<sup>184</sup>

In Marie’s opinion, the Indian Killer only gave shape to Native people’s rage at white society. In fact, in the final chapter, the Indian Killer begins a ceremonial dance and is soon joined by other Native Americans: “A dozen Indians, then hundreds, and more, are all learning the same song, the exact dance. [...] The killer plans on dancing forever.”<sup>185</sup> Krupat explains the scene as a suggestion that more murders will follow: “It might mean what I believe Marie thought it meant: that an Indian, having begun at last killing white guys after some five hundred years, is not likely to stop, and that other Indians will join the killer in murder.”<sup>186</sup>

However, Grassian notes that Alexie did not advocate for violence with the novel’s ending: “This is not to suggest that Alexie encourages an attempted violent revolution, for he surely recognizes that such an attempt would ultimately prove futile, but that the desire for revolt and revenge remains an important, albeit repressed desire for many Indians.”<sup>187</sup> In addition, Berry suggests that Alexie’s goal was to show that violence would only worsen the problem: “The killings, as a mode of protest, do not work to successfully create change. The novel illustrates that revenge-fueled actions simply create more violence.”<sup>188</sup> According to the

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<sup>182</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 185.

<sup>183</sup> Nancy Van Styvendale, “The Trans/Historicity of Trauma in Jeannette Armstrong's ‘Slash’ and Sherman Alexie's ‘Indian Killer’”, *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1/2 (Spring and Summer, 2008): 212, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533868>.

<sup>184</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 418.

<sup>185</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 420.

<sup>186</sup> Krupat, *Red Matters*, 120.

<sup>187</sup> Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 126.

<sup>188</sup> Berry, “Beyond the Margins”.

authors, Alexie did not advocate for violence against white people, as it would likely only produce more aggression, but aimed to show that rage and desire for revenge are experienced by many Native Americans.

All in all, Alexie demonstrates through the *Indian Killer*'s characters that anger towards white society is an emotion that many Native people experience. Even Marie, who is portrayed in the novel as altruistic and who dedicates her time to feeding homeless people, deals with rage and need for revenge on white people. The rage of the characters stems from how Native Americans have been treated by white people from history to the present day. However, Reggie's attacks of white people only lead to more violence and the Indian Killer's murders raise a series of attacks on Native Americans. As various authors noted, Alexie does not seem to promote violence, but intends to raise awareness of the issue of red rage.

## 5 Genre and Symbolism

The novel *Indian Killer* is written in the third-person omniscient point of view and is defined as the mystery genre<sup>189</sup>, since it features a story about a serial killer who terrorizes Seattle and whose identity is never revealed. The novel, however, deals also with topics of identity and ethnicity. For instance, Margaret Homans includes *Indian Killer* in her selection of “adoption narratives”, since it focuses on the issue of origins of the adopted character, John Smith.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, *Indian Killer* is also a part of Kyle Wiggins’ article about “new revenge novels”. Wiggins explains that the feature of a new revenge novel is that it examines the characters’ symbolic revenge on unjust political systems by attacking individuals.<sup>191</sup> Stacey Berry further calls *Indian Killer* “a novel of social protest”, since it highlights the oppression of Native Americans.<sup>192</sup> Even though the novel revolves around the mysterious killer and the murders, and is thus a mystery novel, it focuses also on various issues concerning Native Americans and their role within white society.

The novel is also rich with symbolism. For instance, the symbol of an owl frequently occurs in the story. As Alexie explains in the novel, for many Native Americans the owl is a symbol of death: “John knew many Indian tribes believed the owl was a messenger of death.”<sup>193</sup> The Native Americans at the powwow organized by Marie perform an owl dance and the Indian Killer leaves owl feathers on the crime scenes. Moreover, during the killer’s final ceremonial dance, Alexie writes: “The tree grows heavy with owls.”<sup>194</sup> Considering the symbolism, the presence of owls symbolizes that more murders will follow.

The novel also mentions the Ghost Dance, a ceremonial dance which the killer performs at the end of the novel. Michaela Jirsová explains the dance in her article on *Indian Killer*: “This ceremony is more than five hundred years old and was conducted to drive the invading colonizers out and resurrect dead Indians.” She further maintains that the dance “symbolizes arousal against white oppression.”<sup>195</sup> As the killer is joined by other Native Americans during the Ghost Dance, it is indicated that more Native people will participate in the Indian Killer’s revenge on white people.

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<sup>189</sup> Hollrah, “Sherman Alexie’s Challenge”, 23.

<sup>190</sup> Homans, “Adoption Narratives”, 19.

<sup>191</sup> Wiggins, “The New Revenge Novel”, 676.

<sup>192</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 37.

<sup>193</sup> Berry, “Beyond the Margins”.

<sup>194</sup> Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 420.

<sup>195</sup> Michaela Jirsová, “‘Red Rage’ in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*” in *American and British Studies Annual 5* (Pardubice: University of Pardubice, 2012): 144.

Furthermore, the last chapter of the novel is entitled “A Creation Story”. Krupat notes that the title suggests that by murdering white people, Native Americans will be able to start anew: “This chapter’s title, “A Creation Story”, would then imagine a new beginning for Indian people – Creation – to come about through acts of murderous violence directed against a “racially” denominated oppressor, white men.”<sup>196</sup> The Indian Killer could also be considered a part of the novel’s symbolism, as it was suggested by Nancy Van Styvendale that he is an embodiment of Native characters’ rage.<sup>197</sup> As is evident, the novel includes many features of Native American symbolism.

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<sup>196</sup> Krupat, *Red Matters*, 120.

<sup>197</sup> Van Styvendale, “The Trans/Historicity of Trauma”, 212.



## 6 Conclusion

This bachelor thesis focused on issues regarding identity which Native Americans deal with in today's society. The topic was explored through detailed analysis of Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* and its Native and non-Native characters. The aim of the thesis was to examine how Sherman Alexie depicts identity and ethnicity of Native Americans in his literary work.

Native Americans have typically been misrepresented in literature written by white people. Due to the misrepresentation, white society's perception of Native people has been distorted by stereotypes, which might influence even Native Americans. The characters in *Indian Killer* often deal with the issue of "authenticity". John Smith, who was adopted as a child by a white couple, is an example of a Native American who struggles to measure up to the stereotypes imposed on him by white society. He has read about Native Americans in books written primarily by white people and developed a highly romanticized image of them. In consequence, he feels as if he is not a "real Indian", since he cannot identify with the stereotypes. Through John's character, Alexie furthermore shows that tribe is a crucial part of Native Americans' identity. There is no information about John's biological parents apart from his mother's age. John, therefore, lies about which tribe he is from when other Native Americans ask him about it, since he feels ashamed about not knowing where he belongs.

As the plot is set in Seattle, Alexie also focuses on urban Indians, Native Americans who have left their reservations and moved to urban areas. Many characters in *Indian Killer*, such as Marie Polatkin and Martha Polatkin, decided to leave their reservation as they believed that it would improve their living situation. Furthermore, life in the city is idealized by people who reside on reservations. However, Alexie also shows that urban Indians deal with various issues. For instance, many urban Indians are homeless and others struggle with financial problems. Moreover, the Native characters feel separated from their tribes and might even feel as outcasts. Nonetheless, they still heavily identify with their tribes and see themselves as a part of their people.

Another character who deals with identity issues is the mixed-blood character Reggie Polatkin. Reggie is described as attempting to look more Native so that people perceive him as a Native American and not as a mixed-blood. Due to his abusive upbringing, Reggie used to be ashamed of having a Native mother and pretended to be white. When he realizes that his Native side earns him respect of white people, he begins to behave as white society's image of an "authentic" Native American. Reggie's main goal is to gain white people's approval and he is able to achieve it that way. Ironically, by pretending to embody the stereotypes, he does not

behave authentically. Reggie fully embraces his Native identity only after a fallout with his white professor.

In *Indian Killer*, Alexie also examines the issue of white people appropriating Native American culture. The character of Dr. Clarence Mather, a white professor who teaches Introduction to Native American Literature, considers himself to be an expert on Native Americans. Even though Mather's views on Native people are idealized and based on stereotypes, he does not listen to Native Americans' objections, despite his claims that he is on their side. In that respect, he is similar to the mystery writer Jack Wilson, who declares to have Native roots and thus believes that he is able to understand Native Americans. Similarly to Mather, he claims to be helping Native people by writing novels about them. However, his views are also based on stereotypes and his novels spread them among his white readers. Furthermore, Wilson's claim that he is a Native American is also problematic, since Native Americans cannot say that they are white. Through Mather and Wilson, Alexie demonstrates that white people should not claim to understand Native Americans since they lack the experience of being Native and only risk spreading misinformation.

Alexie further examines the issue of ethnicity. Native characters in the novel are perceived by white people as unequal and believed to indiscriminately share the same negative characteristics. The only Native Americans who are perceived as acceptable are those who assimilate into white society. Furthermore, the Seattle police sees Native victims as unimportant, unlike white victims. There is racial tension between white people and Native Americans, which is increased by the murders and followed by a mutual wave of violence.

Moreover, Alexie raises awareness of the anger which Native Americans typically experience due to how they have been treated by white society. The characters of John, Marie and Reggie are all portrayed as feeling rage and need for revenge. Reggie channels his rage by attacking white people, while John believes that by killing a white man who is responsible for their suffering, Native Americans will be able to get their revenge for everything they went through. On the other hand, Marie turns her anger and need for revenge into academic achievements and protests and attempts to improve the situation of Native Americans. Native Americans' anger is expressed also through the Indian Killer, who chooses white victims and who is seen by many Native characters as an embodiment of the rage Native people feel.

All in all, Alexie portrays in *Indian Killer* the difficulties of defining Native American identity in modern society. Since white people's idea of Native Americans is for the most part based on stereotypes, they have particular opinions on who is a "real Indian". Through the characters, Alexie shows that Native Americans have to deal with the stereotypical views and

might even try to measure up to them in order to be seen as authentic. In the novel, John is unable to compare to the idealized image of a Native American and thus feels as if he is not a “real Indian”. His character, therefore, shows that the stereotypes can have a damaging effect on Native Americans and may result in feelings of inferiority due to Native people’s inability to measure up to them. Alexie further suggests that some Native people, such as Reggie in the novel, adjust their behavior to the stereotypes in order to be respected by white people. Nevertheless, other Native Americans oppose them, as is demonstrated through Marie’s character. It is also suggested that it is frequently white people who claim to understand Native Americans and consider themselves to belong among them who end up contributing the most to the misrepresentation, since their own opinions on Native people are often idealized and based on stereotypes.

In addition, Alexie demonstrates in *Indian Killer* that Native Americans consider their tribe an essential part of their identity, even if they do not live on the reservation among their people. He further maintains that mixed-blood Native people may too struggle with their identity and may even feel ashamed of their mixed ethnicity. In consequence, they might attempt to behave either as fully white or as traditionally Native to affect other people’s perception of them. Furthermore, the novel describes the way in which Native Americans are frequently seen in white society, which is as unequal, unimportant and sharing the same negative attributes. Alexie concludes that common response of Native Americans to such treatment, as well as to the violence committed on Native people throughout history, is rage and desire for revenge.

## 7 Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývala tématem identity současných amerických Indiánů a s ním spojenými problémy, se kterými se Indiáni v moderní společnosti potýkají. Cílem práce bylo analyzovat způsob, jakým indiánský autor Sherman Alexie o problematice identity a etnicity hovoří prostřednictvím románu *Indian Killer* (v překladu „Indiánský zabiják“ nebo „Zabiják Indiánů“).

První kapitola bakalářské práce se zabývala tématem takzvané „indiánské renesance“, která započala v druhé polovině 20. století. Ačkoliv indiánští autoři vydávali literární díla i před indiánskou renesancí, zájem veřejnosti o literaturu psanou Indiány vzrostl až po úspěchu románu *House Made of Dawn* (v překladu *Dům z úsvitu*) od autora N. Scott Momadaye. Kapitola se rovněž krátce zaměřila na historii indiánské literatury a vysvětlila, že Indiáni tradičně svou historii, mýty a ceremoniály předávali mladším generacím ústně, nikoliv psanou formou. Následoval popis témat, která jsou typická pro díla indiánské renesance a rozdíl mezi první generací autorů indiánské renesance a Shermanem Alexiem. Obecně indiánští autoři skrze svá díla učí čtenáře o historii, kultuře a identitě Indiánů. Zatímco však mnoho autorů ve svých dílech popisovalo indiánské tradice a idealizovalo život na rezervaci a jedince se smíšenou krví, Alexie s tímto přístupem nesouhlasí.

Druhá kapitola čtenáři představila indiánského spisovatele Shermana Alexieho a jeho díla a zaměřila se na témata, kterými se obecně Alexie zabývá, tedy především identitou, etnicitou a životem na rezervaci. Typickými prvky, které se objevují v Alexieho tvorbě, jsou rovněž humor a populární kultura.

Třetí kapitola práce se zaměřila na problematiku identity. Nejprve specifikovala pojem „identita“ a objasnila, co znamená indiánská identita. Dále uvedla důvody, proč je téma identity podstatné pro indiánskou literaturu. Společnost si často skutečné Indiány představuje způsobem, jakým byli popsáni v historii a v dílech vytvořených bílými lidmi, který však většinou není realistický. Z toho důvodu pak nepovažuje jedince, kteří se odlišují od stereotypů, za „pravé Indiány“. Sami Indiáni se pak mohou potýkat s pocitem méněcennosti, neboť nejsou schopni se ztotožnit se stereotypy. Indiánští autoři se proto ve svých dílech často zabývají problematikou identity a snaží se o realistický popis Indiánů.

Kapitola byla dále rozdělena do čtyř podkapitol, které analyzovaly problém identity v románu *Indian Killer*. První podkapitola zkoumala téma takzvaných „lost birds“, Indiánů, kteří byli adoptováni bílými lidmi a vyrůstali odtrženi od svého kmene a kultury. V díle je zastupuje John Smith, který neví, z jakého indiánského kmene pochází a velmi tím trpí, stejně

jako faktem, že jeho adoptivní rodiče jsou bílí lidé, kteří se Johna snažili naučit o indiánské kultuře pomocí knih napsaných povětšinou bílými autory. John má z toho důvodu o Indiánech nerealistické představy a věří, že on sám není „pravý Indián“, neboť se nechová jako Indiáni z knih. John kvůli svým pocitům méněcennosti není schopný komunikovat ani s ostatními Indiány, ani s bílými lidmi, a připadá si, že nikam nepatří. Alexie skrze Johna poukazuje na problémy, které může stereotypní vyobrazení Indiánů způsobit.

V druhé podkapitole se práce zabývala tématem Indiánů, kteří odešli z rezervace a přestěhovali se do měst. Počet Indiánů, kteří žijí v městech, se v posledních desetiletích zvýšil, a to především kvůli programu relokace Indiánů z rezervací do měst, který započal v roce 1952. Indiáni jsou však ve městech separováni od svého kmene a podle statistik se velké procento potýká s různými problémy, například s nedostatkem peněz a alkoholismem. V díle *Indian Killer* spousta postav svou rezervaci opustila a odešla do měst, neboť věřila, že se tím zlepší jejich životní situace. Nicméně mnoho městských Indiánů žije na ulici a ostatní řeší finanční problémy. Postava studentky Marie Polatkin také poukazuje na fakt, že si Indiáni žijící ve městě často připadají, že nepatří mezi členy svého kmene kvůli tomu, že nežijí na rezervaci. Na druhou stranu však Alexie v románu ukazuje, že i přesto mají městští Indiáni silný vztah ke svému kmeni a považují jej za důležitou součást své identity.

Třetí podkapitola analyzovala problémy Indiánů, kteří mají jednoho bílého rodiče. Ačkoliv mnoho autorů indiánské renesance považovalo smíšenou krev za velmi pozitivní, Alexie věří, že i když mají jednoho rodiče bílého, jsou stále Indiány a nejsou tedy výjimeční. V díle *Indian Killer* postava Reggie Polatkin trpí tím, že jeho otec je bílý rasista. Reggie strávil velkou část svého dospívání tím, že si přál být zcela bílý a ignoroval svou indiánskou stránku. Poté však zjistí, že jej mnoho bílých lidí kvůli jeho indiánskému původu respektuje a začne tedy předstírat, že je stereotypní Indián. Později začne nenávidět bílé lidi a snaží se zakrýt svůj smíšený původ. Skrze Reggieho Alexie popisuje, že lidé se smíšenou krví mohou mít problémy se svou identitou, neboť je ostatní nevidí ani jako zcela Indiány, ani jako bílé lidi.

Poslední podkapitola se zabývá problematikou bílých lidí, kteří věří, že patří mezi Indiány a jsou schopni jim porozumět. V této podkapitole práce analyzuje postavu bílého profesora, který vyučuje indiánskou literaturu, a bílého spisovatele, píšícího o Indiánech. Obě postavy jsou přesvědčené, že svou činností pomáhají Indiánům, ačkoliv pouze dál šíří stereotypické názory. Ani jeden z nich však neposlouchá námitky Indiánů. Spisovatel Wilson navíc prohlašuje, že je sám Indián, neboť možná měl indiánského předka. Podkapitola poukazuje na problematičnost názoru bílých lidí, že mohou pochopit Indiány, ačkoliv nemají

přímou zkušenost. Alexie rovněž v románu demonstruje, že zatímco bílí lidé mohou prohlásit, že jsou Indiány, skuteční Indiáni o sobě nemohou říct, že jsou bílí.

Čtvrtá kapitola práce se zaměřila na téma etnicity amerických Indiánů a měla jednu podkapitolu. V kapitole byly nejprve definovány termíny „etnicita“, „etnická skupina“, „rasa“ a „menšina“. Kapitola poté analyzovala vztah bílých postav k Indiánům v Alexieho románu. Většina bílých postav v díle vnímá Indiány velmi negativně a věří, že zneužívají sociálních výhod, které jim stát poskytuje. Bílé postavy také často nerozlišují mezi Indiány a věří, že všichni sdílejí stejné povahové rysy. Obecně jsou Indiáni v díle považováni za nerovnocenné a nedůležité. Jediní Indiáni, kteří jsou přijatelní, jsou ti, jež se přizpůsobili bílé společnosti. Mezi bílými lidmi a Indiány panuje v románu napětí, které se plně projeví poté, co se objeví vrah, který si vybírá pouze bílé oběti, skalpuje je a na místě činu zanechává soví pírka. Celá situace vyústí v sérii útoků, kdy se bílí lidé a Indiáni vzájemně napadají.

V závěrečné podkapitole se hovoří o tom, že spousta Indiánů pociťuje zlost vůči bílým lidem a prahne po pomstě kvůli způsobu, jakým se bílí lidé k Indiánům chovají. Dílo *Indian Killer* je považováno za první román, který se plně věnuje této problematice. Analýza postav ukazuje, že mnoho z nich, především John, Marie a Reggie, prožívá intenzivní vztek a potřebu se pomstít. Alexie vyobrazuje tuto zlost také skrze postavu vraha, jehož identita není nikdy odhalena, a kterého mnoho Indiánů považuje za symbol počátku pomsty Indiánů, která bude dále pokračovat. Tímto tématem Alexie zvyšuje povědomí čtenářů o tom, že spousta skutečných Indiánů prožívá stejné pocity jako postavy v románu.

Alexie ve svém díle *Indian Killer* popisuje problémy s definováním indiánské identity v převážně bílé společnosti. Kvůli tomu, že spousta bílých lidí má velmi specifické představy o tom, jak vypadá a jak se chová „pravý“ Indián, se mnoho Indiánů musí potýkat se stereotypy. Alexie skrze postavy ve svém díle ukazuje, že se Indiáni často snaží stereotypům vyrovnat, jako v případě Johna, který si připadá méněcenný kvůli své neschopnosti být stereotypický Indián, nebo Reggieho, který je tak schopný získat si přízeň bílých lidí. Další Indiáni, v románu například Marie, se snaží se stereotypy bojovat. Alexie popisuje, že k těmto stereotypům často přispívají právě bílí lidé, kteří prohlašují, že patří mezi Indiány a věří, že jsou schopni pochopit zkušenosti Indiánů. Alexie také poukazuje na to, že kmen je velmi důležitou součástí identity Indiánů, a to i pro ty, kdo se rozhodli rezervaci svého kmene opustit a přesídlit do měst. Rovněž Indiáni se smíšenou krví jsou zobrazeni jako mající problémy se svou identitou. Dílo *Indian Killer* se dále zabývá intenzivními pocity zlosti a touhou po pomstě, které Indiáni vůči bílým lidem pociťují kvůli tomu, jak se k nim bílá společnost staví, v románu tedy jako k nerovnocenným a sdílejícím ty samé negativní charakteristiky.

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