

## IDENTITY AT STAKE IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *INDIAN KILLER*

Jane Thompson Brodbeck/ULBRA/Canoas

One of the most recurrent subjects in contemporary Native American literature is unquestionably the concept of Indian identity and the elements that define it. The latest and most celebrated indigenous writers in North America, the US and Canada alike, have been discussing it in poems, novels, essays, tales, as well as it has been object of other languages as films, paintings, sculptures, etc. The interest on the part of Native American writers about this issue is something which has effectively been in progress for some decades, but that really increased in the sixties, with the Civil Rights movement all around the US. Increasingly, the right to speak *for /in* the name of Indians was also transferred to Indian scholars and writers positioning them in the *locus* of central debates, which until that date had been privilege of white intellectuals, the Indians being “either ignored or grossly misrepresented by conventional histories” (PORTER, 2005, p.39). As Owens (1998, p.22) observes: “It has taken Native American writers a long time to find a voice, or voices, within the discourse of literate America”.

Therefore, it is the aim of this paper to listen to some of those Indian voices in order to better understand how the Indians see themselves and the challenges they face regarding American large cities. In doing so, I chose the novel *Indian Killer*, by Sherman Alexie because of the panel he builds concerning the “motley crew”, a term borrowed from Paula Gunn Allen’s essay “Don’t Fence Me In” where she associates the Indian crew to the “multitude of complexities [...] summed up by our mixed blood, mixed-culture status” (p. 6).

In the first lines of *Indian Killer*, Alexie presents a theme which is embedded in colonial American literature -- the captivity narratives; however, in his second novel, it is not the white woman who is abducted by savages, but a newly-born Indian baby. In “Captivity” the poem/tale

from *The First Indian in the Moon*, Alexie had already touched the issue of captivity when the poet/narrator established a dialogue with Mary Rowlandson throughout the centuries.

The Native American characters that make part of Alexie's novel live in a permanent state of distress. The scenario shows a tug of war among Native Americans themselves and Native Americans and whites. The atmosphere of the novel from the very beginning until the end reveals the complex issue concerning the life of urban Indians in big cities like Seattle (the place where the novel takes place). Alexie depicts a varied cluster of characters who seem not to find the right channel for communication.

The violence implied in *Indian Killer* is linked to the conflict raised by the incredible number of different ethnic groups which help to increase criminal rates in Seattle. Nevertheless, violence is not restricted to whites against Indians but also to the beating and killing of whites by Indians. The rage explicit in *Indian Killer*, according to Alexie, is "an idea of the kind of anger and the kind of rage that is in the Indian community, as well as that which is in the white community, directed toward Indians" (GILES, 1996).

The characters who compose *Indian Killer* are young and middle-aged people, full-blood Native Americans, half-breed Native Americans, whites trying desperately to prove their Indian origin, white academics teaching Native American literature. In this universe composed by so many different ethnic groups, the rigid logic of the old colonialism fades in a complex multiplicity of breed. Opposing the customary binary set of the economy of Manichean allegory where the Europeans are the good ones and the Indians the bad ones, in this novel, Alexie emphasizes the theme of living the difference.

The main character, the Indian killer, is John Smith, a Native American who was abducted from the reservation while still a baby. Using the abduction as resource for the plot of the novel,

Alexie provides the reader with the chance of following the growth of an Indian in an American upper-middle-class home. Being kidnapped by an organized mafia involving doctors, nurses, ambulance and helicopter drivers and pilots, John Smith is hosted by the average American couple – Olivia and Daniel Smith. As Cyrus Patell (1999, p. 642) observes: “Regarded by the teachers at the St. Francis Catholic School (in which he is one of four nonwhite students) as ‘a trailblazer, a nice trophy for St. Francis, a successfully integrated Indian boy,’ John eventually proves himself to be quite the opposite, a schizophrenic who finds himself at home nowhere”.

The stereotypes start from the moment the Smiths decide to adopt a child, for Olivia after years of attempts to conceive realizes that the only solution is to raise someone else’s child. The adoption agent tells them that white babies are hard to get (from one to eight years of waiting) but they can have the baby in a shorter time if they adopt nonwhite babies like blacks and Indians. The choice for the Indian baby is greeted by the adoption agent who says, “The best place for this baby is with a white family. This child will be saved a lot of pain by growing up in a white family. It’s the best thing really” (ALEXIE, 1996, p.10). The observation of the adoption agent denotes his deformed worldview regarding a group of people he knows nothing about but stereotyped fragments of information from movies (read Hollywood ones), school books (American colonels as heroes to be memorized), and some polls in magazines commenting about the rates of alcoholism, unemployment and suicide among the remaining tribes of Indians in contemporary USA.

The scenario of *Indian killer* plays an important role in the novel, for it shows the Seattle of the 90’s with an incredible array of multiple ethnic groups, especially Indians, and the development of different factions among the Indians themselves. If centuries or decades earlier the Indians were seen as a homogeneous group by historians and the like, where the differences of languages, customs, tribes were not respected, in the Seattle of the nineties, we can observe the appearance of

subgroups among the Indians and the clash provoked by social, educational and economic differences. So, what we face nowadays in terms of Native Americans refers to a very complex panorama of racial conflicts between whites and Indians and among the Indians themselves.

In *Indian Killer* it is possible to recognize three different main groups in the novel: the whites represented by Olivia and Daniel Smith (John's adoptive parents), Clarence Mather (the professor), Jack Wilson (a writer), Buck Rogers and his sons (David and Aaron) and Truck Schultz (the host of a Seattle radio program); the mixed blood/half breed (Reggie Polatkin); and the full blood Indians (John Smith, Father Duncan and Marie Polatkin). John Smith's parents – Olivia and Daniel – represent the typical members of US society. Besides being white, they are tremendously successful in their activities and talents. Olivia is the beautiful girl who enchanted her high school and college colleagues, earning a B.A. in Art History, never working and marrying a very talented architect.

Throughout the narrative, we perceive the firm position on the part of some characters like Marie Polatkin, who rejects the whites that want to make success using a fake knowledge on the real situation of the Indians. She also demonstrates a clear understanding of the discrimination on the part of traditional Indians towards the urban Indians. Many times in the novel, Marie knows that she is labeled as less Indian than the ones who live on the reservation “because she did not dance or sing traditionally, and because she could not speak Spokane” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 33). When she meets John Smith, Marie finds his situation very similar to hers in the Indian culture, as she observes they were “outcasts from their tribes”. Marie's and John's assimilation to white customs had been done in different ways. While Marie's own Indian parents had deliberately forced her not speak their tribal language, obliging her to speak English and reading books on matters other than the Spokane culture, John Smith had been brought to the white society through violence and a criminal act

(kidnapping). At the end, they feel dislocated from both worlds, for in the translation of Indian customs to the urban reenactment of Indian traditions, like the urban powwow, for example, John Smith feels like a fraud.

Despite their condition as urban Indians, both John and Marie are the ones who perform more radical actions in the sense of preserving Indian traditions. So, it is John who decides to kill white men, for “white people no longer feared Indians. Somehow, near the end of the twentieth century, Indians had become invisible, docile” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 30). In his schizophrenic process, John develops a confusing reasoning which links the present plight of urban Indians to assimilation tactics used in the nineteenth century, therefore justifying the killing of all contemporary US white men. For John, the “contact zone” between Indians and whites bears seeds of violence, which can only be resolved through violence.

Not integrated in the urban life of Seattle, John spends his time looking for his origins (his mother) and a past of battles which are not possible any longer. The first signs of the dysfunction operated in his management with reality are the remarks he makes about his present environment. On the day he first meets Marie Polatkin, he cannot prevent observing that even at urban powwows, the tall Indian dancer in traditional dance regalia looked fierce, and “he wondered what the early European settlers must have thought when they first encountered an Indian warrior in all of his finest regalia. Even in his flannel shirt and blue jeans, John knew he was intimidating” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 39-40). It is exactly intimidation and “fear in every pair of blue eyes” that John searches in his hatred against the whites. In his process of selection, he rejects the poor and the drunk whites, for they “were already dead”.

On her turn, Marie Polatkin argues violently with her professor at the University of Washington in classes of Introduction to Native American Literature when Clarence Mather<sup>1</sup> presents the syllabus of the discipline, which included books such as *The Education of Little Tree* by a very controversial author named Forrest Carter who “was actually the pseudonym for a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 58), *Black Elk Speaks*, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*, and *Lakota Woman*, “purported to be autobiographical, though all three were co-written by white men” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 58). The question of authorship is also approached as something considered as appropriation of the Indian history by people who did not live on reservations or have Indian blood. For Marie, the simple fact that Clarence Mather tries to be Indian, for having being adopted into a Lakota Sioux family, does not entitle him to talk like an Indian, considering that he misses the most crucial element that composes Indian life – survival. Clarence Mather belongs to what Kent Carter (Director of the National Archives) calls *Wannabes*.<sup>2</sup> The issue that Marie raises in the classes of Introduction to Native American literature is the scarcity of real Native American authors in the syllabus and the presence of white authors presenting an “authentic and traditional” view of the Indian world. Here Marie discusses the *locus* of enunciation, since the ones who speak on behalf of Indians are not engaged in political pro-Indian organizations nor do they possess Indian blood. When Marie confronts Clarence Mather, she wants to show him how the Indians do not need anybody to speak for them, for they are attending universities, Indian tribal councils, and most

---

<sup>1</sup> Here Alexie plays with the readers, for Mather is the renowned surname of the two most prestigious preachers in Puritan times. Increase Mather was responsible for the publication of Mary Rowlandson’s narrative and his son Cotton Mather wrote *Magnalia Christi Americana* which constitutes a libel against the Indians.

<sup>2</sup> According to Mihesuah (1996, p. 99) there are thousands of Americans who claim to have Indian ancestors (a grandmother) and present a series of characteristics that cluster them in the group of the *wannabes* such as: not having any documentation to prove their tribal membership; unsure of their grandmother’s tribe; since the grandmother has died a long time ago, they do not know how to get more information; the papers that proved their origin were burnt by the ancestors for the fact that they felt *ashamed* of being Indians; there is no documentation because the ancestor was “out of town” during allotment; the grandmother was a fullblood because she had high cheekbones.

important of all, they write books, as she says to Clarence: “there are so many real Indians out there writing real Indian books. Simon Ortiz, Roberta Whiteman, Luci Tapahonso. And there’s Indian writers from the Northwest, too. Like Elizabeth Woody, Ed Edmo. And just across the border in Canada, too. Like Jeannette Armstrong” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 67-68).

The characters in *Indian Killer* represent what Cyrus Patell calls the violence of hybridity. For Patell (1997), “being emergent in America today means recognizing that the dominant culture has transformed hybridity into a state of violence”. This process of cultural damage traces back from the first European conquerors to US government policy of assimilation practices. According to Patell, hybridity is a process that is not accomplished through peaceful transition, making reference to Franz Fanon who considers that the process of decolonization always implies struggle against the dominant power.

Not only is John Smith a product of assimilation policies but also mixed blood Indians as Reggie Polatkin – Marie Polatkin’s cousin. Reggie represents the typical urban Indian who has been raised by a white father but owns Indian characteristics from his mother’s side. As many other Indian women, Reggie’s mother wanted to leave the reservation and found in Bird Lawrence, the director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at that time, an opportunity to “have a big house, a nice car, green grass” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 92). The price for living in the city, however, implies severe beatings, for Bird wants Reggie to be a non-hostile Indian, and he demands his son to be special. As Bird states to Reggie after another lesson for “his own good”: “I don’t want you to end up like all the other Indians. [...] I don’t want you to be running around with a gun. I want you to love your country. I want you to know your history” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 94). The violent treatment to which Reggie is submitted can be read as an allegory of boarding schools where Indians were chastised whenever they spoke their Native language.

Violence runs throughout *Indian Killer* from the abduction of John Smith at his birth up to his scalping of white men. More than anything else, the main focus of *Indian Killer* refers to the quest for identity in a society where geographical frontiers have given way to ethnic ones. Life off the reservation has proved to be really tough for most Indians. As Marie Polatkin argues with Clarence Mather on the subject of the Indian killer, the Indians, according to her, are not worried about peace and beauty:

If the real Pocahontas came back, you think she'd be happy about being a cartoon? If Crazy Horse, or Geronimo, or Sitting Bull came back, they'd see what you white people have done to Indians, and they would start a war. They'd see the homeless Indians staggering around downtown. They'd see the fetal-alcohol-syndrome babies. They'd see the sorry-ass reservations. They'd learn about Indian suicide and infant-mortality rates. They'd listen to some dumb-shit Disney song and feel like hurting somebody (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 314).

The rage felt by John Smith is born out of the unbalanced condition of an Indian living in a white environment devoid of tribal roots and references. Even not having contact with Indian customs from childhood, John realizes from a very young age that he is different from his adoptive parents, “and understood that the difference in skin color was important. [...] His skin [his father's] was so pale that John could imagine he could see through it” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 305). The differences in skin color observed by John triggers a wish he could look like his parents at such an extent that he wanted “to wipe the brown away” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 306). The realization of being brown makes John search for his real mother, and as soon as he leaves his adoptive parents' house, he spends the weekends visiting reservations, “answers, some kind of family” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 126).

The forced and brutal separation from reservation and tribal family awakes in John a strong desire for his origins. After watching a television documentary of the cabin in Ape Canyon on



Mount Saint Helens and the battle between a group of miners and the legendary and angry Bigfoot, John becomes fascinated and hitchhikes to the Hupa Indian Reservation. There he realizes that “something had been lost” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 127), for the reservation town “contained few Indians. It appeared to be a typical small town, with a grocery store, a gas station, a post office, a number of turn-of-the-century houses, a small clinic, and a few anonymous buildings” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 127). The fact that the town reservation seems like any other typical white small city in the US bewilders John and his idealization of the place where Bigfoot could be found. It is a Hupa Indian woman wearing a pair of blue jeans and a T-shirt which reads Bigfoot hunter that tells John that she could lead him to where Bigfoot was, or better, Sasquatch, after all, as the woman remarks: “Most people call them Sasquatch these days. Makes it sound more Indian, don’t it?” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 128).

The fruitless journey to northwestern California and the Sasquatch trail prove how much John had become estranged from Indian customs and the tricks used by the Indians to make some money on tourists’ credulity. The sight of the woods, the creek, the birds, the blue sky made John wondered “if Sasquatch was out there in the woods” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 130). He also did not want to leave that place, for “John knew he did not belong there or anywhere” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 130). That feeling of “not belonging” is a recurrent feature of John’s personality. In all the flashbacks that remount to his childhood and adolescence we observe how precarious his interrelationship with the whites is. Not only does he discover the power of prejudice through his girlfriends’ parents who forbid them to date John till his loosening the ties with Indian groups. His knowledge of Indians was achieved after years of observation and practice at the urban powwows that his adoptive parents took him when a child. Years later, John could pretend to be a real Indian. “He could sit in a huge crowd of Indians and be just another anonymous, silent Skin” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 35).

When John decides it was time for a white man to die “for all the lies that had been told to Indians” (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 132), he starts demonstrating signs of a very strange behavior. In the study carried out by Fixico (2000), this kind of behavior shows a form of schizophrenia. The confusion John presents to the others – his adoptive parents, his employer and colleagues – the loneliness and the muteness configure a picture which is extremely common at US large centers. As Fixico (2000, p. 179) states: “Too often their [the Indians] minds and actions do not coincide, causing an imbalance; the person may appear outwardly solid, but there is confusion inside”.

John’s schizophrenic condition remounts to nineteenth-century US policies when the government implemented programs that preached the ‘civilization’ of Indians. The program consisted of separating Indian children from their families and sending them to boarding schools: “it was hoped that assimilation would be finally achieved. If parents refused to let their children go, Indian agents on reservations threatened to withhold food rations until they cooperated” (HIRSCHFELDER, 2000, p. 129). Through studies on this matter, it is known that this kind of policy caused severe traumatic shocks for the Indian children:

Indians who were forced to attend these schools suffered major hardships and handicaps: the inability to communicate with teachers, a lack of parental involvement and support, the loss of contact with their culture, and poor diets. Students were not allowed to speak their tribal languages, wear their hair long or practice their religions. Transgressors were whipped and slapped (MIHESUAH, 1998, p.41-42).

The policy of assimilation also proved to be a failure, for the Indians were not accepted as such for the white society nor did they belong to their Indian tribes:

Some completed the educational programs, but ironically were still not accepted as equals in Euro-American society because they were Indians. Still others returned to their homes as educated Indians, no longer adherent to their traditional culture, nor were many tribal members willing to accept their new world view (MIHESUAH, 1998, p. 42).

Although John Smith has been raised in a middle-class family, the US mainstream constantly reminds him of his brown skin, be it with high school friends, be it at his work. The fragments that compose John's personality are a product of these *in-between* worlds, not belonging to either of them. In short, John feels disoriented most of the time, and he tries to appease the deep pain through delusions that become more and more frequent. Those delusions always come in form of rites such as dances like the owl dance and the ghost dance. Divided between a world of reality (the US mainstream) and a world of delusions (Indian rites), John's rationality is affected at such an extent that he expects to take revenge for all the crimes committed against the Indians by killing white men.

It is at the end of the novel, when John and Jack Wilson (the white writer) are located at the sky-scraper, site of his former job as a construction worker, that John Smith finally finds the answer for his quest. Just before stepping off the building, John Smith whispers to Jack Wilson: "Let me, let us have our own pain" (ALEXIE, 1996, p. 411). This ultimate cry to Wilson symbolizes the struggle of the Indians for the conquest of their own space and territory. Neither John nor Marie Polatkin wants to be described by whites. It is this message that John leaves for the perplexed Jack Wilson who had been writing a novel about an Indian serial killer.

John Smith, according to the definition used by Sherman Alexie, is what one calls a "lost bird", i.e., Indians adopted by whites. Alexie also points out that this kind of adoption was prohibited by the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1974 due to the tremendous dysfunctions and social problems it caused. In the same interview, Alexie also admits that his intention in *Indian Killer* was the depiction of a lost bird, and that the novel is more than just a series of crimes:

It's also a novel about, not just physical murder, but the spiritual, cultural and physical murder of Indians. The title, Indian Killer, is a palindrome, really. It's 'Indians who kill' and it's also 'people who kill Indians.' It's about how the

dominant culture is killing the First Nations people of this country to this day, still (TOMSON HIGHWAY, 1997).

The gloomy and pessimistic vision that Alexie imprints in *Indian Killer* of an extremely violent society with whites fighting against Indians, and Indians among themselves, points out to the ontology of hybridity as being synonym of ontology of violence.

## REFERENCES

ALEXIE, Sherman. *Indian Killer*. New York: Warner Books, 1996.

ALLEN, Paula Gunn. *Off the Reservation*. Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

FIXICO, Donald L. *The Urban Indian Experience*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000.

GILES, Gretchen. Seeing Red. *Sonoma Independent*. October 3-9, 1996. Available at: <<http://metroactive.com/papers/Sonoma/10.03.96/books-9640.html>> Accessed on: 13 abr.2007.

HIRSCHFELDER, Arlene. *Native Americans*. A History in Pictures. New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, 2000.

MIHESUAH, Devon A. *American Indians*. Atlanta: Clarity Press, 1998.

OWENS, Louis. *Mixedblood Messages*. Literature, Film, Family, Place. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.

PATELL, Cyrus R. K. Emergent Literatures. In: BERCOVITCH, Sacvan (Ed.). *The Cambridge History of American Literature*. Volume Seven: Prose Writing, 1940-1990. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. p. 541-675.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Violence of Hybridity in Silko and Alexie. *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*. n. 6, 1997. Available at: <<http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~jast/Number6/Patell.html>> Accessed on: 6 abril 2007.

PORTER, Joy; KENNETH M. Roemer. (Eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

TOMSON HIGHWAY. Spokane Words raps with Sherman Alexie. *Aboriginal Voices Magazine*. v. 4, n. 1, jan. - mar. 1997. Available at:<http://fallsapart.com/interviews.html> Accessed on: abr.2007.