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Alexie's Indians: *Indian Killer's* Ideal and Real Indians

Much of the work of Sherman Alexie, from poetry to prose, deals with the important question of what it means to be "Indian." His work questions the romantic conceptions of Native Americans that Anglo-European-American culture has consistently rendered. Stereotypes and idealizations in television and movies such as Tonto, or the savage Indians in John Wayne's *The Searchers*, become targets of intense criticism in collections such as *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *The Toughest Indian in the World*. In his novel *Indian Killer*, Alexie turns his focus away from popular culture of movies and television, and criticizes the romantic idealizations embraced by the intellectual worlds of literature and academia in general. Through his characters John Smith, Marie Polatkin, and members of the academic world such as Dr Mather, as well as in his use of intertextuality and allusion, Sherman Alexie creates a dialectic between romantic and realist conceptions of Native Americans. Ultimately, this dialectic becomes a realist criticism of romantic conceptions of Native Americans.

Indian Killer's central and most tragic character is John Smith. Given up for adoption to a white family at birth, John Smith is "raised white," and develops a very confused perception of what it means to be Indian. His parents Daniel and Olivia try their best to raise their son to be knowledgeable of his Native American heritage. They are very naive in how they go about teaching John Smith his heritage, however. As they seek to make their son feel "Indian," Olivia and Daniel Smith indiscriminately embrace

all things dubbed “Indian.” This manifests itself in a variety of ways, such as when they have their newly adopted baby baptized:

Because the baby John was Indian, Olivia and Daniel Smith wanted him to be baptized by an Indian, and they searched for days and weeks for the only Indian Jesuit in the Pacific Northwest (13).

They find Father Duncan, who is described as “eccentric,” but is later revealed to be more crazy as he talks to himself, and will eventually walk off into the desert and disappear, which “reaffirms the realist drift of American Indian subjectivities as reflected in the stat sheet: troubled Indian men have a statistically verifiable tendency to disappear” (Stuart 10). Daniel and Olivia seem to believe that by having their son baptized by an Indian Jesuit, he will receive some sort of authentic Indian label.

Olivia and Daniel Smith teach John about his culture in the same way that they have him baptized, embracing all things “Indian” in order to expose John Smith to as much seemingly authentic Native American culture as possible. They never stop to consider that Native American culture is specific to tribe, and exposing John to anything and everything dubbed “Indian,” as authentic Native American culture will only leave him confused and alienated from whatever culture he could have hoped to salvage. The first showings of this alienation begin to occur when his father takes him to an all-Indian basketball tournament. The basketball game is a laugh-riot for most of the Indians in the gymnasium, and when the game gradually develops into chaotic fun John becomes very confused. “He did not recognize these Indians. They were nothing like the Indians he had read about. John felt betrayed”(22). John most likely feels betrayed because the Indians he has read about are the stoic warrior Indians that Alexie often criticizes in his

writings. John Smith believes in the popular culture image of Indians that Alexie describes in other works, such as his poem, “Eugene Boyd Don’t Drink Here No More”:

us stoic Indians rehearsing for parts as extras in some eternal black and white western. Shit, used to be only whites expected Skins to have monosyllabic faces, but now, now we expect it of each other (75).

This is what John Smith expects of Indians at the basketball tournament. He wants a stern faced, emotionless warrior. His feeling of betrayal occurs when, instead of a gymnasium full of stoics, he sees Indians who succumb to “so much laughter that the refs called an official timeout” (22). John’s conception of what it means to be Indian does not include being carefree and fun.

John Smith’s idealized images of Native Americans is also what inspires his career choice:

During his freshman year in high school, John had read an article about a group of Mohawk Indian steel workers who helped build the World Trade Center buildings in New York City. Ever since then, John had dreamed about working on a skyscraper. He figured it was the Indian thing to do (22).

What could be a more romantic and idealistic perception of the modern Indian warrior, than one that bravely faces the dangerous soaring heights of an unfinished skyscraper? John Smith is hired to work on the last skyscraper in Seattle. He does this because he believes that it will make him feel Indian, but soon discovers that merely working on the skyscraper does not make him the idealized Indian he desires. This lack of self-discovery leaves John frustrated and fanaticizing about killing his foreman in a way that he believes

would be authentically Indian:

John knew if he were a real Indian, he could have called the wind. He could have called a crosscutting wind that would've sliced through the fortieth floor, pulled the foreman out of the elevator, and sent him over the edge of the building (24).

The basketball tournament and the disappointing fact that John's construction job does not make him feel like the ideal Indian he has conjured in his mind are two of the contributing factors in his disintegration into insanity. It is this ultimate confusion between the ideal and the real, fantasy and fact, that leave John Smith struggling to find himself:

As he grows older, the young Smith is increasingly aware that he possesses a story that his suburban upbringing has not trained him to recognize (Stuart 7).

The reality that comes crashing around John Smith, breaking apart his idealized notions of what it means to be Indian are ultimately what lead him to become psychotic, and in the end take his own life.

Perhaps John Smith's tragic life would have taken a more positive direction if romantic idealizations of Native Americans had not been embraced by the experts of academia who write the books. Alexie creates Dr Mather, *Indian Killer*'s white "Indian expert," as a way of criticizing the idyllic conceptions that can sometimes be embraced by the academic world. Dr Mather is described as a "Wannabe Indian, a white man who wants to be Indian" (58). He is a tenured professor in the Anthropology department at the University of Washington, and teaching a "Introduction to Native American

Literature” class. Alexie describes Dr Mather as loving Indians, “or perhaps the idea of Indians” (58). His idea of Indians is a rather romantic one, fueled by the books he chooses to teach in his class. Through Dr Mather’s class reading list, Alexie is able to further his criticism of romantic conceptions of Native Americans. Dr Mather chooses many books that have very questionable Native American origins:

seven books included three anthologies of traditional Indian stories edited by white men, two nonfiction studies of Indian spirituality written by white women, a book of traditional Indian poetry translations edited by a Polish- American Jewish man (59).

In addition, Dr Mather puts Forrest Carter’s *The Education of Little Tree* on the class reading list, and a character author that Alexie creates as an allusion to real-life author Tony Hillerman by the name of Jack Wilson. These books and their authors, in particular *The Education of Little Tree* and the book by Jack Wilson are books that carry very romantic conceptions of Native Americans at the expense of truth. *The Education of Little Tree* by Forrest Carter is a book that further’s many romantic stereotypes of Native Americans. The book is about a young Cherokee boy named Little Tree who is raised by his Grandparents. It consistently uses many stereotypes and romantic portrayals of the Cherokee people. One of these idyllic conceptions, mentioned previously, is that of the stoic Indian. When Little Tree’s grandparents tell him about the infamous Trail of Tears in which thousands of Cherokees died being displaced from their homeland, he gets a stoic portrayal:

The husband carried his dead wife. The son carried his dead mother, his father. The mother carried her dead baby. They carried them in their

arms. And walked. And they did not turn their heads to look at the soldiers, nor to look at the people who lined the sides of the Trail to watch them pass. Some of the people cried. But the Cherokee did not cry. Not on the outside, for the Cherokee would not let them see his soul (42).

This portrayal of the Trail of Tears is almost offensive in its stoic stereotypes of the Cherokee people. It also tones down a very horrific part of American history in an effort to be idyllic.

This sort of attitude towards Native Americans in history is something that Alexie did not invent with *Dr Mather*. It is also not something limited to books such as *The Education of Little Tree*, which one might consider brushing off as being “outdated,” having been published in 1976. Consider, this quote from a 1999 article in which white author Ian Frazier tries to play down the horrific things that happened during early-American colonization in his book *On the Rez*:

The popular refrain about Indians nowadays is that they and their culture were cruelly destroyed. But beyond the sphere of rhetoric the Indians as a people did not die out, awful though their suffering was. Killing people is one thing; killing them off is another. The destruction story gives the flattering and wrong impression that European culture showed up in the Americas and simply mowed down whatever was in its way. In fact the European arrivals were often hungry and stunned in their new settlements, and what they did to Indian culture was for years more than matched by what encounters with Indians did to theirs.

In this paragraph Frazier seems to want to deny the devastating effect that European

colonialization of the North American continent had on the indigenous peoples. By using the idealized text *The Education of Little Tree*, Dr Mather is doing much the same.

In addition to mentioning the real author of *The Education of Little Tree*, Sherman Alexie creates a character named Jack Wilson to allude to another real-life author of so-called “Native American Literature,” Tony Hillerman. Jack Wilson, like his real-life counterpart, is a mystery writer. Jack Wilson claims to be Shilshomish Indian, and it is a very romantic notion of Indians that he wants to be:

Wilson read about Indians and recreated himself in the image he found inside the books. He saw himself as a solitary warrior on horseback, crossing miles of empty plains (157).

His books focus on a single character, a Native American detective named Aristotle Little Hawk. Jack Wilson is an allusion to Tony Hillerman’s character Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, a Navajo detective working to solve murders on reservation land. Both Wilson and Hillerman’s characters are certainly supposed to be the “solitary warrior on horseback.” Hillerman’s novels romanticize the mystic aspects of Native American culture. For instance, his novel *Dancehall of the Dead*, about the murder of a Zuni boy. The novel brings the mystic Kachina gods of the Zuni religion into focus as Leaphorn searches for the killer. Hillerman continually downplays any notion of reservation poverty, and instead focuses on the supernatural. While pondering the possible connection between the death of the Zuni boy and the disappearance of his Navajo bestfriend, Leaphorn refuses to believe that Ernesto Cata’s, the murdered Zuni, family could have done something to the suspected friend in retribution. Leaphorn assumes that because of the Zuni belief that violent thoughts and acts disrupts any connection with the

“supernatural,” there would be no possibility of any Zuni killing in retribution for Ernesto (87). Hillerman also creates a white history of Native culture similar to that of Ian Frazier and Forrest Carter. While discussing Native religions with a reservation priest, Leaphorn is told of the Navajo religion “Your Holy People-- Monster Slayer, Changing Woman, Born of Water, and all that-- they’re more like a cross between the Greek hero idea and the lesser Greek gods” (99). Hillerman is trying to idealize Native American culture by romanticizing and westernizing Native religions. It is because of this kind of idealization that Alexie creates Jack Wilson, a “local white writer...who claimed he was Shilshomish Indian” (59).

Through the use of *The Education of Little Tree* and the creation of Jack Wilson as an allusion to Hillerman, Alexie gives prime examples of the men who create the romanticized conceptions that he abhors so much. He also creates a fully rounded criticism of these authors and Dr Mather’s beliefs through the creation of Marie Polatkin, “ever confrontational, ever the voice of conscience” (Evans 18). Marie is a student in Dr Mather’s class and a full-blooded member of the Spokane tribe. She serves as the reality factor which questions the so-called authenticity of the books Dr Mather uses in his class. From the very first day of class, she is adamant about questioning authors such as Forrest Carter and Jack Wilson. Of Carter, who like Jack Wilson, claimed to be Indian:

The Education of Little Tree was supposedly written by a Cherokee Indian named Forrest Carter. But Forrest Carter was actually a pseudonym for a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (58).

This fact alone should dismiss the authenticity of *The Education of Little Tree*, but when Marie brings this up to Dr Mather he calls them “rumors,” insisting that Marie “recognize

the validity of a Native American literature that is shaped by both Indian and white hands” (59-61). When Dr Mather points out that Jack Wilson is a Native American as well, Marie is quick to dismiss his claims of being part Shilshomish Indian:

But the Shilshomish don't exist as a tribe anymore. There are no records of membership. Lots of people claim to be Indians, and Wilson's vague statements about his Shilshomish ancestors can't be verified...don't you find it highly ironic that all of these so-called Indian writers claim membership in tribes with poor records of membership? Cherokee, Shilshomish? I mean, there's not a whole lot of people claiming to be Spokane. Because we're not glamorous and we keep damn good records (67).

Ultimately Marie's argument is that the romantic idealizations that Dr Mather and men like Jack Wilson create are ridiculous. They gain authenticity only because the dominant culture that Dr Mather comes from insists they “know more about being Indian than Indians do” (247). It is an idealization that Marie can have no part of as she sees the cold reality of the despair that many Native Americans suffer. In addition to being in the classroom to dissent against Dr Mather, Marie spends her nights feeding the homeless out of a Sandwich van. This is because she understands that the romantic notions of a stoic warrior are completely ridiculous:

Marie levels the charge of hypocrisy at the American Indian culture industry in abeyance of the grim reality facing homeless and impoverished Indians (Stuart 15).

It is only appropriate that Alexie gives Marie that last words on who the Indian killer may

be, and whether or not he is even Indian, “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” (418). Considering the atrocities that people like Dr Mather seem to ignore, she is surprised that real Indians didn’t rise up and kill sooner.

Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* is a novel full of important questions about what it means to be “Indian.” He creates a wide variety of characters that have vastly different conceptions of Native Americans. Ranging from the loyal romantics like Dr Mather to the confused idealism of John Smith to the realists like Marie Polatkin, Alexie creates an important dialectic about the issue of Indian representation. His use of intertextuality further explores these issues, and ultimately becomes a criticism on the idealization of Native culture at the expense of the Native peoples themselves.