Culture-Specific and Postmodern Literary Devices in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*

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Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996) rewrites the traditional framework of crime fiction by using Native American culture-specific and postmodern literary devices such as fragmentation, intertextuality, irony, and dark humour. The story revolves around a series of brutal murders in Seattle attributed to the so-called Indian Killer. The murderer receives the moniker from the media because the victims are scalped, and owl feathers are found at the crime scenes. An omniscient third-person narrator reveals crucial details and leaves readers to play the role of detective, tasked with unravelling the mystery and determining the true identity of the Indian Killer.

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1 Introduction

Among the various subgenres of crime writing that have appeared since the Golden Age of detective fiction – which dominated the interwar era of the two World Wars – such as the thriller and the hard-boiled, one of the most captivating was Indigenous crime fiction, because the incorporation of Native American mythology and traditions gave the themes and narrative of crime fiction a new perspective. Indigenous writers transformed the Western conventions of language and form by the decolonisation of crime narratives; thus, they created a format that reflects Native American viewpoints and expands the previously defined boundaries of the genre (Gulddal and King 2023, 288). Unlike traditional Western sleuths who solve mysteries with limited help from their sidekick – if they have one – or a police officer, the Indigenous community actively participates in the investigation process (Fischer-Hornung and Mueller 2003, 17).

A prime example of Native American innovation in crime fiction is Sherman Alexie's 1996 novel *Indian Killer*; its narrative and the use of postmodern literary devices challenge the established framework of traditional Golden Age crime writing. In a sense, Alexie's novel resembles Renaissance revenge tragedies, where the main character is helped to solve the mystery by the ghost of the murder victim, or by

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prophetic dreams (Ascari 2007, 22). The novelty of *Indian Killer* is that the spirit in the story does not help the process of detection, rather it takes vengeance for the historical injustice Native Americans have suffered from since colonisation. It adheres to the characteristics of metaphysical crime fiction, in which – although it follows the narrative structure of detective stories – the detection and the resolution take place in a metaphysical dimension, thus making it impossible to remain within the constraints of traditional crime fiction (Bényei 2000, 12). Alexie's novel has (sub) genre-blending features due to the inclusion of Native American culture-specific elements, thus, its categorisation is ambivalent. Various interpreters use different labels for the book, for example, murder mystery, noir mystery, or psychological thriller, among many others (Ruppert 2005, 184; Moore 2005, 304; Anand and Kaur 2024, 49).

The story is about a mysterious serial killer who terrorises Seattle. The murderer, dubbed Indian Killer by the media, attacks white men at random, scalps them and leaves two owl feathers next to their bodies. Additionally, the culprit also kidnaps a child but later releases him. The first victim, Justin Summers, attracts the Indian Killer's attention with his arrogance: he stands in the middle of the sidewalk, making people walk around him. The murderer brushes past Justin, then follows him and stabs him to death. Having scalped the victim, the murderer leaves the dead body in an abandoned house. The second incident is the premeditated murder of David Rogers, a young university student. David disappears after he is last seen in front of an Indian casino. Killed with a single gunshot to the head, the victim is found by hikers days later in the nearby forest. Disregarding that the modus operandi is completely different from the Indian Killer's other murders, the public is convinced that David is also the serial killer's victim, due to their prejudice about the scene of the crime, the casino.[1] After David's disappearance, a six-year-old boy, Mark Jones, is kidnapped from his bedroom. This time it is obvious that the Indian Killer is the culprit, because owl feathers are left on Mark's pillow. The boy is held in a dark room for days without being hurt, then he is taken back home. The six-year-old is the only victim to survive the encounter with the dangerous criminal, thus, he is able to give a description to the police. When investigators question him, he tells the police that the Indian Killer is neither a man nor a woman, rather a shadowy figure who resembles an owl. The last victim of the serial killer is a businessman, Edward Letterman, who loses his life in the most horrifying manner: not only is he stabbed in the chest numerous times, but also his heart is cut out and eaten.

[1] Towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that this murder was a red herring all along, it had nothing to do with the Indian Killer, and actually two white men were responsible for David's death.

The main character of the novel is John Smith, a construction worker in his late twenties with a strong physique that enables him to potentially commit violent crimes; thus, both the police and people around him suspect him of being the Indian Killer. He was adopted as a newborn by a white couple, Olivia and Daniel Smith, who do not know what tribe their son is from. They try to educate themselves and John about Native American cultures without realising that it is impossible to make up for the lack of John's genuine connection to his indigeneity, which results in his identity issues. He also suffers from severe mental health issues – most likely schizophrenia; he cuts off all contact with his parents and stops taking his prescribed medication, which makes it increasingly hard for him to differentiate reality from hallucinations. The story ends with his complete descent into madness, which ultimately results in his suicide. The police close their investigation – since John's death makes them believe he was responsible for the murders – which also makes the public convinced that the Indian Killer is gone, although the reader is left with key pieces of information to suggest otherwise. The cliffhanger ending encourages the reader to approach these stories from a critical perspective. As Jeanne C. Ewert contends: "[t]he message for the reader of metaphysical detective fiction is clear: she must learn to read without relying on the detective's interpretations; she must also learn to read in a world that offers conjectures and structuring systems, but no single overriding structure" (1999, 188).

Even though Alexie's book centres around the mystery of the Indian Killer's identity, the novel is a social critique of the long-term effects of settler colonialism due to its underlying themes of issues that urban Indian communities face – such as marginalisation and homelessness (Tatonetti 2010, 17). Furthermore, in a post-colonial setting crime fiction – regardless of their subgenre – can be used to express a minority's resistance towards the "colonizing power of the metropolis" (Knight 2006, 26).

The detective figure and the resolution are completely missing from the plot, as Meredith James contends that "Alexie withholds the pleasure of knowing, unequivocally, the satisfying conclusion that results from reading a standard detective novel where a suspect is singled out by a cunning detective and all the questions are answered and wrapped up neatly" (2010, 172). John's viewpoint, numerous minor characters' thoughts, and even police testimonies are revealed to the reader, but no clear conclusion can be drawn about who the perpetrator is. Alexie's ambiguous portrayal of the killer and the lack of a traditional detective figure makes the reader question preconceived notions about identity, justice, and the resolution of the plot. As this paper demonstrates, by blending the elements of metaphysical crime fiction with postmodern literary devices, Alexie diverges from the framework of the subgenre of classic detective fiction and shifts the focus from the investigation

to the perspective of the Indigenous community. The murders turn into a social critique about the struggles of urban Indian communities, as one of the long-term effects of colonisation. Through the figure of the Indian Killer, the depiction of marginalisation, and the lack of resolution, Alexie directs the reader's attention to the instability of truth both in the murder investigation and in the history of Native Americans in the US.

2 Narrative Techniques and Postmodern Features

Self-reflexivity is crucial in *Indian Killer* in several instances, which showcases how the narrative is an amalgamation of Western conventions and Indigenous traditions. To draw the reader's attention to the creation process, Alexie uses metafiction – one of the most common narrative techniques in postmodern literature (Nicol 2009, 16). As Malcah Effron writes: "self-referential statements indicate chinks in the ideological armor of any narrative frame because, [...] where the system becomes apparent rather than always-already interpolated, problematize the totality of the established definitions, particularly those used to define the nature of reality" (2010, 52). In the case of *Indian Killer*, the established definitions of reality would suggest that the killer is a human being; therefore, the possibility of looking for the perpetrator in the metaphysical realm is excluded by the non-Indigenous characters.

The first instance of self-referentiality is the title of the novel, which has multiple interpretations. Jack Wilson is writing his new novel based on the ongoing killing spree of the Indian Killer. Wilson is struggling with writing, and the creation of his novel within the novel is described multiple times to obscure the boundaries between fiction and reality. An impersonal narrative voice appears throughout the novel; it cannot be determined whether some of the chapters are segments of Wilson's work, or the authentic descriptions of the events. Periodically the same scene appears in separate chapters, described in slightly different ways, from the killer's perspective and from the prime suspect's – John's – point of view. The same narrative technique appears in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842) – a forerunner to the true crime genre – which features conflicting accounts of Marie Rogêt's death. In the third chapter, John is walking through the University District when he suddenly feels dizzy, accidentally bumping into a white man who is talking to his friends. The man asks John if he is okay, shows him the peace sign, and says goodbye to his acquaintances. He then walks away while John silently follows him. A similar scene is described from the killer's point of view in the fifth chapter, when he walks through the University District and spots a lonely, arrogant, and

self-absorbed man, Justin. The murderer watches him from afar, sensing that his solitude makes him vulnerable. When they reach a secluded area, the murderer kills him, thus making Justin Summers the Indian Killer's first victim. These scenes are red herrings, since at first glance the killer's and John's point of view are very similar, which can lead the reader to jump to the conclusion that John and the Indian Killer are the same person. Upon closer scrutiny, however, these sections show discrepancies which – even if they do not conclusively rule it out – cast considerable doubt on the possibility that John is the murderer.

The composition of the novel reflects the complexity of both the social problems represented and the decline of John's ability to differentiate reality from hallucinations. Regardless of whether the sections written from John's point of view are the parts of Wilson's novel or not, the book's narrative structure is highly fragmented – a common characteristic feature of postmodern texts. Fragmentation is experienced both on a psychological and social level, internally and externally likewise (Reed 2021, 41). Postmodern storytelling discards the conventional plot structure to dismantle overused master narratives while reconstructing fictional worlds where irony and humour can play a central role, and multiple points of views can prevail (Hoffmann 2005, 5). Fragmentation represents how colonisation disrupted Native American historical continuity, causing generation trauma and the loss of identity for American Indians. The plotlines are linked by repeated allusions to literary texts and Indigenous oral tradition. Alexie also includes references to his literary predecessors; for example, a homeless man named Loney is briefly mentioned, which, although apparently has no significance in the plot, is an homage to James Welch's novel, *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979). A minor character, Truck Schultz – who finds himself in a foggy alleyway while he thinks that someone is following him – compares the eerie and sinister atmosphere of the location to the setting of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902). The overall structure of *Indian Killer* evokes traditional elements of Indigenous storytelling, since the narrative is constructed of a string of interrelated stories that reflect on and are connected to one another (Brill de Ramírez 2016, 334). It is the reader's task to find the connections among the sections by focusing on the text as a whole rather than analysing each chapter individually. Native American authors link the text, the Indigenous community, and the reader together in an inclusive space where these participants can interact with the story itself (Porter 2005, 43). In the case of *Indian Killer*, the audience is not only encouraged to be involved in the story and to move away from the spectator position, but the reader is also forced to take on the detective's role by the omission of the detective figure and the story's cliffhanger ending.

The events are described from an authoritative narrator's point of view, instead of a character who is part and witness of the investigation itself. Following each

victim's murder – or in Mark Jones's case, kidnapping – chapters titled "Testimony" are featured, which also increase fragmentation. In these sections, the reader is presented with a dialogue between police investigators and witnesses questioned. For example, the first victim's, Justin's, friend is interrogated by an officer about what he saw on the night of the murder:

> "Mr. Russel, could you please tell us what you saw on the Burke-Gilman Trail that night?"
> "I'm sorry Officer, I was really drunk. I barely remember anything from that night." […]
> "One of your friends said you ran into, how did she say it, a shadow carrying a white guy on his shoulder. That sounds pretty memorable to me. She said you talked to this so-called shadow."
> "I don't remember Officer. I mean I just don't remember."
> "What did this shadow look like?"
> "I don't remember. I remember long hair. But that's it." (1996, 71)

In *Indian Killer*, more information is available to the audience than to any character; consequently, the pressure of discovering who committed the murders is on the reader, similarly to the way jurors are instructed to make decisions about criminal cases in court. The investigation is not included in the story itself, and the character referred to as "the killer" is a mythical, shape-shifting figure who alternately takes the form of a human being and an owl, although its appearance is not described in detail. Shapeshifter figures appear in the legends of several tribes, such as the Ojibwe windigo, described as a spirit that is neither a man nor a woman, or the Navajo (Diné) skinwalker, which takes the form of a shadowy coyote (de Vos 2022, 284; Alford 1992, 119). Most Native American tribes consider the owl as a bad omen associated with selfishness, sickness, and manipulation; thus, when it appears, it foreshadows misfortune or death (Lake-Thom 1997, 117). John witnesses an owl dance ceremony, organised by Native American university students, which he had read books about throughout his childhood to connect with his Indigenous roots. He is asked to join, but he is reluctant, as he knows about the bird's significance. "John knew that for many Indian tribes, the owl was a messenger of death. For those Indians, *the owl was death itself*. […] With Indians, death was always so close anyway. When Indian owls danced, their *shadows were shaped like owls*" (1996, 37, emphasis added). In the same way, witnesses refer to the murderer as a shadowy figure, and none of them can give a clear description of the culprit when police officers interrogate them. Six-year-old Mark Jones, the survivor of the kidnapping, says that he thinks the Indian Killer can fly, since its silhouette resembles an owl with feathers on his/her/their back, which seems impossible to the police officers, hence they dismiss Mark's description. In comparison with the Western worldview, in Indigenous cosmology, there is no hierarchical relationship between the supernatural

and the physical world, as Paula Gunn Allen writes: "Native American thought makes no […] dualistic division, nor does it draw a hard-and-fast line between what is material and what is spiritual, for the two are seen to be two expressions of the same reality" (1976, 148). In the Native American context, it is a viable and logical possibility that a shapeshifter commits the crimes. Alexie's goal with the solution of the story is to make social commentary, as it shows how circumstances paired with prejudice – based on the murderer's methods – make people jump to conclusions that offer a simple and convenient explanation instead of the multi-layered, intricate nature of the true cause of events. Native American stereotypes of owl feathers and scalping also impact people's judgement; they automatically assume that, based on the murderer's methods, it must be an Indigenous person responsible for committing these crimes.

The duality of the killer and investigator is present in Alexie's story, but since there is no sleuth solving the murders, the reflective traits are embodied in the murderer and the prime suspect of both the police and public opinion. Evidence against John is circumstantial at best, because the police have no physical proof that would link him directly to the activity of the Indian Killer, yet he becomes the main suspect due to similarities between him and the culprit. For example, both John and the killer identify blue eyes as an attribute of guilty white men whom they want to hurt. The parallels between John's and the murderer's descriptions of blue-eyed men are hardly distinguishable. In one scene, John walks through the University District of Seattle, attracting attention because he is Indigenous. "John the Indian was walking, and *his audience* was briefly interested because *Indians were briefly interesting*. White people no longer feared Indians. Somehow, in the twentieth century, *Indians had become invisible* and docile. John wanted to change that. He wanted to see fear in every pair of blue eyes" (1996, 30, emphasis added). Referring to people who look at him as an audience indicates that he sees himself as a performer because he feels they glance at him with the colonial gaze, then they ignore him. Native Americans' invisibility from the dominant society's perspective appears in a literal sense in the killer's ability to disappear, while figuratively, it is a social commentary about the neglect of Indigenous peoples in the US. Alexie emphasises depicting every class of society and calls attention to the problems that cause tensions between the top and the bottom of the social hierarchy. John's adoptive parents are the representatives of the richest people in Seattle, while the homeless characters are the most vulnerable in the city. John, the killer, and several minor characters are in an interim position, yet they align themselves with the disadvantaged groups of the society both morally and emotionally. This reflects that they are disenchanted with the ideals of the affluent social classes, and they relate more to the resilience of homeless people.

3 The Role of Social Commentary

Alexie includes some issues in his narrative – such as homelessness – to make social commentary on the struggles of Indigenous people and on how these problems are handled. The reader is presented with two completely different perspectives about homeless people who, in the novel, reside in Occidental Park, a real-life site in Seattle. From John's point of view, character development can be seen as his preconceptions about the most vulnerable people in society change. "[John] was relieved that many of the homeless Indians refused to surrender and drink themselves to death. He was saddened that so many Indians were homeless and had no simple reason to offer for their condition" (1996, 144). John has ambivalent feelings when he discovers that alcohol issues are often not the cause of the problem. On the one hand, he is glad that perseverance and resilience make homeless people strong enough to avoid self-destruction; on the other hand, he realises that the issue is rooted in a complex set of social problems that require a lot of time and effort to be solved. He knows that the main cause of the struggles Native Americans face can be traced back to settler colonialism, and the quote above expresses that Indigenous people "refused to surrender" to white colonisers.

A radically different view on homelessness is represented by Jack Wilson, a retired policeman and crime fiction writer. He describes the park as an unpleasant and filthy place, lacking in vegetation, which would have the potential to become a tourist attraction, but the Native American people who reside there make it less desirable, so their presence embodies the "Indian problem." Contrary to John's stance on the matter, in Wilson's chapter, the issue is the visibility of homelessness rather than the underlying causes of the situation. Wilson reminisces about his career as an officer and the routine set by the police to keep homeless people away from the location for a short period of time when tourists are expected to attend concerts at the park. "So every Thursday morning around ten, the Seattle Police Department quietly drove the homeless out of the park. Around one in the afternoon, the homeless would begin filtering back in. By five, the park would once again belong to the street people" (1996, 228). Wilson uses a metonymy to name those who carry out the removal – the federal Native American policies – and depersonalises homeless people with a collective term, "street people." The choice of words shows how he tries to distance himself from the problem, mentioning only that he recognises some faces, the children of those who lived in the park when he started his career. He realises that the issue of homelessness is hereditary, but quite naturally he lacks the compassion John has for residents of Occidental Park. Just like in his other works, Alexie didactically thematises the struggles Indigenous communities face – this time through Wilson's perspective –, which David Treuer explains as: "The person being

educated is not the main character. The reader is the one receiving instruction. These are not bildungsromans; they are culture manuals." (2006, 163) The procedure of the police chasing homeless people away from the park every day resembles the process of colonisation, when the Indigenous inhabitants of the land – in this case Occidental Park – were driven away by white armed forces. The way homeless people go back to the park to reclaim the space for themselves symbolises the fight for Indigenous rights. Native Americans living in the park, in an open field with vegetation surrounded by Seattle's urban environment with its skyscrapers, concrete buildings and asphalt roads mirrors how the Indigenous population was forced onto reservations. In his comprehensive work about Seattle's Native American history, Coll Thrush explicates on social commentary on homelessness in the city: "Even in *Indian Killer*, otherwise a powerful meditation on what it means to be both modern and Indian, cities are somehow places where Native people cannot belong except as half-fulfilled people or as ciphers for nature. Being a metaphor in Seattle, it would seem, is an Indian fact" (2017, 38). The feeling of alienation is expressed by several Indigenous characters, who give voice to varying levels of frustration in connection with embracing their Native American identity in the urban environment. John is the most troubled by the hardship of his identity construction, due to his lack of connection to indigeneity.

4 Oral Traditions, Identity Construction and Irony

The use of oral traditions in *Indian Killer* showcases one of the most common culture-specific elements of Indigenous literature. The structure of the novel reflects on creation stories, which is apparent from the first chapter titled "A creation story." In this section John imagines his birth in a remote reservation hospital. This segment includes grotesque details, signalling that the narrative employs postmodern metalepsis. John recounts events he could not possibly remember, constructing a story within a story on a metadiegetic level. The book also ends with a metaphorical scene in which the killer is singing and dancing in the cemetery, teaching hundreds of Indigenous people a traditional song. This ceremony, although not specified, resembles the Ghost Dance that aims to reunite Indigenous people, both the living and the dead (Vizenor 1992, 227). One of the characters, Reggie Polatkin, often recounts the massacres of Native Americans. He tells his friends about the Ghost Dance: "It was a dance that was supposed to destroy the white men and bring back the buffalo. Ghost Dancing was thought to be an act of warfare against white people" (1996, 185). Reggie misinterprets

the original purpose of the dance, because he thinks it urges violence. The real aim, however, was to ensure the cultural continuation of Indigenous peoples and the revitalisation of communities (Mohrbacher 1996, 75). The Ghost Dance is a pan-Indian tradition, not directly linked to any specific tribe. Thus, Alexie uses it to comment on the importance of a supra-tribal Indigenous identity. The killer uses the elements of oral tradition the most, for example, by singing an invisibility song, praying, and dancing. Even the abduction of Mark is described in the novel as a part of a ritual meant to initiate the revenge on white people who massacred Native Americans: "The killer knew that the kidnapping of Mark Jones was the true beginning, the first *song*, the first *dance* of a *powerful ceremony* that would change the world" (1996, 192, emphasis added). The quote reflects on the social change the murderer wants to initiate with his crimes.

Oral tradition, ceremonies, and songs are not the only sources that appear in *Indian Killer,* as John also frequently references the Bible. The elements of Christian scriptures were incorporated into Indigenous oral literature with minor changes, or in other cases, completely new narratives were created that contain elements of both sources but are not dominated by either (Ramsey 1994, 136). In the novel, the presence of both tribal cultures and Christianity creates a conflict in John's already unstable sense of identity. It is typical of Alexie's work that the tribal affiliation is not as important as the characters' personal identity (Gamber 2013, 198). Since the story is set in Seattle, most of the characters are Spokane, but not all, which serves as social commentary by emphasising the diversity of urban Indian communities. Although his white parents try to keep John close to his cultural environment by taking him to powwows and helping him to learn about different tribal customs and beliefs, that does not make up for the missing information about John's birthmother or his tribe. When John is still a baby, his adoptive mother, Olivia, decides to get him baptised by a Native American Jesuit, Father Duncan. The priest embodies the duality of representing Catholicism while embracing Indigenous values at the same time, and he teaches John about both worlds from a very young age. When John is six years old, Father Duncan takes him to the Chapel of the North American Martyrs in Seattle, where they gaze at the stained-glass windows depicting Indigenous people killing Jesuits. "John did not have the vocabulary to express what he was feeling. But he understood there was something odd about the contrast between slaughtered Jesuits, Father Duncan, and between the Indian Jesuits and the murderers" (Alexie 1996, 14). John realises that the priest can be connected to both the offenders and the victims, but he is an outsider and does not belong to either group, similarly to how John feels about his own place in society. John asks several questions to try to make sense of the discrepancy between the coexistence of indigeneity and Christianity:

> "Was Jesus an Indian?" asked John. Duncan studied the crucifix, then looked down at John.
> "He wasn't an Indian," said the Jesuit, "but he should have been."
> John seemed to have accepted that answer. (15)

The expression "should have been" in Father Duncan's answer suggests that aspects of Indigenous experiences, such as sacrifice, and a sense of spiritual connectedness, may have profoundly resonated with the teachings of Jesus. John seems to accept the discrepancy, suggesting that he acknowledges the unresolvable differences between Native American and Christian belief systems. Although the underlying meaning of Duncan's remark is not understood by John, the reader is aware of it.

Irony is a key feature in Indigenous literature because it enables the reassessment of currently existing representations of Native Americans (Gruber 2008, 56). Ironic utterances are present throughout *Indian Killer* – such as Duncan's remark that highlights the discrepancy between Christianity and indigeneity – and in most cases, they educate the reader rather than playing an important part in the characters' conversations, or in the story itself. As Gruber argues, "by acknowledging the irony [readers] laughingly recognize the author/ ironist as a kindred spirit whose assessment of who- or whatever is mocked […] they implicitly share – even if they come from a vastly different cultural background" (2008, 56). The ironic undertone of the text challenges the prejudiced representation of Indigenous people, while offering thought-provoking ideas regarding the long-standing relationship between Christianity and Native American tribes. Alexie does not only focus on the historical trauma of colonialism, but also, as Moore and Shanley contend, "through his commanding wit and ironic attitude, [Alexie] takes on the world for its hypocrisy and ignorance. He takes Native literature in new dimensions of self-reflection, as he affirms Native lives and Native personhood" (2016, 445) ironically, through the story of a serial killer. Alexie concentrates on the personal aspects of cultural identity and the everyday ironies of the lives of urban Indians to a greater extent than other Indigenous writers do, but the historical aspects of indigeneity are also represented from one minor character's, Reggie Polatkin's, point of view.

Irony, other than expressed in the characters' utterances, can also appear in the structure of the text (Gruber 2008, 55). Chapters from Reggie's perspective showcase structural irony, because they mirror the sections from another minor character's, Aaron Rogers's point of view, creating two plotlines that are the exact opposite of each other. When Reggie hears about the murders, he immediately suspects that the perpetrator is a white man who poses as an Indigenous person, based on the scalping and the owl feathers the Indian Killer leaves. He thinks that a "pretendian" is responsible for the murders, someone who falsely claims to be Indigenous, and misappropriates Native American traditions and symbols (Kolopenuk 2023, 469).

With two of his friends, Reggie goes out at night to attack white men at random partly because they want to take revenge for the ongoing murder spree, while they also want retaliation for the generational trauma caused by colonisers. After they capture a white man, they record the physical assault of their victim. Reggie's plotline is reversed in the sections from Aaron Rogers's perspective, who is the older brother of David Rogers, the second victim of the Indian Killer. Aaron is also accompanied by two of his friends to "hunt" for the Indigenous people he blames for his brother's death. Reggie and Aaron both have increasingly radical ideas, and they become more ruthless with each incident, that is why their accomplices abandon them. Ironically, the two men are equally wrong about their presuppositions; the murders were not committed by a pretendian, and David's death was a red herring all along, which had nothing to do with the Indian Killer. Reggie and Aaron stand for two starkly opposing views, yet their methods for retaliation, their brutality, and the consequences of their actions are the same, although they are most likely not prosecuted for their crimes – the cliffhanger ending does not contain any detail that would suggest that Reggie or Aaron are held responsible for the assaults. Ultimately, instead of getting revenge, they only perpetuate the problem they claim to fight against, which results in even more violence inflicted upon innocent people and creates further racial tension.

Sarcastic remarks might leave an odd impression in a narrative about a killing spree, but dark humour is an integral part of Alexie's style and Native American literature in general, regardless of the subject matter, and *Indian Killer* is no exception to this rule. Humour is a way to escape, a coping mechanism in the face of struggle Indigenous communities have, whether it is personally experienced, or part of generational trauma caused by colonisation. When John sees a group of men from different tribes and backgrounds at a powwow he attends, he feels jealous over their laughter. "John wanted to own that laughter, never realizing that their laughter was a ceremony used to drive away personal and collective demons" (Alexie 1996, 21). John's lack of genuine connection to his Indigenous roots hurts him so much that he would not even consider the negative consequences that are inseparably and inherently part of Indigenous existence. He suffers from personal trauma due to his placement within a white family as an infant, therefore feeling like an outsider who does not fully belong in either Native American or white society. The source of his mental distress, the circumstances of his upbringing, although they weigh heavily on his character, are depicted in ironic and grotesque ways throughout the novel, starting with his name, John Smith. When his father, Daniel, is looking for him asking around about his son's possible whereabouts, he asks a Native American homeless man if he knows John by any chance:

"Listen, could I ask you something? I'm looking for my son. […] Talks to himself."
"Hey, partner, most everybody down here talks to himself. How'd you get an Indian son anyways? Marry you some dark meat, enit?"
"No, no. He's adopted."
"What's his name?" asked the Indian.
"John. John Smith."
"You adopted an Indian kid and named him John Smith? No wonder he talks to himself." (218)

Although not as obvious as the irony behind John Smith's name, two minor characters, Jack Wilson and Clarence Mather, also have names that carry underlying meaning. Firstly, Jack Wilson was the other name of the Paiute religious leader, who prophesised about the Ghost Dance ritual (Moses 1985, 336). Secondly, the fictional Jack Wilson is an author of crime stories, who claims to have Indigenous background, although is unable to prove it. Wilson's popular book series features a Native American detective figure – called Aristotle Little Hawk – which may also allude to Tony Hillerman, a white author who writes crime stories featuring Navajo characters (Gamber 2013, 196). Clarence Mathers is a professor at the University of Seattle. He is white, but was raised by the Lakota, and because of that he thinks he is entitled to claim Native American culture and traditions just like Indigenous people. It is revealed in chapters from his perspective that he exploits Native Americans for his own advantage. He teaches a literature course that only includes books that are not authentic, because they were written or co-written by white people, for example *The Education of Little Tree*, *Black Elk Speaks*, or *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*. He is named after a Puritan minister, Cotton Mather, who disapproved of the abuse of Native Americans in his works, but he believed that the only way to "civilize" the Indigenous population is to make them follow the English lifestyle, while abandoning their Native American language, culture, and beliefs (Smolinski and Minkema 2022, 266). Wilson and Mather, who have no real ties to any Native American culture and who claim to be Indigenous for their own personal gain, are both instances of cultural misappropriation. Ironically, they are the only characters that benefit from – false – Indigenous identity. The underlying meaning behind the names of Jack Wilson and Mathers requires comprehensive knowledge about Native American history that most readers do not necessarily have, but if they do realise the connections, it adds yet another layer to the interpretation of the story. "Decontextualizing historical specifics of characteristics of historical persons from their original background and recontextualizing them in contemporary Native texts […] triggers recognition while simultaneously effecting defamiliarization and reimagining" (Gruber 2008, 91). The additional meaning of the character names serves to rewrite the traditional representation of historical figures and events. The reader does not have to know

about and decode these important details to understand the story, but they do make the social commentary much more obvious and powerful.

Alexie's dark humour is also used when the last and most gruesome murder is described, where the method of the murderer slightly changes. The news of the killing is announced live on air in a popular radio show, in which the host elaborates on how the crime was committed, emphasising that this time the Indian Killer – after stabbing and scalping a businessman named Edward Letterman – proceeded to devour the victim's heart "like a fucking sandwich" (Alexie 1996, 336). The host's grotesque remark at the end of the announcement leaves the reader with ambivalent feelings because the simile is amusing due to its absurdity but also seems highly inappropriate. Following the murder of Edward Letterman, the police try to connect their prime suspect, John, to the killings so that they can close the case as soon as possible. When the police interview Marie Polatkin, John's love interest, about his possible guilt, she clearly states her opinion about John and the murderer: "I know John Smith didn't kill anyone 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" (418). Marie's sarcastic remark that Native Americans are usually the victims of violence, with white men as the perpetrators, serves as social commentary on the impacts of settler colonialism. She finds the police's suspicion of John absurd, since historical precedent would suggest that a white person is much more likely to be involved in violent crimes. This also highlights that Native Americans endured systematic oppression for centuries without retaliation. Marie is the only character who believes in John's innocence, and she suspects that the real killer might not even be Native American. Her belief does not only expose the deep-rooted prejudice against American Indians but also reframes the investigation as an instance of colonial power dynamics, where Indigenous people are cast as criminals to conveniently close the case. In the end, Marie's perspective underscores a larger truth: the real violence lies not just in the murder, but in the centuries of systemic oppression and misrepresentation.

5 Conclusion

Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* is a powerful representation of how traditional crime fiction tropes can be subverted by the incorporation of the characteristics of Indigenous literature. The absence of a detective figure and an authoritative narrative voice makes the readers take on the role of investigator, but rather than offering a resolution, the novel leaves questions unanswered; thus, Alexie follows the conventions of metaphysical

detective fiction. The combination of culture-specific elements – such as the oral tradition and Native American cosmology – with literary devices frequently used in postmodern texts, like fragmentation and metafiction, also challenges the reader to reconsider his/ her presumptions that underlie Western narratives.

The highly fragmented storylines draw attention to the complexities of identity construction and social issues; hence, the narrative moves beyond the depiction of the murder case itself by thematising the long-term effects of colonisation as well as portraying the problems of contemporary Indigenous communities. It also mirrors the diversity of Indigenous communities, because numerous characters' point of view appears in the novel. Alexie emphasises the contrast between empathy and insensitiveness about the topic of homelessness through the perspective of John Smith and Jack Wilson. The multi-layered meanings and several possible interpretations enrich the text, while it also teaches readers about Native American cultures and the effects of settler colonialism on Indigenous communities. Individual stories are interconnected and cannot be understood in isolation; thus, the book's structure resembles the episodic construction of traditional Native American stories. Intertextual references are created by evoking both the literary predecessors of *Indian Killer* and the *Bible*.

The characters in the book are used to showcase cultural (mis)representation. While John is completely isolated and has no authentic connection to his indigeneity, Jack Wilson and Clarence Mathers symbolise the exploitation of Native American identity for financial gain. John's only role model is Father Duncan, who is also torn by the discrepancies between his Indigenous cultural roots and his connection to Christianity as a Jesuit priest. Irony strengthens the contrast between the contradictions and meanwhile it aids the re-evaluation of the traditional representation of Native Americans.

Indian Killer fits into the framework of metaphysical crime fiction, especially with the shapeshifter character as the perpetrator. It sets out to not only reflect on, but also to initiate change in the representation of Indigenous people. With its unique blend of elements from both crime fiction and Native American traditions, it is an outstanding example of Indigenous innovation in contemporary literature.

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