Innocent Vs. Guilty: The Effects of Trauma in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*

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Abstract

In the 1990s, literary scholars began to approach literature using the framework of trauma theory. This lens illuminates the effects of extreme violence in literature and allows critics to explore how these effects unfold for victims in the years after the traumatic events themselves. In this article, the researcher discusses Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* which diverges from the conventional responses to trauma found in the works of trauma literature by portraying a victim who becomes the perpetrator of trauma or violence himself. The use of violence in *Indian Killer* underlines the importance of the message that violence only for violence's sake will never change the world for the better. Moreover, the justification of brute forces highlights the suppressed anger of Native Americans against their past and the importance of the hybridization of the natives and the whites. The main theme of *Indian Killer* seems to be expressing rage through violent acts. In general, violence is depicted as inevitable for both cultures to pursue their beliefs and as an expression of their feelings. It comes from racist thinking not only from the whites against the Indians but also inverse racism from the Indians against the whites. This paper aims to look into the use of violence in this novel from different perspectives of the whites, the Indians, and the killer and to analyse the different dimensions of violent acts.

Keywords: trauma, innocent, guilty, violence, victim

Early trauma theory posits an event-based theory of trauma, in which trauma stems from the traumatic "event [that] is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth 4). Cathy Caruth initiated the contemporary field of trauma studies in literature and argues for this notion of trauma stemming from the "structure of the experience" of an event that comes back to haunt the victim. Thus, her theories are based on punctual trauma, which is trauma that stems from a singular event. Theorists like Laura Brown and Maria Root have challenged this limited definition of trauma, and have developed the concept of "insidious trauma" (Brown 107). This theory is a feminist model that stems from the need to describe the trauma of women who suffer from "abusive situations that, while part of their everyday life, were nevertheless traumatic" (Gibbs 16). However, as Alan Gibbs

suggests, Brown's theory "overlooks the colonial experience as a key marker of insidious trauma" (Gibbs 17). To bridge this gap between the insidious model of trauma and (post)colonialism, Stef Craps, and Gert Buelens explain in a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* that "the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities has yet to be fully accounted for" (4). The presentation of the insidious model of trauma to (post)colonialism is crucial, as it describes trauma that transcends, but also includes, singular events. For example, the trauma of slavery is both insidious and punctual: there are everyday encounters with oppression, abuse, and dehumanization, as well as singular events that are especially traumatic and return to haunt the victim. Attention to the haunting return of trauma has also led to the controversial theory that an entire culture or race could be affected by the trauma of past

generations, even years after the events themselves. This concept of transgenerational transmission has been described using the theories of collective and cultural memory and trauma.

Against the backdrop of these theories of trauma, the researcherconsidersa contemporary American novelthat depicts the experiences of trauma in provocative ways. The novel discussed, Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* (1996), mainly encapsulates the idea of trans/ historical trauma. In Alexie's novel, the characters experience trauma as a collective whole from their culture's past and continue to be subjected to traumatic racism in the present. The novel is about a Native American man named John Smith who was taken away from his mother as a child and placed into a white family. Never feeling authentically Indian, nor fitting in with the white community that continues to be racist against people of colour, he experiences feelings of rage and desires to kill white people. An anonymous killer, whom the characters in the story called the "Indian Killer," emerges and murders several random white victims, but the novel never reveals whether the Indian Killer was John or someone else. The novel demonstrates the effects of trans/historical trauma. This trans/historical trauma is especially evident in *Indian Killer*, as there is a wider gap between the original collective trauma of Native people and their present-day traumatic experiences in the setting of the novel (which takes place in the late 1960s). This aspect of the trans/historical trauma in the novelalong with the insidious, collective, and intergenerational trauma that is also presentprovides a more complete background of what the victims have suffered and suggests what may have led them to become perpetrators of violence.

Indian Killer, which takes place in America in the late 1960s, tells the story of an Indian man named John Smith who was taken from his mother at birth and placed into a white family. As his life goes on, he suffers from feelings of inauthenticity that lead to psychological deterioration, rage, and a desire to commit violence. Meanwhile, in a parallel narrative, an anonymous serial murderer, the "Indian Killer," emerges and begins to kill white people. The context of *Indian Killer* is the "Sixties Scoop" that took place in Canada between the 1950s and 1980s and briefly in America. The 'Sixties Scoop' was the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities, and their subsequent placement into white families.As a result, many Native children suffered from different kinds of trauma and issues with identity, due to the government's aim to assimilate them.

Although it is no secret that Indians face ongoing racism and prejudice that can traumatize them, the novel presents these experiences and their effects in an unconventional way. The novel seems to fall under the genre of murder mystery, yet subverts the conventions of this genre by failing to reveal the identity of the Indian Killer, who is repeatedly referred to with the pronoun "it." In addition, a third-person omniscient narrator seamlessly switches between the focalizations of several different characters. Certain focalizes, however, are unreliable and presented as such. What makes the novel an unconventional one in the realm of trauma literature is that it grapples with the idea of victims of trauma seeking revenge and perpetrating acts of murder or violence. In this paper, the researcher focuses on the following questions: What is the function of the unconventional narrative strategies that are used to address issues of ongoing racism and trauma towards Native peoples? What, according to the text, are the implications of ongoing racism for how one evaluates victims who have become perpetrators of violence? The novel sets up necessary reflections on these issues. Theresearcherargues that by leaving the question of culpability open-ended, the text pushes the readers to consider who the real, less obvious "perpetrators" are and how ordinary people can be part of the problem without even realizing it.

The narrator of the novel is a third-person omniscient narrator who focalizes through various, sometimes unreliable, characters. This makes it difficult to navigate what is reality and what is imagined, but the novel provides hints that indicate which it might be. In the first chapter titled "Mythology," the omniscient narrator focalizes John Smith, the protagonist, to relate the story of his birth, his immediate removal from his mother and

community, and his placement into a white family. John would have had no way of remembering the events of that day since he was a newborn, and he has had no connection to his birth mother, likely the only person who would have shared her sentiments about that day. This raises the question of how to understand this section and its function as an unreliable account. Nancy van Styvendale argues that this chapter is an example of the dislocation of trans/historical trauma (216). Because of the chapter's label as "Mythology" and its presentation as John's fantasy rather than the objective truth, and because it is related through a third-person narrator focalizing through John rather than John himself as a first-person narrator, the chapter highlights the dislocation of John from his mother and his roots. Van Styvendale further argues that by imagining his birth, John "returns to the trauma" of his forced removal, and reconstructs it as a "kidnapping" rather than accepting it as an adoption. While van Styvendale goes on to argue that the purpose of this chapter and its narrative strategies is to show the simultaneous "historical particularity" and "universality" of this trauma, and to prove that trauma is not grounded in a single "event" but is rather trans/ historical, theresearcher offers a different argument. Theresearcher argues that by framing the trauma as a kidnapping rather than adoption, the narrative reconstructs the complicity and the culpability of a range of perpetrators involved, including the government that has imposed such displacement, the doctors and nurses who participated, the transporters who took the baby to the new family, and the white parents who adopted the baby, since the book makes many references to the fact that the people involved in carrying out such displacements are white people.

Another possible interpretation of this "Mythology" chapter is that it makes this story of the forced removal a communal one rather than one that is unique to John's experience. The indefinite vagueness of the descriptions, including the following opening lines, reveals that this particular story could have happened in any number of Indian Health Service hospitals on any reservation: "An Indian Health Service hospital in the late sixties. On this reservation or that reservation. Any reservation, a particular reservation" (3). Furthermore, the text states, "John's mother is Navajo or Lakota. She is Apache or Seminole. She is Yakama or Spokane" (4), which emphasizes that this story is not only the specific experience of John and his mother, but could be the experience of many other Native peoples from many different tribes. Therefore, although the chapter is labelled "Mythology," which indicates that it lacks complete objectivity and truthfulness, the indeterminateness of the language also portrays it as a widespread, communal experience that many Native people face.

The function of John's perspective in this chapter is to reject the dominant narrative that white people were trying to "help" Indians by assimilating them into white families and portraying them as kidnappers and criminals instead. The text states that as soon as John comes out of the womb, "the doctor cuts the umbilical cord quickly" (5). This is a literal representation of the ties between John and his mother being cut. Their relationship is being severed in a way that is natural for every birth, but it becomes unnatural when John is rushed out of the room despite his mother's pleas to keep him: "*I want my baby. Give me my baby. I want to see my baby. Let me hold my baby*," she cries (5). This repetition of "my baby" emphasizes the fact that it is *her* baby, yet they still take him away from her without any regard for what she wants. John—who is not named by his mother but by his white adoptive family—is rapidly taken out of the room where a man in a "white jumpsuit" and features that "are hidden inside his white helmet" rushes him into a helicopter and takes him to the white family who adopts him (6). Both the white helmet and the white jumpsuit, along with the hidden features, implying that this person may not be one specific person, but a representation of a larger cohort of white people involved in forcibly removing Indians from their homes and placing them into white families. As Nancy van Styvendale delineates in her article, the novel takes place before the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act, which recognized the "theft, removal, and relocation of Indian children" as a "neocolonial assault" (van Styvendale 210). Therefore, the person in the white helmet and white jumpsuit is the collective embodiment of

the people responsible for the "neocolonial assault[s]" against Indian children. In addition, the birth scene has many indications of a crime scene, as the nurse "washes away the blood, the remains of the placenta, the evidence" (5). Therefore, the language of the text helps frame the white people involved as the perpetrators of the trans/ historical trauma that John feels from the moment he is taken away from his mother and throughout the rest of his life.

Before discussing the various additional kinds of perpetrators that exist within the text, it is crucial to first discuss the concept of rage in the context of Native literature. Arnold Krupat discusses rage within the context of *Indian Killer* itself. He suggests that by incorporating this aspect of rage within many of the characters and demonstrating murderous revenge, Alexie means to produce a "shiver" among white readers who may relate to the white characters in the novel (120). Nancy van Styvendale theorizes rage in *Indian Killer* in addition to *Slash* (1985) by Jeannette Armstrong and argues that rage both results from trauma and is a method of resisting trauma for Native people (208-209). In *Indian Killer*, John, Marie Polatkin, and Reggie Polatkin all exhibit symptoms of rage. There are several factors that the text presents as the precursors to John's rage: the trauma he has experienced from being forcibly removed from his mother and the assimilation process of placing him in a primarily white community have led him to experience feelings of inauthenticity as an Indian, which has engendered schizophrenic tendencies and rage. John suffers from intense paranoia, delusions, and hallucinations, which are commonly associated with schizophrenia ("Schizophrenia"). This, in turn, affects his reliability as a focalizer when he begins to picture things that could not be true.These schizophrenic tendencies that manifest themselves in John's character throughout the novel represent his feelings of not belonging to either community and not having a real sense of identity.The text, therefore, suggests that the trauma he has faced may have engendered paranoia, and the lack of a sense of identity is represented by the multiple voices in his head.

The text also suggests that the trauma in his past and the ongoing racism he faces engender rage and the desire to commit violence. At the beginning of the novel when the book relates John's experiences in high school, it describes how John would often have to leave class to go into a bathroom stall and "fight against his anger":
He'd bite his tongue, his lips until sometimes they would bleed. He would hold himself tightly and feel his arms, legs, and lower back shake with the effort. His eyes would be shut. He'd grind his teeth...His struggles with his anger increased in intensity and frequency until he was visiting the bathroom daily during his senior year (19).
This excerpt shows how his rage is all-consuming, affecting not only his mind but every part of his body. This rage that he suffered from in high school continues to progress as he gets older and even turns into the desire to commit violence. The first indication comes when he is working as a construction worker on the skyscraper and has the urge to throw the foreman off the edge of the building (24-25). The foreman provokes rage inside John; he "brought the heat and music" in John's head (24). Because of this, John wants to see "fear in blue eyes," and imagines himself letting the foreman fall. After this image, the text states, "John needed to kill a white man" (25). His rage engendered a desire to kill, and he is consumed by this desire throughout the rest of the novel. The text presents his main goal as figuring out "which white man was responsible for everything that had gone wrong" (27). He wonders, "Which white man had done the most harm to the world?" (27). He did not want Indians to be the victims anymore, "he wanted to change that" (30).

The text presents similar feelings of rage in other Indian characters, namely Marie Polatkin and Reggie Polatkin. Marie, an Indian student and activist whom John meets and befriends, takes a class on Native American literature at her university only to have a professor who teaches the work of white authors who claim to be Indian, or books by Indians that were co-written by white writers (one of which was disavowed by the Indian it was about, yet continuously taught in Native literature classes). The professor, Dr. Clarence Mather, argues that he teaches their work so he can create a positive

view of Indians. Among the works that Mather teaches is a book by Jack Wilson, a fictional author who plays a significant role in the novel. Wilson claims he is Indian because of a possible distant Indian relative, but provides no proof that the relationship is real. Marie, who rejects the idea that he is Indian, avows that Wilson writes books that are "killing Indian books" and provides a long list of Indian authors Mather could have, but failed, to choose from (67-68). When Mather states that he wants people to "recognize the validity of a Native American literature that is shaped by both Indian and white hands," the implication is that without white intervention, the work of Indians is not valid (60-61). This is supported by his refusal to include the work of an actual Indian author, even though there are many. Mather closes the door in Marie's face when she tries to confront him about these issues, and she feels a sudden, violent urge to "smash the glass, break down the door...tear apart the world" (85). She believes that Mather would never have done that to a male student or a white student. At that moment, "[s]he wanted every white man to disappear. She wanted to burn them all down to ash and feast on their smoke" (85). The text, therefore, suggests that Mather was the catalyst of the rage inside her, directed towards hundreds of years of white people trying to intervene in Indian work and culture, in the attempt to take it away from them or make it their own.

Similarly, Marie is filled with anger at the fact that Jack Wilson and other white people can claim to be Indian whenever they want, but "she could not be white if she wanted to be white" (232). When she was younger, she had rubbed her face with sandpaper to get rid of her colour; therefore, it angered her that she could not be white when it would have been convenient for her (for example, at job interviews), but a white man could pretend to be Indian to be a successful writer.This shows how, as a child, she had internalized the view that darker skin was inferior to whiter skin, a sentiment that turned into anger later in her life. With Mather, "[s]he'd found an emotional outlet in the opportunity to harass a white professor who thought he knew what it meant to be Indian" (61), so she could direct her built-up rage towards him.

Reggie Polatkin, Marie's cousin, also exhibits rage that turns into the desire for violence. Reggie was born to an Indian mother and a white father. His father had abused him for years intending to make him a "good" Indian rather than a "dirty Indian" (94). As a result, "[o]ver 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" (94). He had internalized the racist beliefs of his father, and thus avoided anything related to his Indian culture for a long time. This trauma of being abused for years turns into anger and rage later in his life. Once, a white woman he was dating told him she hated Indians, and then Reggie violently had sex with her and tried to get her pregnant with the hope that she would have a brown baby: "He'd wanted to dilute his Indian blood. He'd wanted some kind of revenge. He'd wanted someplace to spill his pain" (183). The repetition of "he'd wanted" shows his frustration and desire for revenge. The passage demonstrates his complicated emotions towards being Indian, as he believes it would be some kind of punishment to impregnate a white woman with a brown baby. His violent sexual power dynamic that his white father had constructed by repeatedly abusing Reggie and forcing onto him the idea that Indians are inferior. John Smith's outlet for his rage is directed towards finding a white man to kill, Marie's outlet is Professor Mather, and Reggie's outlet is whichever white woman he is dating and attempting to impregnate. Their past and ongoing trauma engender rage and the desire to commit violence, and they each find an outlet for it that never truly satisfies that desire.

Because this rage and desire to commit violence as a response to trauma may appear to "muddy the victim status of the person who has been traumatized by complicating the division between victim and aggressor," van Styvendale argues that rage must be considered as more than just uncontrollable or violent anger (208). When it is theorized as something that stems from trauma, it validates the fact that someone or something is responsible for causing that trauma. Even in Reggie's case in which his sexual assault against his girlfriend is inexcusable, or other cases in which actions go

beyond mere desires for violence, this theorization of rage will prevent a one-sided, stereotypical view of Indians as "savages" who must be controlled because it will emphasize the implication of white people in inflicting the trauma that got them to that point. After all, victims do not have to be completely innocent to remain victims of trauma. The text does not mean to imply that Reggie is guilt-free just because he is a victim, but instead shows the drastic effects that the trauma had on him that led him to perpetrate inexcusable assault.

The Indian Killer character is fueled by similar rage and a desire for violence against white people. An Indian Killer is an anonymous person (or entity) who is responsible for the murders of various white victims in the city. In each chapter presented through the killer's focalization, the text-only refers to the character as "the killer" or "it" rather than with a male or female pronoun. There are two possible interpretations for this unconventional narrative choice. The first is that the Indian Killer is, in a way, an embodiment that represents parts of each main Indian character: John, Marie, and Reggie. Nancy van Styvendale claims that the killer provides a form to the rage that the Indian characters feel, while also giving a shape to the collective trauma that is larger than the individual. Thus, the text presents this figure as a "collective victim" that becomes a perpetrator in response to years of pent-up anger for the injustices that Native people face. The second possible interpretation is that by referring to the killer as "it" rather than as a person, the text detaches the killer's agency from any actual person. The killer figure thus becomes an outlet for expressing anger towards white people without having to place the blame for these actions on any Indian character. The ambiguity of the term "Indian Killer" also supports this interpretation, as it could mean one who kills Indians or an Indian who is a killer. By choosing this ambiguous term as the title of the book, Alexie initially draws attention to the killers of Indians, which forces people to consider this aspect before realizing that it is most likely an Indian who is killing people. The name of the killer thus prevents a one-sided view of Indians killing people and sets readers up to see the other side of it as well. In this way, the text presents the Indian Killer as a collective victim-turned-perpetrator that is made up of parts of each character, but simultaneously as no specific person at all, making it an unconventional figure. How does the text address the question of the culpability of such a figure?

The novel presents not only the violence carried out by the Indian Killer but also those perpetrated by white characters against Indians. Aaron Rodgers is one of these people. Aaron is a violent white man who attempts to shoot Indians who trespass on his property, and feels "giddiness" when he sees that Indians are approaching his land, meaning that he can shoot them. He wonders "if this was how the great Indian-fighters, like Custer, Sheridan, and Wright, had felt just before battle" (63). Custer, Sheridan, and Wright were military officers who fought against and killed Native people in the Indian Wars, and Sheridan is the man who many lexicographers credit with the saying, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (Mieder 42). Later, when his brother goes missing at a casino and he believes the Indian Killer is responsible, he attacks innocent homeless Indians in retaliation.

Another character named Truck Schultz, a white radio host, and outright bigot, has long racist rants after the Indian Killer starts murdering white people in the city. He also paraphrases the "great" Philip Sheridan and says, "The only good Indian Killer is a dead Indian Killer" (209). Although he does not commit violence, his hate speech has a similar effect. He discusses his belief that white people are the victims even after the "great" things they have done like "tam[ing] the wilderness" (207). What he is referring to is the genocide of Native peoples, when America attempted to "tame" them by murdering them and then tried to assimilate whoever was left. He calls the Indian Killer an Indian "savage," which perpetuates a common racist stereotype and overlooks the fact that white people acted as the real "savages" in the wars against Indians. In addition, Truck Schultz refers to his listeners as "citizens," and repeats this term many times throughout his rants. By doing so, he is implying that only white people—his listeners—are the "citizens" he considers important. In a way, he is attempting to unite them against the Indians by

igniting the patriotism and prejudice in his listeners.

In addition to these two obvious perpetrators of violence or bigotry, the text also presents more common, "ordinary" perpetrators of ongoing racism, cultural appropriation, or stereotyping. The character Jack Wilson—the novelist and fraud who claims to be Indian—often appropriates and perpetuates stereotypes about Indian people, which is a more discreet form of modern racism in comparison to Truck Schultz's explicit racism. Wilson began to write novels about Indians and loved the fame and attention he received from it (162). He profits from the appropriation of their culture and from perpetuating common stereotypes. He would often go to Big Heart, a bar predominantly visited by Indians, and pick up "bits of stray information for his novels" (180). He thinks about naming his next novel "Savage Revenge," which once again uses the racist stereotype that Indians are savages. At one of his book readings, a protester holds up a sign that says, "Only Indians Should Tell Indian Stories," which shows how Indians are tired of having white people appropriate and exploit their voices and culture for their benefit (263). John becomes aware of what Jack Wilson does after Marie, who despises Jack Wilson, shares these sentiments with John. John's anger towards Jack Wilson stems from his feelings of inauthenticity and of being "less than real," and the fact that Jack can feel like a real Indian (even though he is not) when John cannot do the same.

Indian Killer, which falls under the genre of murder mystery, is framed like most murder mysteries in that it depicts a killer with an unknown identity. Readers who are familiar with this genre expect a resolution at the end, an answer that finally reveals who the killer is. Alexie, however, employs the conventions of this genre and then subverts them by choosing to not reveal the identity of the Indian Killer. Although there are hints in the text that lead readers to develop their theories, the story ultimately lacks the big reveal that would have identified who the *Indian Killer* was. Instead, the big reveal at the end involves John's unveiling of the white man whom he sees as ultimately responsible for Natives' suffering. From early on in the novel, John had been consumed with the

idea of determining who would fit that description, and in the end, decides it is Jack Wilson. Yet, it is futile to hold one man responsible for all of the past and current trauma of Indians. What is the novel suggesting by giving so much significance to the figure of Wilson? By revealing Wilson as the white man responsible, the novel challenges readers to consider the issue of perpetration more broadly. Instead of focusing on the perpetrators of violence, the text highlights the "ordinary" perpetrators who are more widespread and are often not considered "perpetrators" at all. These people could fall under Michael Rothberg's theory of "implicated subjects" which is discussed in the introduction, in which people who are not technically perpetrators of violence still participate in racism and oppression in a more indirect way ("Trauma Theory"). In this way, perpetrators of ongoing racism, cultural appropriation, and stereotyping are revealed as just as harmful as perpetrators of violence. By subverting the genre of the murder mystery, the text not only leaves out the identity of the perpetrator but also reveals that the definition of "perpetrators" extends farther than those who commit violence and includes various kinds of implicated subjects.

After examining whether *Indian Killer* can shed light on new ways of thinking about trauma, perpetrators, and responsibility for acts of violence, it is analysed whether *Indian Killer* represents the effects of trans/historical trauma in different ways. In *Indian Killer*, however, the trans/historical trauma can be seen through more subtle attacks like "casual racism," which consists of perpetuating harmful stereotypes or ignorantly appropriating a culture's customs as Jack Wilson and other characters do. The victim turned perpetrator in *Indian Killer* is more abstract: an unnamed, genderless killer that represents the collective embodiment of Native victims of trauma, or because of its lack of identification or gender an outlet for anger that prevents the placement of blame for the murders on any individual Indian. In addition to this abstract figure, however, various characters exhibit strong desires to commit violence against white people. The acts of perpetration in *Indian Killer* are vengeful products of built-up anger towards random white victims. What Alexie

suggests by emphasizing this randomness is that responsibility for trauma is systematic and not simply the product of a small number of people. Though the motivations behind the murders in this novel ultimately move the focus away from whether or not the victim-turned-perpetrator should be held responsible for his actions. The novel constructs the point that being a victim does not imply perfection of innocence, and therefore readers do not have to determine the degree of responsibility of the victim-turned-perpetrator. Although he is undoubtedly a victim of trauma, he still took the lives of others, which makes him not completely innocent. Therefore, the novel demonstrates that trauma complicates the dichotomy of "innocent vs. guilty."

The notion of responsibility as an implication also challenges the innocence/guilt binary. The novel indicates that responsibility extends farther than the perpetrators directly involved in the crime and that it includes those involved in the perpetuation of trauma in more indirect ways. It shows that trauma does not end after the original historical moments of the trauma, but rather lives on and is reproduced by implicated subjects in the form of racial injustices and the perpetuation of stereotypes. By highlighting the various kinds of "ordinary" people who are implicated without even realizing it, the novel challenges the readers to consider if they are ever implicated in similar ways.

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