

Tracing *Différance*:

Effects of Reading Ambiguity, Ambivalence and Dissemination

in Sherman Alexie's

Indian Killer, Reservation Blues and Flight

By Cristina-Mariana Nuțu

A thesis presented to

The Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages

University of Oslo

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the

MA Degree

Spring Term 2010

Supervisor: Rebecca L. Scherr

Abstract

This thesis sets out to interpret Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, *Reservation Blues* and *Flight* in the context of the theory of deconstruction and post-colonial theory. I use the theory of Jacques Derrida and Homi K. Bhabha. From Derrida I have chosen the concept of *différance*, as a way of portraying the effects of reading produced through traces and textual constructions of ambiguity, ambivalence and dissemination. The latter have a major impact on the interpretation of the novels and on how Native American identities are read. From Homi K. Bhabha, I have chosen the concept of "hybridization" and "Third Space" as tropes that help me identify the ways in which Sherman Alexie deconstructs the representation of Native American identities in narrative.

In my attempt to define Alexie's deconstructive project, I first trace out the ways in which he differentiates himself from other Native American authors. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay has included Sherman Alexie as participating in defining some of the new directions in the Native American novel (Georgi-Findlay, 92). The way he complicates and reinvents Indianness is one of the ways I use to show that representations of the Native American are no longer simplistic and more importantly, no longer static.

A second aim for this thesis is to consider the implications of some of the representations the novels trace out. Will these enable the subject in formation as represented through the theme of emerging hybridity as survival? Is survival a result of having transformed discursive impediments into possibilities, through reading moments of textual anxiety and ambivalence? If everything is a text, will deconstructing the norms of Indianness allow for the hybridization and deferral of identity Alexie debates *through* his characters?

'And death shall have no dominion.'

Dylan Thomas

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Associate Professor Rebecca L. Scherr, for her thorough feedback and inspiring teaching.

A BIG ‘thank you’ goes to my sisters: Ela, for starting me off at ten, with Dumas and Dickens; for never asking me to read Communist propaganda. To Anni, for bringing out the ‘playfulness’ in me. I remember ‘The River’. Nichita Stănescu and Lucian Blaga stayed with me. Georgia, for her probing questions that made me research and defend my choice of studies and for teaching me my first sentences in English in fifth grade. I will never forget that feeling of newness. I am grateful for their constant love.

Thanks to my future husband Tommy, for all the delicious dinners, all the cups of tea and for gently reminding me why I thought this project would be fun *every* time I ran into a debacle. I dedicate this paper to them.

This thesis is also dedicated in loving memory of my grandmother Zamfira Dumitrașcu and of my father, Gheorghe Nuțu.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	6
 CHAPTER 1: INDIAN KILLER	
Tracing <i>Différance</i>: Effects of Reading Ambiguity and Emergence of Newness.....	17
<i>Différance</i>	18
<i>The Shadow of the Presence</i>	35
 CHAPTER 2: RESERVATION BLUES	
Effects of Reading Ambivalence.....	41
<i>Coyote Springs</i>	42
<i>Of Stereotype and Mimicry</i>	48
<i>A Reading of the Ending</i>	59
 CHAPTER 3: FLIGHT	
Disseminating the Native American ‘I’.....	65
<i>The Constructive Journey</i>	67
 CONCLUSION.....	87
 WORKS CITED LIST.....	91

INTRODUCTION

The linguistic process of individual subject positioning is at the centre of this thesis. I examine the implications of individual identity formation within the subject of Native American literature and consider the ways in which Sherman Alexie differentiates himself from authors and main directions within the same discourse. In poststructuralist theory, the semiotics of literature engenders both subject positions and subjective truths. I explore the ways in which Alexie complicates the issue of individual identity formation versus the collective, essentialist constructions of Native American identity and interrogate the resulting constructions. Are these subject positions a result of deconstructing the structure of cultural positioning altogether? Will they amount to subjects of enunciation (Bhabha, 53)? That the contexts that influence identities are various and in constant re-definition suggests a change in the discourse of the Native American and acknowledges influences that are often excluded by essentialist, nationalist, traditional outlooks on Native American literary identity formation: the diasporic, urbanized, broken and less than perfect constructions of transient, troubled Native Americans (Dix, 348). I investigate the effects of reading Native American identities located in *Indian Killer*, *Reservation Blues* and *Flight*, focusing all along on the process of signification through *différance*, ambiguity, ambivalence and dissemination.

THE AUTHOR AND THE NOVELS

Born in Spokane, Washington, on October 7, 1966, Sherman Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Native American. He is a powerful writer who has revolutionised Native American literature and received increasing critical attention in the last few years. The *New York Times Book Review* views his writing as “so wide ranging, dexterous, and consistently capable of raising your neck hair that it enters at once into your ideas of who we are and how we might be, makes us speak and hear his words over and over, call others into the room or over the phone to repeat them” (Bellante, 3). Although he started off as a poet (*The Business of Fancydancing*, Hanging Loose Press, 1992), he published his first novel *Reservation Blues* in 1995, for which he received the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award in 1996. That same year, *Granta* magazine selected him as one of twenty “Best

Young American Novelists”. His second novel, *Indian Killer*, was published in September 1996, by Atlantic Monthly Press. He is well known for his short fiction publications, for example *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (Grove Atlantic, 1993), *The Toughest Indian in the World* (NY, Grove Press, 2000) and *Ten Little Indians* (NY, Grove Press, 2003). His third novel, *Flight* was published in 2007 by Black Cat Books.

I chose to focus on *Indian Killer*, *Reservation Blues* and *Flight* because they present significantly different representations of Native American identities from other Native American authors. While authors such as Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday will account for the racial and cultural hybridity of Native American identity, Sherman Alexie is among the few that attempt to destabilize the hybridity of his characters as no longer located on an either/or basis. In this reading, I trace this deconstructive project through difference and deferral, as an on-going negotiation of meaning. What some critics have read as supposedly deviant constructions of Indianness, functions in this reading as the basis (although deconstructed) of establishing the emergence of “new” identities that are liberating (Bhabha, 303). Reading the Native American discourse as subjected to deconstruction, as constantly re-defined, allows for the break from essentialist views on both the identities that emerge as well as the structures of representation. In other words, in these texts, the deconstructive project examines the changing status of the individual identity as liberating future identity constructions.

ON NATIVE AMERICAN CRITICAL THEORY

In his book *Ethnocriticism*, Arnold Krupat writes that “what might be called an ‘indigenous’ criticism for Indian literatures remains to be worked out”. Although he is only referring to “traditional Indian expression” in the oral tradition, the statement may be easily applied to Native American fiction as well (as quoted in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, Weaver *et al.*:2). Since 1992, however, there has been a noted increase in Native American literary critical texts. Critics such as Paula Gunn Allen, Louis Owens, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Gerald Vizenor, Thomas King, Lee Maracle, Kateri Akiwenzie Damm, Armand Ruffo, Greg Sarris, Gary Hobson and Daniel Justice, to name only a few, have created a large debate that touches on important concepts such as sovereignty, cultural authenticity, traditionalism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism. These are just a few of the

major issues that concern the growing field of Native American critical theory. There are many differences between both the political and literary angles that these critics take. One particular issue that I am concerned with is the differentiation between critical debates concerning essentialist and constructivist takes on identity. The essentialist nationalists demand, among other things, that Native American literature should focus on and “privilege internal cultural readings” (Womack *et al.*:10). Three of the major nationalist critics, Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack and Robert Warrior state the following:

We *want* non-Natives to read, engage, and study Native literature. The survival of Native authors, if not Native people in general, depends on it. But we do not need modern literary colonisers. We only ask that non-Natives who study and write about Native peoples do so with respect and a sense of responsibility to Native community. (Weaver *et al.*,11)

Craig S. Womack insists that “Just as Native American literature by definition can only be produced by Native writers, so Native American literary criticism [...] must be in the hands of Native critics to define and articulate, from resources *we* choose” (Womack *et al.*, 17). In my defence, as a non-Native, European student, writing on Native American literary texts, I need to state that I do not wish to join the tradition of critics who posit Native American literature as “an ‘extension’” to “national literatures of the settler colonies” (Chadwick, 30), rather, I accept that it is one of the many discourses occupying the American postmodern identity stage. That Native American literature is “a separate discourse” (Chadwick, 30) is however, in this thesis not as much a separate discourse, as much as a discourse that represents both the influence of the white and Native American worldviews. Nor do I intend to suggest that ambiguity, ambivalence, dissemination and hybridity are the only tropes a critic may use to describe Native American literary identity, neither that they as such, may prevail upon different Native American critical terms.

American Indian Literary Nationalism, an important critical nationalist text, was written as a response to Elvira Pulitano’s *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* (2003). In the latter, Pulitano refers to this important debate within Native American literary criticism, specifically, that of the “separatist” (nationalist) and that of the “dialogic” approach (Pulitano, 7). Pulitano asks some important questions, such as: “Is there such a thing as a Native American critical theory? If so, how should we define it? As a non-Native critic, am I entitled to define it?” (Pulitano, 1). Pulitano aligns herself with Native American writers, such as Sarris, Owens and Vizenor, whom she classifies as using a “crosscultural dialogic approach” insisting that “presenting this material from the outside” implicates and exposes

her position as well (Pulitano,191). Her purpose, she explains, is to distance herself from the “separatist distances” of Allen, Warrior, and Womack” (Pulitano, 191).

In an interview with Doug Marx, Sherman Alexie states the following: “I write what I know” he says, “and I don’t try to mythologize myself, which is what some seem to want, and which some Indian women and men are doing, this Earth Mother and Shaman Man thing, trying to create these ‘authentic, traditional’ Indians. We don’t live our lives that way” (Marx, 20). Alexie is in fact controversial in his positioning. In an interview with John Purdy, he states that in writing his novels he writes “about a drunk in a bar, or a guy who plays basketball”, and not “about anything sacred” or about “any ceremonies” (Purdy, xii). His views have also changed dramatically over the years. While in 1996, in the same interview with Doug Marx, he states that “I have a very specific commitment to Indian people, and I’m very tribal in that sense. I want *us* to survive as Indians”, in his interview with Matt Dellinger from 2003, Alexie states that “the worst part about tribalism is its tendency to fundamentalize, and if I can fight fundamentalism in any of its forms I’m happy” (Dellinger, 123). With Timothy Harris, he describes his texts as “less and less Indian-centric” (Harris, 129). In a later interview, in November 2007, with Tanita Davis and Sarah Stevenson, he explains that “Ever since 9/11, I have worked hard to be very public about my multi-tribal identity. I think fundamentalism is the mistaken belief that one belongs to only one tribe; I am the opposite of that” (Davis & Stevenson, 190).

When it comes to new directions in Native American literature, Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, in her “Transatlantic Crossings – New Directions in the Contemporary Native American Novel” (94) shows her contrasting focus from the one nationalist angle I have mentioned above. She asks: “How much are Native Americans part of the project of Native American identity?” (Georgi-Findlay, 89). As a part of the ‘Classic path’ she observes that as early as the Native American Renaissance, N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968), James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), three major Native American literary texts, changed the “cozy idea of an alternative ‘pure’ ‘Indian’ counter-identity” (Georgi-Findlay, 89). Abel, in Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, is a troubled mixed-blood, who confuses his war experiences with his reality. Silko’s Tayo is also a mixed-blood, who is hidden away in his aunt’s house because his mother is not married. Ever since the 60s, Native American literature has been concerned more and more with the notion of the hybrid, of identities that challenge the prescribed norm of traditional and essentialist Native American identity (Georgi-Findlay, 90). Novels begin to interact with “contemporary debates on American identity in the context of diversity by, for instance,

resisting the depiction of Native Americans as victims, by insisting on the positive qualities of a hybrid experience, and by (re) establishing the importance and adaptiveness of the tribal heritage in a modern world” (Georgi-Findlay, 89). Texts such as Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983) and Janet Campbell Hale, *The Jailing of Cecilia Capture* (1985), investigate the women’s part in survival and identity (Georgi-Findlay, 91). *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988) and *The Bingo Palace* (1994), all by Louise Erdrich, integrate “a multiplicity of narrators, voices, and viewpoints into their fictional worlds” to the point of destabilising the dichotomy of white/Native American influence (Georgi-Findlay, 91).

As a ‘new’ route, Georgi-Findlay discusses the continuation of these concerns into novels published in the 90s. From Momaday on, literary texts engage with the white tradition of Western “storytelling—the Bible and literature” (Georgi-Findlay, 92). Writers such as Paula Gunn Allen, Linda Hogan and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn consider a cross-cultural exchange between the white world and the Native one impossible (Georgi-Findlay, 92). Gerald Vizenor and Louis Owens on the other hand, are both critical of cultural stereotypes of “the Indian” and thematise characters that destabilise plots, are often anti-heroes, thus challenging “earlier representations of potentially stable Indian identity by questioning whether in today’s postmodern media culture any person, and particularly one with Native American ancestors, may even be able to define who they are” (Georgi-Findlay, 93). As part of the new trend, Sherman Alexie has been accused of perpetuating stereotypical images of the Native Indian through “the exaggerated depiction of eccentric drunks” (Georgi-Findlay, 93). The same goes for Gloria Bird, who considers Alexie’s characters as “social and cultural anomalies” (as quoted in Coulombe, 94).

Alexie’s views on Native American literature seem to give very little power to the debates surrounding him. In an interview with Joe Purdy back in 1997, he argues that he wants to take Native American literature “*away* from the people who own it”:

“Most of our Indian literature is written by people whose lives are nothing like the Indians they’re writing about. There’s a lot of people pretending to be ‘traditional,’ all these academic professors living in university towns, who rarely spend any time on a reservation, writing all these ‘traditional’ books. Momaday—he’s not a traditional man. And there’s nothing wrong with that, I’m not either, but this adherence to the expected idea, the bear and all this imagery. I think it is dangerous, and detrimental.” (Purdy, 43)

To a certain extent, Alexie may be said to have started a new direction in Native American literature: “I am going to burst the genre apart” (Bellante, 14), he warns.

ON DERRIDA AND DECONSTRUCTION

From the beginning, I need to state that I am not doing a textual analysis in the modern fashion, or the structuralist vein, rather, I am attempting a reading of the texts informed by poststructuralist theory, namely aspects of J. Derrida and Homi K. Bhabha. In my thesis I interpret Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, *Reservation Blues* and *Flight* in the context of the theory of deconstruction and post-colonial theory. From Derrida I have chosen the concept of *différance* as a way of portraying the effects of reading produced through traces and textual constructions of ambiguity, ambivalence, anxiety and dissemination, as having a major impact on the interpretation of the novels and on how Native American identities are read.

Deconstruction and Derrida's anti-*logocentric* reading are a result of Saussurean linguistics, the study of signs, otherwise known as semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure based his linguistic study on the notion that language is a system of constituents defined from and through their differences from and in their spacing from each other. Language is constructed through a network of differences that result in meaning. The signifier (the word) and the signified (the idea relayed by the word) enjoy, in Saussure, an arbitrary relationship. Signification takes place as a result of what Leitch, in *Deconstructive Criticism*, identifies as "a sign [is] what all others are not" (8). Saussurean linguistics lies at the origin of Structuralism, changing the focus on cultural systems as read comprehensively rather than historically. The focus becomes that of studying the relationship of signification within a code or a discourse. Within structuralism, the Saussurean model of linguistics is used to study "cultural phenomena such as mythology" and "kinship relations" (Claude Levi-Strauss) (Abrams, 71). It undertakes to "provide an objective account of all social and cultural practices, in a range that includes mythical narratives, literary texts, advertisements", viewing these practices as "combinations of signs that have set a significance for the members of a particular culture", thus explicating the "rules and procedures by which these practices have achieved their cultural significance and by specifying what that significance is" (Abrams, 347). Concepts and entities are given their identity as signs "by their relationship of differences from, and binary oppositions to, other elements within the cultural system" (Abrams, 347). Within literary studies, "structuralist criticism conceives literature to be a

second-order signifying system that uses the first-order structural system of language as its medium” (Abrams, 347).

Jacques Derrida’s paper “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, which he read out at the International Colloquium at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, changed the approach to literary texts through emphasizing the decentering of both structure and reading, defining in this way a movement beyond structuralism. In the same paper, Derrida states that:

“structure—or rather the structurality of structure—although it has always been at work, has always been neutralised or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form” (Derrida, 352).

Derrida also explains that “there are two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play” (369). In the same way, when I argue for effects of reading the deconstruction of Native American identity, I do not wish to erase the category as much as argue for its interrogation and re-inscription as adapted to processes of signification rather than previous figurations of culture. That Native American identity needs to be seen with new eyes, or seen anew, as adjusted to more pertinent concerns of contemporary social and political nuances is a given. That they are sometimes not liberated enough is also true. What drives the questions forward is the notion that concepts, play, structure, identity and signs are split or postponed in the process of spacing. That words can never summon forth their full meaning, therefore they are never fully present and in this way never transparent is connected to the notion of spacing, “the force that differentiates elements from one another and, in so doing, engenders binary oppositions and hierarchies which underpin meaning itself” (Abrams, 71). Derrida in this way attacks “the systematic, quasi-scientific pretensions of the strict form of structuralism” by “asserting that the notion of a systematic structure, whether linguistic or other, presupposes a fixed ‘center’ that serves to organize and regulate the structure yet itself ‘escapes structurality’” (Abrams, 279). Derrida discusses the notion of closure in the context of language as play, as a field of “infinite substitutions only because it is finite” (Derrida, 365).

Jacques Derrida discusses the “event” that alters the “concept of structure” as having the “exterior form” of a “rupture and a redoubling” (Derrida, 351). The events that are introduced through *rupture* and redoubling, produce various results or, better, further

disseminations that change with every re-reading. How the process of *différance* takes place both through the continual demonstration of difference and deferral between signs and signifiers provides a paradoxical concomitance/coexistence/cohabitation along with deferral and spacing of individual and cultural formation. Tracing itself out, the resulting coherence is never inconsequential or insignificant; rather, it is located in a constant negotiation of momentary, postponed significations of the same oscillation.

Différance works to embody the indeterminate fluctuation between structure and event, and the in-betweenness of difference and deferral of meaning. When Derrida argues that Western metaphysics is founded on the binary structure of for example, in this context, White/Native American language, White culture/Native American culture, presence/absence, representation/socially outcast, he shows that the hierarchical system always prioritises one binary element over the other. When he deconstructs the hierarchy of speech/writing, he offers the first deconstructive analysis. As a part of literary criticism, deconstruction aims to destabilise these hierarchical systems within language and signification only to eventually do away with them, by demonstrating that the very texts that propose them also dismiss them. It is a method of reading that questions the structure of the novel as well as the structure of interpretation, through focusing on moments of textual (as I have interpreted here) anxiety, ambiguity, ambivalence and dissemination of meaning and traces of meaning. However, it is important that I differentiate between my focus on these later concepts as a locus of negotiation of signification and not as the locus of the actual identities I look at. Homi Bhabha's notion of the in-between is rather connected in this thesis with the notion of the emergence of hybrid identity, prioritizing in this way not a hybrid result as much as revealing the hybridization process. Where I refer to characters as caught between representations of dichotomous cultural hierarchy, this only qualifies as a departure point that is in itself also negotiated.

There is a great deal more to be said about deconstruction. The method of close textual reading will help me reveal and go deeper in the process I have delineated here. I have combined a deconstructive reading with Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial perspective, as an attempt to show the same traces and effects of reading through the post-colonial take on deconstructive reading as well, solidifying in this way my conclusions, although even these are subjected to the same process of difference and deferral (not excluding the metaphysical). This union of form and context is unavoidable however. Suffice it to say that, deconstruction, is a difficult method, that requires that while I write I deconstruct whatever ideas I have taken with me in the study of critical theory, yet one that I believe liberates my thinking as I am

writing, destabilising in this way my own stereotypical views on Native American literary identity, Native American criticism and critical theory in general. *It is the traces of meaning I am offering*, not the deconstruction of my own reading. As a concomitant process of learning and unlearning, I find my project to be a little daring, yet it is an oscillating question that drives me in my pursuit.

ON HOMI K. BHABHA AND POST-COLONIAL THEORY

In contemporary cultural theory, post-colonial theory represents the analysis of literature, culture and history and the discourses therein, originating from the colonies of former empires. A key text in post-colonial theory, Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (1978) extends Michel Foucault's New Historicist reading of discourse to analyze what he terms as "cultural imperialism" (Abrams, 277). Cultural imperialism designates its power "not by force, but by the effective means of disseminating in subjugated colonies a Eurocentric *discourse* that assumes the normality and pre-eminence of everything 'occidental', correlatively with its representations of the 'oriental' as an exotic and inferior other" (Abrams, 277). *Orientalism* is now a term that describes cultural imperialism within the creation of discourse all over the world (Abrams, 277). Derrida's deconstructive theory has often been used in correlation with post-colonial issues, as a way of revealing how the discourse of cultural imperialism has deleted the agency of the colonised; the resistance to that discourse, through resisting what is termed as "master narrative"; the substitution of that master narrative with a counter-narrative (post-colonially defined); the hybridization of colonial cultures (Abrams, 277).

Post-colonial theory also investigates the construction of the colonial and post-colonial subject along with the explication of the forces that act upon the construction of the subject: in other words, the cultural positioning, the way the subject identifies and is represented, within discourse. While decentering the Eurocentric norms, post-colonial theory also aims to expand the literary canon to include colonial and post-colonial writers (Abrams, 278). Post-colonial theory offers different definitions of what it is about and what it aims to accomplish (I have used the definition that is given by Abrams in his ninth edition of *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2009)).

I have chosen to focus on Homi Bhabha's outlook on the post-colonial perspective, paying attention to how he conjoins Derrida in both method and content. I have appropriated the notion of "emergent hybrid identity" and the notion of "Third Space" as tropes that help me identify the ways in which Sherman Alexie deconstructs the textualisation of that same literary identity. The way his concepts complicate and reinvent, simultaneously, Native American literary identity and agency is one of the ways I use to show that representations of the Native American are no longer simplistic and more importantly, no longer static.

A final aim for this thesis is to consider the implications of some of the representations the novels trace out. Will these enable the subject in formation as represented through the theme of emerging hybridity as survival? Is survival a result of having transformed discursive impediments into possibilities, through reading moments of textual anxiety and ambivalence? If everything is a text, will deconstructing the norms of Indianness allow for the hybridization and deferral of identity Alexie debates *through* his characters?

THESIS OUTLINE

I have structured my thesis into three chapters, assigning a chapter to each novel. Chapter 1 investigates through close textual reading, the signification of the signs of death and the Indian Killer, and follows their varied understanding, depending on the context they are placed in. The paper relies on the concept of *différance*, Toni Morrison's concepts of the "not-there" and "rememoration" as used by Homi K. Bhabha, and investigates, in the second part, the outcome of the reading, specifically, whether the hybrid characters may be considered as resisting the essentialist hybrid construction of either/or, and emerge, rather as "new", hybridizing identities.

My second chapter investigates whether moments of textual anxiety and textual ambivalence would, through Homi Bhabha's concepts of "the stereotype" and "mimicry", act as emerging resistance that would equate the survival of the characters as also located within the cross-cultural negotiation of Native American identities. The journey of Coyote Springs is in focus in the first part, stereotype and mimicry in the second, and in the third, I provide a reading of the ending, as a way of answering the questions I start off with.

The third chapter focuses on the narrative technique of *deus ex machina*. I discuss the importance of the technique in the context of the identity formation of the protagonist. The disseminating effect of individual identity formation is closely connected to the narrative

technique. I look at all the narrative jumps into other histories, times and hosts and then investigate their contribution to the structure of the novel and the significance of the disseminating effect within an interpretation of the ending.

Chapter 1:

Indian Killer: Effects of Reading Ambiguity and Emergence of Newness

Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996) is considered to be the most controversial so far. The author himself finds the novel troubling because he "can't even get a grasp on it". He also claims that it is the only one he re-reads (ed. Nancy Peterson: xv). The reader of course finds herself/himself, in similar positions. As this chapter will argue, the liminality/ambiguity resulting from the text produces the need for reading and re-reading. With the repetition of reading (a repetition that inscribes significant difference) the text repeatedly refuses to give just one interpretation of the cultural fabrics at work as well as just one definition of "What is an Indian?" (Alexie, 2000:221).

Reading and re-reading Alexie addresses a whole tradition of what would appear as misleading perceptions of Indianness. My argument is that the returning, detouring and repetitive act of reading *Indian Killer* deconstructs the subject of Native American identity to change the literary representation of "the Indian" in narrative frames. The text mixes essentialist takes on identity with constructivist ones in a manner that makes the purpose of ambiguity functional to the structural choices of narrative. The themes of death and of the Indian Killer as semiotic signs of violence are so contrastingly interpreted that the depiction of the cultural process of their interpretation, transformation and signification is itself portrayed as cruelly reductive. The resulted ambiguity is quintessential for the process of reading. It seems to be *the* question of the text. Suggesting that characters are constructed as results of the political and cultural environment, Sherman Alexie's novel also questions that same notion when it depicts the problem of definition as also engrained within the cultural stereotype as misconstruction. The missing part is the *in-between*. Therefore, the problem at hand lies in revealing the purpose of such textual constructions of inconsistent, controversial and often mutually-cancelling traits of individual Native American literary identity.

Since I am interested in the process of individual literary identity construction, I have chosen to focus on the concept of *différance* and deferral of meaning as seen through both Jacques Derrida and Homi K. Bhabha. What for Derrida signifies inherent incoherence, meaning a text that reveals plural signifiers and signifieds locked in an indeterminate relationship of dissemination/s, I place parallel to another concept from Homi Bhabha, that of hybridization. Along with the concept of *différance* and hybridization, I wish to add to my

discussion Toni Morrison's concept of the "not-there" and that of "rememoration". While endeavouring a *playful reading*, the conclusions this first chapter is investigating aim at answering several important questions: are all the characters victims of a dominant discourse? Will *différance* testify for an emerging 'newness' of identity (Bhabha, 303) or accompany rather the irony located in the central themes of death and the Indian Killer? Is the trope of the "not-there" hybrid a liberating literary construct as far as future identities are concerned or is it rather, as Native literary nationalists claim, an erasure of tribal identities?

1.1 *Différance*

Différance is a structure and a movement that cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing by which elements relate to one another. This spacing is the production, simultaneously active and passive (the *a* of *différance* indicates the indecision as regards activity and passivity, that which cannot yet be governed and organized by that opposition), of intervals without which the 'full' terms could not signify, could not function (Derrida, *Positions*: 27)

Différance relates to the process of signification through a negotiation of meaning. It is a structure that explains the way these signs are received and transformed within the two cultural settings as well as within the individual. As it is always destined to "continually break up 'in a chain of different substitutions'", it is very much located as "an affirmation of a movement" (Wood: 92). As the first movement of *différance*, deferral of meaning signifies that "words and signs can never fully summon forth what they mean but can only be defined through appeal to additional words, from which they differ" (Abrams, 71), such as the process that the signs of death and the Indian Killer produce. The Indian Killer and death provide the reading with a "network of differences, whose meaning is never established, never fully 'present' (Abrams, 71). A second inferred meaning in *différance* is the notion of 'spacing', which concerns "the force that differentiates elements from one another and, in so doing, engenders binary oppositions and hierarchies which underpin meaning itself" (Abrams, 71). Since it will not refer to the opposition of presence/absence, the addition of the terms of "not-there" and "rememoration" is necessary, since they interrogate beyond the

“self-effacing trace” (Abrams, 71)¹, inherent in the apparent meaning of both text and signs. Homi Bhabha refers to these latter concepts as part of his analysis of *Beloved*. In “By Bread Alone—Signs of Violence in the Mid-Nineteenth Century”, he explains that:

the process of historical revision and the production of political and cultural agency emerge through a discursive time-lag; in the contingent tension between the social order of symbols and the ‘desubjected’ scansion of the sign. This temporality finds its spirit of place in the ‘not-there’ that Toni Morrison memorializes in her fiction and uses, interrogatively, to establish the presence of a black literary work. The act of ‘rememoration’ (her concept of the recreation of popular memory) turns the present of narrative enunciation into the haunting memorial of what has been excluded, excised, evicted, and for that very reason becomes the *unheimlich* space for the negotiation of identity and history (Bhabha, 284)

The themes of death and of the Indian Killer act through *différance* as a concomitant process of rememoration. Meaning, that the return and detour of reading the signs also brings up the historical conditions of the colonial past. They are actualised at the same time as the popular memory is recreated in the present of narrative enunciation through repetition and circulation of the excluded. Homi Bhabha defines the ‘time-lag’ as “the stressed absence that is an arrest, a ceasure of time, a temporal break” (Bhabha, 284). Connected with death as an arrest, a ceasure of time, a temporal break, the exclusion of the *in-between* identity enables the existence and continuation of *différance* within the reading of death. What at first looks as a broken narrative, with the episodes of the murders and the narrative thread of John Smith and Wilson, is joined by the various interpretations of the murders. The fact is that the identity of the killer is unknown. The lack of classification produces speculations that result in signficatory returns to the same murders, changing in this way their intention. Issues of agency and representation seem closely tied to the possibility of reading and knowing the identity of the killer.

The novel is split in three parts. “Owl Dancing”, “Hunting Weather” and “Last Call”. When the second and third part begin, the numbering of the chapters restarts, which gives the appearance that each part has a new beginning. John Smith is a Native American adopted by a white couple. His attempt to regain a Native American identity is an accumulation of the broken scraps of Native American literature his adoptive mother gives him; she “bought all the children’s books about Indians and read them aloud to John” (12), and brought him to reservations. Olivia tells him words in “Navajo, Lakota, Apache” taken from “books, Western movies, documentaries” (12). As such, as a multiply sourced space, his identity

¹ I feel it is important to mention that I do not claim to interpret past identifying effects of reading, nor do I wish to identify the self-effacing traces themselves. In positing possible characters that may show both deferral and displacement of meaning as opening, as a movement of emergence of newness, I do not claim that my thoughts are more than effects of reading and re-reading, and perhaps only one effect of reading out of many.

sources challenge a singular interpretation too: his envisaged Indian way *seems* to be the opposite of his daily life. But the truth is that this analogy is not that simple: his view of the Indian culture is incomplete, yet constructed à la postmodern: pictorial, scripted, narrated subjectively and more importantly, one that is filtered through the spectre of the colonising position. Olivia's cultural programming is apparently unaggressive: John's sense of Indian life is inherited from her celebratory multicultural tendencies. She reads books to know more about where her son comes from; to identify him; to enable a copy (12). What this reflects is rather Olivia's inadvertent but nevertheless damaging unawareness. Unable to take a critical stand towards what she inscribes as John's sense of identity, she in this way reproduces the same absence of Native American factual knowledge into her son.

As a young adult, John Smith wishes to reject his white upbringing and decides that the purpose of his life is to kill the white man "responsible for all that had gone wrong" (404). His wish is to make white men fear Native Americans, because "near the end of the twentieth century, Indians had become invisible, docile" (30). When he meets Marie, a young Spokane Native American student, the owl dance that is performed as part of a student demonstration opens up his thoughts on the owl as a symbol of death:

He had learnt about owl dances, but feared them. John knew many Indian tribes believed the owl was a messenger for death. For those Indians, the owl was death itself. Yet, those same Indians who feared the owl still owl danced. John had always been confused about that. Were the Indians dancing out of spite? Were they challenging the owl? Or perhaps they were dancing to prove their courage. With Indians, death was always so close anyway. When Indians owl danced, their shadows were shaped like owls. What was one more owl in a room full of Indians dancing like owls (37)

The distance between him and what he feels are "real" Indians is however also placed in the way he interprets these symbols. It suggests perhaps, that for John, the owl is not a symbol of death, or that the owl itself as a symbol is also determined by the context it is placed in. His thoughts on the owl dance connect with the fifth chapter, "How it Happened". In it, "the killer" (49) is silent. The lack of language leaves him/her/it unidentified to either social or ethnic categories. As it is shown in this chapter, the title is a palindrome: it shows both how the killer identity is achieved through repetition and performance and how the murder takes place: the text explains that "The killer believed in the knife" (49) and that "For hours, the killer practiced pulling the knife from its sheath, then slashing, cutting, and thrusting the blade into imaginary enemies. Faster and faster. The killer practiced, as hands blistered and arms ached with pain, until exhaustion" (50). The actions of the killer foreshadow the significance of this narrative episode in the rest of the text: "With the knife,

the killer became the single, dark center around which all other people revolved” (49). It is interesting that the wish to kill is connected with the notion of a release or the opening up of possibilities. In the text, the killer follows white men, which he picks at random. ‘It’ notices that “Those gray suits were not happy, yet showed their unhappiness only during moments of weakness” (51), “The men in gray suits wanted to escape, but their hatred and anger trapped them” (51). Death in this episode is connected with countering unhappiness, anger and fear and more importantly with the expression of weakness. When it meets Justin Summers, the first victim, and kills him, the text explains that “The killer had not necessarily meant for any of it to happen” (53). Even more controversially, it explains that it “felt responsible for the white man. Honestly, the killer had not necessarily meant to hurt him and wanted to make sure the man was buried properly” (53). “Silently, singing an invisibility song learned from a dream” (54), he scalps its victim and places two owl feathers beside him, yet the killer is disappointed and decides that “One dead man was not enough” (54).

In Chapter 6, Truck Schultz, the KWIZ radio host, broadcasts the news of the murder. During the course of his first transmission, he changes the truth about the evidence found at the crime scene. He first states that “My sources say certain evidence makes it clear that an American Indian *might* be responsible for this crime” (my emphasis, 56). He then adds that “only an Indian, or a person intimately familiar with Indian culture would know to leave such evidence behind” (56). This is the first instance of what Homi Bhabha explains as “The chain of communication in the rumour, its semantic content, [is] transformed in transmission, but despite exaggeration, hyperbole and imprecision, the messages are syntactically ‘contiguous’ (Bhabha, 286). The doubt that Schultz communicates becomes a rumour that enables the double-reading and inscription of death as sign. The “caesura of the sign”, “constitutes [...] the ‘first stroke’ of the communal, intersubjective experience” of the murder (Bhabha, 285). The following chapter, “Introduction to Native American Literature” ties the issue of Native American literature with the rumours. As the only Native American student taking the class, Marie hears students discussing it as if they were certain of the ethnicity of the killer. When Marie argues that the reading list is mostly comprised by texts that are authored, co-authored or edited by white men, Dr. Mather responds:

“You see, Ms. Polatkin, I envision this course as a comprehensive one, viewing the Native American world from both the interior and exterior. One would hope that we can all benefit from a close reading of the assigned texts, and recognize the validity of a Native American literature that is shaped by both Indian and white hands. In order to see that the premise is verifiable, we need only acknowledge that

the imagination has no limits. That, in fact, to paraphrase Walt Whitman, 'Every good story that belongs to Indians belongs to non-Indians, too' (61)

When Dr. Mather goes on to lecture on the long tradition of European-Americans who were adopted into Indian tribes" (61), and gives himself as "an example of the modern extension" of that tradition (61), Marie connects the murder with the colonial history of killing: "What about the long tradition of white guys who were killed by Indians? How about the white guy they found dead in Fremont? Can we talk about him, too? How about the modern extension of that long tradition?" (61). When Mather retorts with "I hardly see how the murder of one poor man has anything to do with the study of Native American literature" (61), Marie's thoughts equate survival with a compulsive repetition and creation of conflict:

...being Indian was mostly about survival and she'd been fighting so hard for her survival that she didn't know if she could stop. She needed conflict and, in those situations where conflict was absent, she would do her best to create it. Of course, conflict with whites didn't need much creating. Her struggle with Dr. Mather, which started out as intellectual sparring, became personal, and intensified as that first class hour went along" (61)

Killing is extended as a metaphor for literature where cultural survival is extended to solidarity. When discussing Jack Wilson's texts, (also a character in this novel), she feels that "his books are killing Indian books" (68), because the act of interpretation of literature is so closely connected with 'authentic' cultural expression. Fear of discrimination results in what Homi Bhabha terms as "clinging to [its own] traditions with a renewed fervour" (Bhabha, 290). This is another way of expressing a "social solidarity [that] is wrought through the crises and contingencies of historical survival" (Bhabha, 285). That Marie needs conflict and often creates it is part of her identity as a Native American, part of her struggle to succeed in mainstream America. When David Rogers approaches her she thinks that he wants "to colonise her by sleeping with her" (69).

In chapter 9, "Building", John Smith's boss starts to suspect him of being the killer. He thinks that John "is acting pretty damn strange lately" (79) and wonders "if he felt afraid" (81). The reason he gives is an apparently simple one: "he's...different" (81). In chapter 10, "Confessions", Mather argues that casinos on reservations, as an act of "fiscal rebellion" are "polluting" the "cultural purity" of the Native Americans (83). Ironically, his views on literature as seen both from the interior and exterior and as shaped by both Native Americans and whites are no longer valid when it comes to the economy and survival of the Native American people. He claims that "'Indians are gambling with their futures'" (83), quoting Jack Wilson, to which Marie responds: "We're just putting food in our cupboards. If eating is

rebellious, then I guess we're the biggest rebels out there. Indians are just plain hungry. Not for power. Not for money. For food, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner" (84). When he is criticised, his defensive comments hide also an accusation that yet again implicates his panic, having had his authority challenged. Indirectly, Marie claims in fact the opposite: she wants "to tear apart the world", "Dr. Mather to disappear", "every white man to disappear", to "burn them all down to ash and feast on their smoke" (85). Marie defines her anger in terms of changing the world by wishing to reverse historical events. She considers her "Hateful, powerful thoughts" and then she wonders what these "powerful thoughts" can "create" (85). Her thoughts reveal that:

"The indeterminacy of rumour constitutes its importance as a social discourse. Its intersubjective, communal adhesiveness lies in its enunciative aspect. Its performative power of circulation results in the contagious spreading, 'an almost uncontrollable impulse to pass it on to another person'. The iterative action of rumour, its *circulation* and contagion, links it to panic – as one of the *affects* of insurgency. Rumour and panic are, in moments of social crises, double sites of enunciation that weave their stories around the disjunctive 'present' or the 'not-there' of discourse" (Bhabha 286)

The antagonistic nature of the views that result from the contagious spreading are a part of the deferral of meaning. Marie's emotional outburst is connected to both panic and the force that the insecurity of the sign produces. The racial separation, although clearly also an intersubjective dialogue, maintains the circulation of the rumours as long as the murders remain unsolved. In chapter 11, Marie's cousin, Reggie, who is half Native American and half white, remembers how his dad taught him colonial history, specifically famous murders of Native American chiefs, in order to avoid his becoming "a dirty Indian" (91). This teaching he enhances with violent, physical abuse:

'And was the smallpox good or bad?'
'Bad'
'Wrong,' Bird had said and slapped Reggie again. 'The smallpox was God's revenge. It killed all the hostile Indians. You want to be a hostile Indian?'
'No,' Reggie had said. (91)

It is only natural that Reggie extends killing to his own death, were he to read history from the Native American perspective. His beliefs are so closely motivated by fear and physical pain, that reading history from the colonising perspective is a natural way to survive. To protect himself from Bird who hates 'hostile Indians', feels that Crazy Horse "got what he deserved" (92) and worked at the time for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, he "had come to believe that he was successful because of his father's white blood, and that his Indian mother was to blame for his failures" (94). As soon as his survival (in that context) becomes validated as success, the text compares his exclusion of his Native American identity with the

image of a funeral: “He’d buried his Indian identity so successfully that he’d become invisible” (94).

In the following chapter, “Indian Gambling”, David Rogers, is killed. He had just won a large amount of money. His body is only found toward the end of the novel. When Truck Schultz contextualizes his disappearance, he introduces it with a discussion of whether casinos on Native American reservations should be allowed. He explains it as “they want to turn our state into a nest of sin and debauchery” (117), appealing in this way to the Christian religion as a clear sign of authority and privilege. He broadcasts fear and hate toward the Native Americans by appealing to patriotic feelings: “that’s right folks, the Indian tribes in this state want to subvert our constitution” (117). At the same time as Truck produces his desired effect, he indirectly produces a “temporality of repetition that constitutes those signs by which marginalized or insurgent subjects create a collective agency” (Bhabha, 285). His shows create a space of antagonism. At the same time, they empower the rebellious reactions that follow: the fear of the whites that agree with him and the anger of the Native Americans that do not. His arguments are fast and move from accusations such as “They are angry, bitter people, and treat the rest of us with disdain and arrogance” (118), to less obvious juxtapositions: “Maybe this whole Indian gambling thing is about revenge on the white man” (118) implying the first murder. He first questions the Native American right to establish casinos, an issue that questions the larger debate of tribal sovereignty. Then, he associates Indian gambling with the notion of retribution which induces more panic, with intentions that are clearly discussed with prejudice: “They want to take all of our money. They want to corrupt our values. They want to teach our children that greed and avarice are good things” (118). The text quickly jumps to another analogy: “Now, I don’t want to jump to conclusions, but I can just imagine what happened” (119). His conclusion is that “The Indian tribes of Washington State have declared a cultural war on us” (119). The irony is that he broadcasts this message which circulates panic, fear and rumour while he is supposedly creating a dialogue of opinions. The cultural conflict, if not started before, it sure has started now.

One example of how his words affect the public is Aaron Rogers, who “needed some kind of ceremony in which to express his grief” [...] “Without the ability to mourn properly, Aaron could only steep in his anger” (124). That Truck has more influence on the public than one would think possible, is perhaps a textual exaggeration; it has the purpose of showing how hate and social rejection will enhance the action taken as a response, especially those who are in pain or discriminated against. This is a clever way of combining the theme of death as defined in so many different ways by context. It mocks altogether, both ideal notions

of equality, suggesting that in so many ways violence is still a political act present in both historical memory and the status quo. That historical acts of violence will show continuity with present events is even more difficult to justify. What produces violence is a combination of different elements: “Tapping a thirty-six-inch baseball bat against the floor, he spent hours alone in his dark bedroom, listening to Truck Schultz’s radio show. Aaron made plans for revenge against the unknown” (124), yet they all seem to result in the same separatist conflict. It is obvious enough that hate, rage, anger and panic are concepts that are inherently dualistic. They are even concepts that double and repeat themselves as acts, only reproducing each other or combinations of these.

Chapter 19 interrogates a different kind of violence. This time, it is Mather who is shown as taking advantage of cultural folklore for his own success. The fact that he bases his success on anthropological finds breaks the friendship between Mather and Reggie, because Mather refuses to delete the tapes that he has found, containing Native American stories told by tribe elders. The text connects these two in an interesting way: “Mather and Reggie were mirror opposites. Each had something the other wanted” (136). As soon as Reggie feels betrayed, he goes to the other extreme and tries to defend his Native American culture. Mather’s abuse demands symbolically that Reggie step up and defend his values. The problem is that in doing so, Reggie is also suspected of being the Indian Killer. This possibility is what also creates the controversy of a Native American literature Professor that is now afraid of Native Americans.

While secretly listening to the tribal stories in the basement of his building, where Chief Seattle’s bones were supposedly stored, Mather “was becoming very frightened” (139). Coincidentally, he is listening to a story about Coyote, a Native American spiritual entity that represents change, permutations of both feelings and situations. The location of bones and other anthropological finds in the basement also carries a connotation of violence and a displacement of the mythological value of the stories themselves. Reggie argues that these stories “die because they are supposed to die” (137), which connects his rebellion to Mather’s attempt at recording them in history in a disconnected fashion. Earlier in the text John connects the idea of telling stories around the fire with the ceremony of mourning the dead. Telling stories is symbolised as a way to celebrate and mourn actual people as a ceremony that implicates both moral and ethical values.

Reggie seems to react powerfully, not only to the possible publication of these stories, but most importantly to their disconnection from actual historical people, to the oral and historical values of stories that die and hence new stories that need to be born. The orality of

stories is so important in this context, that they recreate a feeling of violation in their listener, perhaps not because he is white, simply because he violates their intention. Mather “could feel that something was chasing him, was right behind him, reaching for his neck. Mather ran for his life” (140). Interestingly, the text actually equates revenge as a motivation of success as well: “Sometimes Marie wondered if she worked so hard at everything only because she hated powerful white men. She wondered if she went to college and received good grades just because she was looking for revenge” (146-7). Hate and revenge seem to be not only reproductions of a historical past into the present, (a remembrance), rather as productive of positive outcomes in the identities I will suggest work as an opening of hybrid identity. Will the killing, as Arnold Krupat suggests, also produce good outcomes (Krupat, 104)? Krupat extends the question also to the final chapter “A Creation Story”. Whereas he finds the violence troubling and the novel “committed to a hostile separatism” (Krupat, 125n21), this chapter interrogates, with the addition of the terms of “not-there” and hybridization the notion of whether the novel intentionally interrogates hybridity through the emphasized setup of separatism. In Toni Morrison’s words,

Certain absences are so stressed [that] they arrest us with their intentionality and purpose, like neighbourhoods that are defined by the population held away from them. Where...is the shadow of the presence from which the text has fled? Where does it heighten, where does it dislocate? (as quoted in Bhabha, 284)

Therefore, is there sufficient proof in the text to argue that killing remains a highly abstract concept because in its double inscription it is not represented as *other* to life? The various uses of death in these social inscriptions seem to define it personally as rage, violence even competition. It is only the lack of gender and racial identification that leave the character of the killer as both separated in the narrative as well as abstracted from actual social positioning. Is it a he, a she, an it, or a bird, or, as Krupat suggests in his “The ‘Rage Stage’” essay on *Indian Killer* from 2002, all of these at the same time (Krupat, 138n6)? In Chapter 21, however, the killer “thought about the owl, the messenger of death for many tribes” (149) and “wanted so much to behave like an owl” (149) which suggests that it is human. Wanting to kill “without emotion”, be “silent”, waste “neither time nor emotion”, feel “no guilt, no remorse” (149), works rather to ascertain the opposite. Moreover, finding the next victim is closely connected to the message the killer is trying to send: it wants to find a “perfect and beautiful victim” because ‘it’ feels that “one dead body was not enough”. ‘It’ feels “incomplete” (149). In fact, the message of the killer is unclear. If the message is meant to “terrify the world” (150), how would killing two people accomplish that? Secondly, in

view of the fact that the second victim it chooses is a “perfect child who, through no fault of his own, would grow up into a monster” (150), how would sparing that child send an equally powerful message as that of death? The title, in retrospect, is far from “Killing the Dragon”, since “the killer knew that Mark would grow up into a powerful man” (151) is, when re-read, an actual guarantee.

The second part of the novel starts with Jack Wilson, a white author whose Native American hero, *Aristotle White Hawk*, solves crimes. He “read about Indians and recreated himself in the image he found inside those books” and “saw himself as a solitary warrior on horseback, crossing miles of empty plains, in search of his family” (157).

A closer look at Jack Wilson’s ‘dream’ of what Indians are like may simply be a reflection of his own ingenuity/wishful thinking or, quite simply an ideal version of the literary Native Indian identity. What this implies is that Jack Wilson may simply be perpetuating literary stereotypes about the ‘noble Indian’ as part of a tradition of writing. One reason may be that his construct is an impossible simulacrum because he negates his own racial origin. Another, that, in doing so, he uses literary stereotypes that have little in common with actual Native Americans. This would add to the deconstructive project an ethical and moral gravity as to the dangers of portraying Native Indians as only good, only brave, which, in retrospect would impede individual identity construction itself. Changing the literary standards seems here closely connected to the future of identity construction, hence the freedom of representing differences to the prescribed margins.

Little Hawk is “emotionally distant and troubled” (162). Then, “beautiful white women fell in love with Little Hawk because he was emotionally distant and troubled” (162). Olivia Smith is a big fan of Wilson and John Smith grows up with that. As a cultural model, the literary construction of Little Hawk is an influence both on mother and son. When Wilson is able to obtain details from former colleagues at his precinct, he starts to write a book on the Indian Killer. When he sees John, at a demonstration, he is exactly as he had imagined Aristotle. In trying to find out more information about the Indian Killer, Wilson is also on the look-out for John, which mocks altogether, the simplistic definitions that are perpetuated in literature. Just before Mr. Two Leaf’s confession, the former chapter closes off with: “The word spread quickly. Within a few hours, nearly every Indian in Seattle knew about the scalping. Most Indians believed it was all just racist paranoia, but a few felt a strange combination of relief and fear, as if an apocalyptic prophecy was just beginning to come true” (185). It seems that the more panic is induced through riots and beatings, the more the Ghost

Dance is revived in the popular memory. Arthur Two Leaf is beaten up by Aaron's gang. He warns that "something crazy is starting to happen" (188). He then follows up with:

'Well, I've been hearing rumors, you know?'

'What kind of rumors?'

'That Indians are organizing. They're looking to get revenge.'

'Revenge?'

'Yeah Indians have been scared for a long time. Now they want to scare some white guys. Things are starting to get tense, you know? I mean, it's like fire and hydrogen. All by themselves, fire and hydrogen are fine. But you mix them up and *boom!* Volatile' (188-9)

To a certain extent, Two Leaf is right. In such an ambiguous space of contradiction, what Homi Bhabha terms as a Third Space of enunciation, a hybrid culture is in fact 'volatile' (prone to change). Even though the text is focused on the two perspectives within the communication model, there are characters that destabilise the notion that these cultures produce hybridity through juxtaposition only. Although it is difficult to see the change in the novel, which would argue for the process of transformation of values, subject positions and actual representations, the "not-there" is in fact bound to change and vary with every reader that is "snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign" (Bhabha, 285).

In chapter 7, "Mark Jones", the verb 'to know' is so often repeated that it is evidently charged with irony:

By now, the killer had assumed the whole world would know about the power and beauty of the knife. But the police had managed to hide the truth. The newspapers knew nothing about the killer. The television knew nothing about the killer. And there was so much to know. [...] 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.

At this point in the narrative, the question of changing the world is tied to the lack of social inscription: the gender mystery is perhaps what may change the world, through emphasizing the general need to define, in spite of actual knowledge of both the identity of the killer or its racial categorization. As a narrative instrument, the act of leaving out information that would insert the killer within a social category is equated as a question of identity: not complying with the categories of masculinity, femininity, race and sexuality is at the centre of an investigation that is carried out by the receivers of the news in a way that mocks the compulsive need that society has: in the return of the reading, the intentional gender mystery works to destabilise the liminality of identities. Revealing at the same time that the killer character is constructed in the text according to a 'truth' it aims to send out, the ambiguity remaining in the way the character is understood reveals also the improbable nature of the same truth. Subjectivity is in this way also a result of the social scene, yet one

that at this point limits that same identity through already established categories, when, in fact, the killer refuses that categorization, through mystery and violence.

David Roger's body is found. Although he is aware that the kidnapping is not committed by the Indian Killer, Truck Schultz announces the opposite, with a clear intent to induce panic. He then assumes that Mark Jones is dead even though he only received a piece of his pajamas and announces his death on the air. In this transmission, he makes some serious accusations: "We should have terminated Indian tribes from the very beginning. Indians should have been assimilated into normal society long ago" (209). Not only does he imply that Native Americans are outside the norm, he also attributes drug abuse and addiction to the tribes. The issue of sovereignty is discussed implying that the little land that was turned into reservations should have never been given in the first place: "We allowed them to remain separate. In fact, we encouraged their separation from the mainstream values and culture in this country. That separation created poverty. It created drug abuse and addiction. It created misery and anger. It created this Indian Killer" (209).

The killer later decides to spare Mark. Whether or not it is because 'it' acts against Truck, its "shallow wave of compassion" seems less and less like the owl that has "no compassion of its prey" (192). The first dance of a powerful ceremony that would change the world becomes a ceremony of lives spared, not taken. When the killer takes him home, it is humanely portrayed in the mix of feelings that are shown in the text: "Then, ever so gently, the killer leaned over the mother, and kissed her cheek." (300). There is a change in the actions of the killer character, who now seems to take a different attitude to killing: if before, the message of the knife made him/her "the single, dark center around which all other people revolved" (48), it now "had counted coup, had won a battle without drawing blood" (300).

Less than an hour after the transmission, Aaron and his gang are on the streets, looking for "Indians to attack" (212). That Aaron accepts Truck's words as true is a testimony that he has no historical knowledge, but more importantly that his socially gendered feeling of rage, is a result of his reading historical remembrance as a result of maintaining the essentialist categories in place. As a result, his gang beats up Cornelius and Zera, two homeless Native Americans and tells them to "Get the fuck out of our country, man!" (215). When Wilson switches on the radio having once again dreamed about owls and about his own death, Truck Schultz makes shocking remarks: "Well, citizens, I propose that we sterilize any girl whose I.Q. is below one hundred" (243) as a way of stopping "the dumbing down of America" (243). Then, Truck assembles an odd equation through similarity and difference: "Dumb girls will not give birth to dumb babies. Evil girls will not give birth

to evil babies. Indian women will not give birth to Indian Killers” (243), which suggests that his deductive argument, his false use of logical reasoning is a dangerous method of presenting subjective truths as objective ones. That Schultz may not read signs other than through his sense of identity, emphasizes the notion that there is no objective truth as long as the essentialist categories remain in place.

Chapter 17, “Deconstruction” goes back to Dr. Mather’s classroom. The Indian Killer, he accuses, “is an inevitable creation of capitalism”, “a revolutionary construct” and the kidnapping of Mark Jones, a “metaphor for the Indian condition” (245). His conclusion is that “Indian people have had their culture, their children, *metaphorically* stolen by European-American colonization” and that “this Indian Killer has physically and metaphorically stolen a European-American child” (my emphasis, 245). The use of ‘metaphorically’ is indeed absurd, especially since when discussing the Indian Killer he decides to add ‘physically’. (Have not 500 years of colonial killing also been quite the ‘physical’ genocide?) When he states that the “The Indian Killer and Little Hawk are twentieth-century manifestations of the classic Indian warrior” (246) Marie changes the direction of the discussion entirely. In fact, the focus of the novel changes slightly. When she asks Mather “I’m not quite the revolutionary construct you had in mind, am I?” (247), the idea of a revolutionary construct is displaced in the reading and associated with Marie. This is an important twist, because the Indian Killer is no longer in focus as a symbol of change: the way Marie looks at it, that “An Indian man is not doing these killings” (248), emphasises the notion that the *différance* is located in the “ways in which different contexts change the meaning of terms and ideas” (Huddart, 33). This is perhaps a possible explanation as to why the killer remains unidentified. As a sign it will produce the subject through ambiguity, allowing the agency of that subject to take place through contingency. Marie is “talking like a twentieth-century Indian woman” and “a twentieth-century Indian” (247).

In the following chapter, John rescues Carlotta Lott from a gang that is about to beat her up. The image of John, “strong as water” and yet flowing, facing the “three flames”, symbolically suggests that his identity construction is in flux and prospering while the flames “tore everything down and rebuilt it in their image” (250-1). Contrasted to the biblical reference of God creating man in his image, John is not only posited as different, but also as not a copy or a repetition of a pattern. He is not an extension to them and neither recreated in the image of something. Carlotta tells him that “There’s a big difference between what those white people think about Indians and what we know about us. A big d-i-f-f-e-r-e-n-c-e. and there’s even a bigger difference between what Indians think about each other, and what you

and I know about ourselves” (252). Carlotta’s words argue for the subjective understanding of both identity and violence. Explaining that “There’s good magic and there’s bad magic. The knife is both” (253) points back to the killer who believes in the message of the knife. Carlotta further complicates her advice by suggesting the duality of the knife, as a way to emphasise the fact that violence is not represented only in the “linear equivalence of event and idea” (Bhabha, 201). As a way of emphasising the ambiguity of “nation as a narrative strategy”, (Bhabha, 201), her words implicate both a return as well as a re-reading of the historical positioning of the Native American:

I’ve got me a time machine. And I can show you how to use it. You can go back to that beach where Columbus landed, you know? You can wait there for him, hidden in the sand or something. C-a-m-o-u-f-l-a-g-e. And when he gets on the sand, you can jump out of hiding and show him some magic, enit? Good magic, bad magic, it’s all the same (254)

Carlotta may in fact suggest that re-reading the historical events with a different attitude, one empowered by a violence that may also work as a metaphor of constructive violence: as re-creating the way historical texts are understood, as re-creating the positioning of Native American characters. Perhaps the visualization of violence works as a mental resistance that would, in the narrative present, signify the act of fighting back. John Smith uses the knife to cut Jack Wilson’s face in the end, not to kill him, which symbolically ties the knife with the act of marking a returning difference in the coloniser image, one that would work as a reminder that the coloniser is “not innocent” (411).

Ambiguity is further displaced in the way Reggie and his gang interpret the message of the killer. Reggie is recording the beatings he and his gang give to random whites, taking on the persona of Ira Hayes, the Native American “who raised the flag at Iwo Jima” (256), Black Kettle and attributing to the ones he beats the persona of Truck Schultz. Although it is a conclusion to which the reader has also come, that Schultz is a powerfully negative influence on both whites and Native Americans, the inclusion of an ethically questionable act of violence is in this example an abuse of intention and a misconstruct of disambiguation. Although Reggie’s intentions are probably a response to the violence that has been happening lately, the chain of events suggest that “What articulates these sites of cultural difference and social antagonism, in the absence of the validity of interpretation, is a discourse of panic that suggests that psychic affect and social fantasy are potent forms of political identification and agency for guerilla warfare” (Bhabha, 291). As social fantasy, the killer “he’s got Crazy Horse’s magic. He’s got Chief Joseph’s brains. He’s got Geronimo’s heart. He’s got Wovoka’s vision. He’s all those badass Indians rolled up into one” (219). Reggie reproduces

the abuse of his father. He becomes a projection of the same anger that his father inscribed in him. While looking for retribution, Reggie is also altering the negative influences in his past. As if he were symbolically beating up his father, it is ambiguous that he chooses the same means, that of violence, to open up for his *self*, a new reading of his historical positioning. When John tells Reggie that he is Navajo, Reggie starts to hit him: “You don’t belong here. You ain’t Indian. If you don’t eat salmon, you ain’t shit” (281), he claims, extending his rage and fear to intra-tribal relations. The second part of the novel closes off with a chapter called “Hunting Weather” as well. When he is possibly followed, Truck believes that the Indian Killer wants to kill him as well. The policeman tells him to “stay off the radio” (302) because he is the “one starting up this trouble” and “broadcasting lies” (301).

The first chapter of the third part is about Mark Jones’s return home. Towards the end of the chapter, the third part suggests that its time span is that of the last day: “The last day was just beginning” (300). In Chapter 6, “The Searchers”, Reggie’s gang are watching the John Wayne movie. In the movie, John plans to kill his niece because “she’d been soiled by the Indians” (319) to which Reggie sadly comments: “I’d kill her”, “I understand what John Wayne is feeling. How would you feel if some white people kidnapped your Indian kid? I’d cut them all into pieces” (320). Just before that, John Smith differentiates himself in both his preoccupations and intentions. While he is “softly singing a Catholic hymn” about “water and forgiveness” (303), he wonders about the significance of the murders: “Black people get killed every day and nobody cares. It wouldn’t even matter. Killing a black man wouldn’t get me famous, would it? Killing a black man wouldn’t solve a thing, would it?” (308), his answer is in fact at the same time a denial of all the reasons that have been attributed to the murders and a possible explanation as to why the killer chose to simulate Native American appearances of ceremony: somehow, the simulation has made the repercussions ‘volatile’. He extends the equation to “If you kill a white man, the world erupts with noise: fireworks, sirens, a gavel pounding a desk, the slamming of doors” (308). The way he questions violence is by not giving it any importance, more importantly, by reacting in a completely different manner than all the other characters in the novel: “Nothing made sense” (308). That “John could not understand the economics of it” (308), contributes to the notion that that the “organizing principle of the *sign*” of death/the Indian Killer “is constituted in the transmission of fear and anxiety, projection and panic in a form of circulation *in-between* the colonizer and the colonized” (Bhabha, 294), differently. The economics seems to be easier understood by those that identify with either white or Native American representations. For

John, who is trying to find the one responsible for his individual mess, it is necessarily difficult to understand the subtext of anger and rage in the same way as the others.

Dr. Mather recommends that Marie is expelled from his class. At the meeting, their discussion on the Ghost Dance shows their utterly different interpretations:

‘So maybe this Indian Killer is a product of the Ghost Dance. Maybe ten Indians are Ghost Dancing. Maybe a hundred. It’s just a theory. How many Indians would have to dance to create the Indian Killer? A thousand? Ten thousand? Maybe this is how the Ghost Dance really works.’

‘Ms. Polatkin, the Ghost Dance was not about violence or murder. It was about peace and beauty.’ (313)

Marie suggests also that “if the Ghost Dance worked, there would be no exceptions. All you white people would disappear” (314). The Ghost Dance, however, is clearly influenced by the Christian religion. In “The Messiah Letter: Mooney’s Free Rendering” (Norton, 1792), Wovoka states that “Jesus is now upon the earth. He appears like a cloud”. His message to other Natives to “work for the whites” and not “make any trouble for them” is even stronger in the middle paragraph of the letter: “You must not fight” (Norton, 2003:1792). Alexie qualifies his use of the theme of the Ghost Dance as a “subtle questioning and criticism of cultural purity” (Mellis, 181), in other words a criticism of the way Marie interprets the Ghost Dance, as reflecting only the influence of the Native American discourse. Alexie suggests that the Ghost Dance is a way of revealing the Native American fear of assimilation, and that assimilation is wrongfully viewed as a “one-way bridge” (Mellis, 182). He further states in the same interview, that “Native Americans, all of us, whatever we are, have had influence and been influenced by the common culture, we’ve all worked together to create it” (Mellis, 182).

In chapter 8, “How it Happened”, Edward Letterman is killed. Yet the circumstances seem different from before. Justin Summers dies because “the arrogant white man rudely brushed past”, “strolled down the middle of the sidewalk, forcing others to walk around him” (51). The killer “wanted to teach him a lesson” (51). In this final (?) murder, there is no talk of the message the killer wants to send (perhaps as a result of the understanding that signs are arbitrarily signified), rather a description as to why the killer wishes to kill this particular white male. The first murder is interpreted racially by others, yet in the narratives they seem to be motivated by random and apparently petty reasons. Edward is followed into a pornographic shop. The killer reacts to “a white man and brown-skinned woman” who are having sex. As a result, the killer is “both fascinated and repelled” (326). The intra-racial act enrages him because the world “even the tiny part of it contained in that dark cubicle, was too

large” (326). It feels ashamed. By contrast, the world of the killer seems small. ‘It’ seems to lack both interaction and experience.

In Chapter 10, Truck is advised not to mention his alleged experience in the back alley. He is warned that “psycho bastards like the Indian Killer thrive on this kind of attention” that they “feed on it, breathe it” (335). One of the phone calls he receives goes as far as to suggest another Indian Removal: “We should lock up all the Indians, just like we locked up the Japs during World War Two. I mean, it’s for our own safety. Once we catch the Indian Killer, we can let the other Indians go” (336). Two chapters later, he continues his destructive agenda, accusing the Native American of causing the “the downward spiral of this country” (343) and gives the Whitmans, a missionary couple as an example of civilising “savages” but for “a few enlightened” Native Americans who converted (344). The only reason Truck gives as a motive for the frightening ‘smallpox’ colonization is that Native Americans “were Godless people” (344). He encourages his targeted audience to “arm themselves” in order to defend the country from “pure evil, pure violence, pure rage” (346). The way Truck positions his listeners is through appealing to their property and their ego: “what will history books say about you?” (346). Shortly after, Aaron is out beating up people, again. When Aaron hits Sean, because the latter explains that the “old Indian named Lester” (347) is innocent, this gang breaks, too, suggesting that there is, possibly, a limit to the escalating violence.

Ironically, John is beaten up by both gangs. The second time, Marie saves him using “a butter knife” (374). In an important way, Marie’s thoughts reveal that her anger and violence are never without a consciousness, that she is able to control her violent impulses: “She wanted to cry. She was shocked by her anger, and how much she had wanted to hurt those white boys. Nearly blind with her own rage, she had wanted to tear out their blue eyes and blind them” (375). In the context of hybridity, Marie Polatkin, essentialist in Native literature views, engages in both her postmodern environment as urban and cosmopolitan, as well as her traditionalist Spokane views. There is little to suggest that although there are often conflicting encounters between these dimensions, the character of Marie requires definition according to one nation. In defining herself as Spokane, Marie’s thoughts run as follows:

‘Now she was proud of being Indian, but it wasn’t a simple feeling. In the eyes of the white world, any Indian woman was the same as all other Indian women. Only white people got to be individuals. They could be anybody they wanted to be. White people, especially those with the most minute amount of tribal blood, thought they became Indian just by saying they were Indian. A number of those pretend Indians called themselves mixed-bloods and wrote books about the pain of living in both the Indian and white worlds. Those mixed-blood writers never admitted their pale skin was a luxury.’ (232)

In a difficult auto-ethnic construction, Marie deplors the fact that whites cannot see differences between Indian women, yet, indirectly, that the coloniser's simplistic definitions of Indianness do not allow for individual identity. This progression of thought moves from a falsely constructed perception of Native American women to expressing envy that white people may choose to be anybody they wish to be. More importantly, Marie's nationalist views are not necessarily exclusive of difference neither of hybridity.

1.2 The Shadow of the Presence

As quoted above, one of the questions that the concept of "not-there" interrogates is: "Where is the shadow of the presence from which the text has fled?". In that respect, Marie and John may be seen to represent an emergent identity, showing effects of hybridization: she does not speak Spokane fluently, neither is she a traditional singer or dancer. Her choice of the university life is prompted by her parents who "refused to teach Marie" about the Spokane culture, because they feel that she belongs "in that larger world" (33). In the same way as John, her parents "bought her books by the pound" (33). Specifically, she wants to create an *individual* identity in a power system of language that as of yet, prohibits it.

A different process of *différance* is the one taking place in the individual literary identity formation of Marie and John Smith. There are different ways of looking at the struggle to signify in the plethora of culturally ambiguous subject positions: John and Marie particularly, have an image of what they *wish* to become which, when posited in contrast, along or intertwined with their socially *prescribed* identity results in a postponement of individual signification. Another way of looking at this struggle is to argue that these characters are constructed as 'hybrids', caught up between the ruling culture and their own ideal version of Native American culture. Or, functioning as a deconstructive intent, these individuals create a space of emergence of new identity (Bhabha, 303). Thus, by inserting the 'imagined'/unfixed nature of identity construction *in-between* simplistic binaries of cultural/individual and Indian/White thinking, Alexie re-thinks the method of writing these identities within literature. As shown before, Marie's rage is connected with an individual identity construction as well. Her powerful thoughts reveal that in her attitude she uses that anger as a way of channelling her opinions. Her violence is always focused on changing the

fixity of both stereotypes about Native American literature as well as stereotypes about Native American women.

John Smith's attitude to the Indian Killer and death is beyond a relationship of difference established by these signs. As Cyrus R. K. Patell also has noted in his analysis of *Indian Killer*, "The Violence of Hybridity in Silko and Alexie", "John [of *Indian Killer*] is a cultural hybrid, but he is not 'successfully integrated' (19); he is a cultural hybrid who finds his hybridity intolerable" (as quoted in Krupat, 109). I agree that he views his hybridity as intolerable. However, the ending, as I intend to show below, may be seen through different eyes. John Smith imagines his past, as a way to stabilise and complicate the essentialist struggle, through deferral of meaning. Although it may look as if he is nostalgically trying to re-create what he has lost, he is also engaged in redefining his sense of identity according to various sources that do not submit to the public remembrance of rage and violence.

The first chapter of *Indian Killer*, "Mythology" describes the way John Smith invents and returns to the event of his birth, on "An Indian Health service hospital in the late sixties. On this reservation or that reservation. Any reservation, a particular reservation" (3). The first chapter is at the same time a re/construction of a narrative event as well as an attempt at re/constructing an ethnic origin. The reservation exists at first as an imagined location and it is separated from the main narrative of the Indian Killer. John's second hyperreal (Baudrillard, 3-4), narrative, "How He Imagines His Life on the Reservation", reveals his wish to learn the tribal language as a way to make himself a 'real' Indian. The structure of this narrative is elliptical though: it jumps from a little scenario when he is four, to a family dinner when he is ten and very quickly to when he is sixteen. This episodic structure relates to the way John views his ordinary life: "As the hammer began its next descent, John could see it happening in segments, as in a series of still photographs" (25). His subjectivity goes deep in connecting these different situations: the real projects into the hyperreal as broken apart from his reality: "She loves her son and cannot believe that she almost gave him away" (45). What John Smith identifies with is fictional, a construction that reproduces expectations that also keep him suspended, yet in transition. As a fictional character in his own fantasy, he partakes in his fictionalization which points to an advantage: deconstructing oneself ends up deconstructing the way cultural programming functions on an individual level: an identity creation as such, one that will not take the place of either Self *or* Other, anymore. If in his reality he finds "no language in which he [could] express himself" (377) and "he had no definition for what he was" (276), in his hyperreal narratives, he is reproducing possibilities of *being*. The novel however presents John in different postures,

different narratives, which in their turn stand equal. The voices that result from these narratives although different are not necessarily exclusive of each other: they gain the same privilege in the text, which in this reading I propose is really the same as their being equal parts of John. Or shall I say Johns? John's third narrative portrays the events following John's 'supposed' admission to college.

While breaking apart from his reality, the individual act of interpretation emerges as a result of conjoining the narratives that surround "How He Imagines His Life on the Reservation" with the latter. The conflicts I have high-lighted as a break from reality in the hyperreal, are a proof of the *différance* at play, or the play of *différance* within the remembrance of the novel. As a result of the juxtaposition, a Third Space of enunciation renders the act of translation/negotiation, controversial, yet also productive. In Homi K. Bhabha's words:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. In other words, the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation which Benedict Anderson so perceptively describes as being written in homogenous, serial time. (Bhabha, 54)

The act of constructing through fantasy may represent a disruptive temporality of enunciation if it is taken as a refusal of a solely Western upbringing or a solely Native American one. Hence, if 'Mythology' and the surrounding narratives are to signify, they need to be "mobilized in the passage through a Third Space" (Bhabha, 2007:54), what Bhabha also qualifies as the hybrid, or the *in-between*.

There are those who will read the ending as either a final surrender to the colonising culture and those who interpret it simply as a new break from John's conflicting realities. Some prefer to look at his death as a suicide. Nancy Van Styvendale classifies it as "the ultimate return to roots, albeit a tragic and paradoxically unfulfilled return, which rehearses the discourse of the 'vanishing Indian' (207). This chapter looks at his death as a simple narrative technique that will serve a practical purpose to the structure. Even though he thinks he has found the person responsible for his troubles, John *does not kill* Wilson. With all the violence and death surrounding him, he breaks apart from his urge to kill and chooses differently. He deals with the racial conflict in a new way compared to what the novel has

shown. In this reading, death is a textual effect that carries on the division of self/selves: “Pushing himself up, he felt a tearing inside. He stood above the body embedded in the pavement, small *fissures* shaking away from the arms and legs.” (my emphasis, 412).

This sentence can be interpreted as the further dissemination of selves that testifies to the emergence of new and endless significations. In “Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier”, Jacques Alain-Miller defines such a process using the term ‘suture’, to suggest the same fissuring of identity as fissuring the suture:

Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse ... it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension—the general relation of lack to the structure of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking-the-place-of. (25-6)

As a result of the fall, John feels a tearing inside and his body is left on the sidewalk. A new body, rising out from the old, stands above the old one. The image of rebirth suggests a hybrid construction as *emerging* in the text. The new body also suggests that the sutured one was a previous substitution of meanings within the differential play. The fissures represent the suture coming apart, John’s separation from his prescribed identities, his resistance and his emergence through that which lies beneath him. It is important to mention that the ‘newly’ emerging identity is to be subjected to *différance* and deconstruction and that it is not textualised as a solution. That John walks into the desert in the same way as Father Duncan, testifies to the deconstruction of the ending as the ‘typical’ death of the Native American: this character is able to leave “the fallen man” (413) behind and is reborn.

A poststructuralist answer would recognise the agency of this emergence of meaning as textual, if everything is a text. An emergence that is pivotal to the structural choices in the novel for the same deconstructive intentions. In Derrida’s words:

There is the ‘system’ and there is the text, and in the text there are fissures or resources that cannot be dominated by the systematic discourse. At a certain moment, the latter can no longer answer for itself; it initiates its own deconstruction. Whence the necessity of an interminable, active interpretation that is engaged in a micrology of the scalpel, both violent and faithful (Jacques Derrida, *Points ... Interviews*, 82)

If we connect the act of interpretation which the surviving John continues, with Derrida’s micrology of the scalpel, his rebirth becomes in this text a break from the way the signs of death and the Indian Killer have been read. The emergence of new identity resists the structured discourse of both white/Native American as subject positions. Since Derrida’s *jeu* does not mean a play without rules, I also suggest that as part of Alexie’s deconstructive project one may easily posit as effects, whatever this reading has traced: the emerging hybrid,

a continuous subject of *différance*, as the new discursive tool to counter the purist myths of rage and violence.

The ending adjusts both the image of the character as well as the structure of the narrative. In the ‘doubling’ or dissemination of John, one may read also the intention to adjust the site of mourning as both a repetition of the initial stories before writing, yet perhaps, at the same time, as a disconnection that has now gained new meaning, enough as to differentiate it from the others. According to Derrida, this moment of *différance*, located at the “origin of sense and presence”, “is not something that happens to a transcendental subject: it produces a subject” (as quoted in Wood, 92).

Another question I need to answer here is whether the emergence of new hybrid identities implicates the erasure of tribal identity. As I have shown in my consideration of Marie’s position, she never refutes her ethnic identity. As shown, she insists on correcting misunderstandings of it. She regrets that she has not been raised as her friends, speaking Spokane, singing and dancing traditional songs. On an identity formation level, recognition plays an important part in the process of identification and representation. Leslie Marmon Silko suggests in her famous novel *Ceremony* (1977) that even “ceremonies have to change” (as quoted in Krupat, 110) which suggests that the differential play is valid as a forward movement even here. Although traditionalists would most certainly question John’s authenticity, he nevertheless meets their blood requirements.

The last chapter of *Indian Killer*, “A Creation Story” is connected to the first one, “Mythology”, sharing the same lack of tribal affiliation and location details: “A cemetery on an Indian reservation. On this reservation or that reservation. Any reservation, a particular reservation” (419). Echoing John’s transformation, the killer “is softly singing a new song that sounds exactly like an old one” (419), the birds of prey are now also “birds of prayer” (419), and, more importantly, the text inflects a difference within the ontology of violence: “The killer finds bread and blood in *other* ways” (my emphasis, 420). That the killer may dance forever with “this mask, with this mystery” (420) connects the ambiguity of identity as a meta-textual continuation of the process of differentiation. “The killer never falls” (420).

I started out considering the frail possibilities that mark my reading, from my re-reading this novel. It has made an enormous impact in both the way I connected to it and the understandings that I tried to relay in this first chapter. I have used the first part of the essay to focus on the plurisignation of signs such as the Indian Killer and the theme of death. I meant for it to expose the way the emphasis of violence changed also the way I read the ending. I then focused on the ending and my reading of it, arguing all along for the movement

of opening that both exclusion and *différance* reveal, through traces and effects. In my second chapter, on *Reservation Blues*, I aim to look at moments of textual anxiety and of narrative ambivalence, through Homi Bhabha's concepts of 'the stereotype' and 'mimicry' as a way to argue for the same resistance as surfacing with acknowledging traces that anxiety both destabilises and constructs. In the same way, I hope to show that reading the effects and traces of textual anxiety and ambivalence changes significantly how the ending is read.

Chapter 2:

Reservation Blues: Effects of Reading Ambivalence

“**Coyote:** A traditional figure in Native American mythology, alternately responsible for the creation of the earth and for some of the more ignorant acts after the fact.

Coyote: A trickster whose bag of tricks contains permutations of love, hate, weather, chance, laughter, and tears, e.g., Lucille Ball.” (48)

June 1995 saw the publication of Sherman Alexie’s first novel, *Reservation Blues*. The same year, Alexie released *Reservation Blues: The Soundtrack*, including all the songs in the novel. Unlike *Indian Killer*, Sherman Alexie explains that he wanted to “write a positive novel” because “there are no healthy male/female relationships” in Native American literature (ed. Nancy Peterson: xiii). The strong relationship is that between Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Chess Warm Water. They are members of the band Coyote Springs, one that Alexie chooses to use as a microcosm of interrogation of both individual and cross-cultural negotiation.

However, Scott Andrews interprets Coyote Springs’ fall-out with Cavalry Records as a “failure” that “suggests that dominance and submission are still in place” (Andrews, 2007:137). He also states that “the novel resorts to a puzzling sense of despair and settles for survival rather than imagining success for its protagonists” (Andrews, 137). My main focus remains that of deconstructing literary identity construction through narrative ambivalence and textual anxiety. An important part of this second chapter is to find out the implications of Coyote Springs’ interaction with the White/Urban/Urban Native American worlds. By looking at the way Coyote Spring members interact with the leadership and members of the Spokane Indian Reservation, I hope to show that, according to the different notions of Indianness and whiteness the novel traces out, the characters do not fail; rather, they learn the responsibility of deciding for themselves: of creating an individual identity. Homi Bhabha states that “the very question of identification only emerges *in-between* disavowal and designation” (2007: 72). How identification and representation function is highly relevant to what Bhabha considers “the doubling of identity” (72), as identities that reflect the “reflection of the One in the Other” (72). This constitutes a way of creating a space for the colonized to resist colonial discourse (Huddart, 57). Ambivalence is the site of a process of negotiation of cultural images (72). The borderline between the Spokane Native American Reservation and mainstream America represents, textually and through repetition the notion that identities and

cultural images are “spatially split” (72). The cross-cultural exchange of identity images is possible because the process is never frozen in time or space.

As a result of the various, ongoing negotiations also symbolized by the ending of the novel, with another journey, I also aim to connect a different part of the analysis with an inquiry into the significance of dreams and music. I view the interpretative possibilities connected with these as a controversial semiotic act. The ambivalence of dreams/music as other ‘Coyote’ symbols also adds imaginative significance to the processes of individual and cultural identity formation I look at. I hope to show that what Franz Fanon names as a ‘time of liberation’ through “cultural uncertainty, and, most crucially, of signifiatory or representational undecidability” (as quoted in Bhabha, 51), equals a culturally hybrid understanding of the world, as a significant move away from essentialism, as well as a radically different relationship with definitions of Indianness. If seen through this light, the different cultural domains influencing Coyote Springs are no longer functioning on an either/or basis, therefore, never a hybridizing that would require the erasure of Indigenous agency.

Survival is what Derrida also names as “*sur-vivre*”, a considerably different type of dreaming. By emphasizing the role of the “nostalgic dream of tradition” or the dream “of the past or the present” Alexie does not offer in exchange “the Utopian dream of modern progress” (Bhabha, 324), rather, the actual dream quality of “translation as ‘survival’, the “afterlife” of translation and negotiation as the act of “living on borderlines” (Bhabha, 324). *Sur-vivre*, also translatable as about living/on living, or survival, without the dash (my translation), connects survival with living on the borderlines, the in-between with a whole other notion of time, as adjusted to a cross-cultural process that includes re-read and re-signified histories and signs.

2.1 Coyote Springs

When Robert Johnson shows up on the Spokane Indian Reservation, Thomas Builds-the-Fire is the only one willing to “let this stranger any further into his van and into his life” (Alexie, 8). Having sold his soul to The Gentleman, and faked his death, Johnson is currently wandering around looking for the big woman that “*rode into his dreams as a shadow on a shadowy horse*, with songs that he loved but could not sing because the Gentleman might

hear” (8). Robert Johnson comes to Wellpinit for salvation, as the only African American to have visited the reservation since its establishment. His helper, “[W]ith his long, black hair pulled into braids, he looked like an old-time salmon fisherman: short, muscular legs for the low center of gravity, long torso and arms for the leverage to throw the spear” (4). As part of the description of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the narrator supra-imposes an image that produces “that sensation of a new tribal presence in the very ruins of the representation of the invented Indian” (Gerald Vizenor as quoted in Andrews, 140). By comparing him to a salmon fisherman, the narrator calls up a cultural historical image to mind, as well as rendering ironic the futility of a body built for an activity which Thomas himself is no longer practicing. The cross-cultural effect rising from confrontations of older and newer figurations of culture testify for a cultural hybridization within the perception of Indianness that testifies to a new tribal presence. Although they both end up loving the guitar “so strongly” and identifying with it (11), Robert seeks to save his soul from it, while Thomas wants to use it to “change the world” (13). The main difference between the two is not delineated as racial, for Thomas is “nearly as dark as the black man” (4), rather a difference between their artistic responsibilities. Thomas is immediately described as a loner:

He wasn't ugly, though, just marked by loneliness, like some red *L* was tattooed on his forehead. Indian women had never paid much attention to him, because *he didn't pretend to be some twentieth century warrior, alternating between blind rage and feigned disinterest. He was neither loud nor aggressive, neither calm nor silent.* (my emphasis, 4)

Builds-the-Fire turns out to be very different from any of the male characters included in the novel. While others, like Junior and Victor crumble at times under the pressure of how to assert themselves on both Native and white turf or in-between, Thomas acts as a foil to most of these male images: to Junior and Victor he is described as a fatherly image (quote with Thomas paying for Victor) at the same time as he is, ironically, often beaten by them. However, he “knew that Victor and Junior were fragile as eggs, despite their warrior disguises” (16). To his father Samuel he is kind and protective. To Father Arnold, defiant. That Thomas is not some twentieth century warrior does not necessarily mean he is not misguided by other notions of Indianness. Yet, by portraying him *as* he is and not what he dreams of becoming, the narrator also reveals one of the aims of the text: to show the Native American condition, the way the ‘regular’² Native American perceives it. More importantly,

² By generalising the terms of reservation life, I do not implicitly generalise the experience of Thomas as ‘completely’ that of other Native Americans in the novel. That they share poverty and hunger and experience

he concisely reveals to the reader the competitive cultural definitions of both maleness and Indianness. The fact that Native American women do not differentiate between the two is contrasted to what Chess Warm Water, a Flathead Native American notices about him.³ A second commonality between Thomas and Robert is their story telling:

Thomas knew about sickness. He'd caught some disease in the womb that forced him to tell stories. The weight of those stories bowed his legs and bent his spine a bit. Robert Johnson looked bowed, bent, and more fragile with each word. (6)

Thomas tells stories for “the little country” (16), yet the people are so tired of his story telling that they refuse to listen anymore. Perhaps this is a reason as to why he feels that in order to create new stories, his experiences with music would expand his range. He tells his stories so many times, that the narrator explains that “the words crept into dreams” (15). In a power-system of language, the action of speaking one’s story and confessing is more than an act of rebellion: it is a search for truth which comes across through the *articulated/spoken/written* desire of the creative quality of stories. That stories creep into dreams suggests both the power these stories contain in the individual human experience as well as in shaping the non/reservation ‘I’. Borrowing from Jacques Derrida, Homi Bhabha uses the notion of ‘iteration’ along with Foucault’s ‘statement’, to show that repeatability (of stories, or of the act of *telling* stories) is necessary for the creation of meaning. According to him, repeatability helps the statement, whether mythical or metaphorical, to acquire various meanings according to the different contexts it is placed in (Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, 16). For example, Junior and Victor are part of the members of the reservation that refuse to hear stories and channel their dissatisfaction through their rage and violent instinct:

Thomas was not surprised by Victor’s sudden violence. These little wars were intimate affairs for those who dreamed in childhood of fishing for salmon but woke up as adults to shop at the Trading Post and stand in line for U.S.D.A commodity food instead. *They savagely, repeatedly, opened up cans of commodities and wept over the rancid meat*, forced to eat what stray dogs ignored. Indian men like Victor roared from place to place, set fires, broke windows, and picked on the weaker members of the Tribe. (my emphasis, 14)

As a consequence, their resistance is less pronounced than Thomas’s act of storytelling. Their act of colonial resistance is more defined by repeatability in a rebellious and often inconsequential way. Their drinking episodes, their rejection of religious practices

similar consequences of alcohol abuse does not imply, I hope, that their common experiences describe altogether their individuality.

³ A deeper look at the relationship between Thomas and Chess is given later in the chapter.

and their refusal to follow the prescribed role of the 'reservation' Native American as Other, although motivated by resistance, do not produce meaning through difference in the same way as the other members. The lack of meaning production fails to interrupt the colonial power over them. In themselves, these episodes seem to function mostly against them, lacking any negotiating quality. As a cross-cultural exchange, whether within the Native American identity or otherwise, they resist by acts that do not counter the influence and powerlessness their condition already possesses. In the same quote, the particular image of poverty, rather than pointing to only cultural identity, also delineates class and social differences. The rage and violence are directed to the 'white' man and to the economic despair of the reservation life. The whole structure of the novel is often explained by access to financial means or the lack of it. Coyote Springs depend in fact so much on their economic situation that the plot is driven forward or backwards by it:

'Y'all need to play songs for your people. They need you. Those two boys need you.' (23)

'What you talking about?' Thomas asked.

'The music. Y'all need the music.'

Thomas thought *he needed more money than music*. Music seemed to be a luxury most days. [...] Still, Thomas *heard music in everything, even in money*. (my emphasis, 23)

Victor and Junior join the band as a result of a dream where they are promised to appear "on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*" (28). Victor receives the guitar that by now has fixed itself. He had broken the guitar before, only now, he hears it whisper to him (29). The instrument is a tool for the Gentleman, one which the reader may already assume has the same intention for Victor as for Robert Johnson. The magical qualities it has, that of making Victor an object for the sake of fame, is also reflected in the cuts the guitar strings leave on his hands. The reader later finds out that fame requires a sacrifice.⁴ There is an important difference in the text between Thomas's reasons for joining the band and Victor and Junior's. Thomas, "picked it up and strummed a few chords, thinking how nobody believed in anything on this reservation" (28); Victor for the fame, but most importantly, because he is under the influence of the guitar; Junior, the reader already knows, because he is influenced by Victor. In fact, the only members that seem to have other reasons than fame, and who are also sceptical to the influences of success are Thomas and the Warm Water sisters. These three are also the ones who interpret not-signing the contract differently from Victor and Junior. Their interests also enable them to succeed in different ways, one of which is survival.

⁴ I will take a closer look at this episode later in my analysis.

The sacrifice the guitar later demands, (although the reader may also perceive it as surreal, for it is located in a dream), is immediately foreshadowed by the song and title the next chapter begins with. In the second stanza of “*Treaties*”, the song with the same title explains that “Treaties never remember/ They give and take ‘til they fall apart/Treaties never surrender/I’m sure treaties we made are gonna break this Indian’s heart” (31-32). Considering that the guitar claims that “The blues always make us remember” (22), the deceit of that message is clear: Thomas escapes the control of the guitar, which we may assume signifies that he is able to maintain a critical distance to the whole act. By comparing the influence of the guitar with a treaty, and Johnson’s deal with the Gentleman who “gets into the strings” (5) of the guitar, the idea of breaking a treaty implies an interpretive ambivalence: it signifies hope, and freedom, in the sense that the characters may in the future escape this influence, and, at the same time, the ‘failure’ of the one signing it, to overcome the trial. The idea of signing a treaty bears another important significance. In the beginning, Robert Johnson compares the Spokane Indian Reservation with being “[A]t a crossroads” (4). His perception of the reservation as a location is early given this image to symbolise the different conflicting realities also located within reservation life. While witnessing rehearsals, other Native Americans proclaim the music they play as “the devil’s music” (33) with an insight which furthers ambivalence to the religious aspect. This act implies both the notion that change is a difficult notion for most of the reservation inhabitants, that in itself, Coyote Springs is a bad influence on traditional and Indigenous values. At the same time, the religious aspect is an influence that is brought to the band also through the addition of the Warm Water sisters. They are profoundly religious, and also profess nationalist values. Chess, more than Checkers, provides a different angle to the intentions of the band. She is also an influence that keeps both Thomas and Checkers as grounded in more important aspects of their lives.⁵ As a result of meeting Chess, Thomas dreams of a conversation that reveals a fear and denial of success before the ending:

*You know, Thomas said between songs. I hope we don’t make it.
 Make what? Junior asked.
 Make it big. Have a hit song and all that, Thomas said.
 Why the hell not? Victor asked.
 I don’t know. Maybe we don’t deserve it. Maybe we should have something better in mind. Maybe something bad is going to happen to us if we don’t have something better on our minds. (72)*

⁵ I will follow Arnold Krupat in his example and try to argue for the necessity of including all aspects of the critical “account of Native American Literature” as anti-colonial, yet also as a mix of the usual nationalist, indigenist (a term used by A. Krupat) and cosmopolitan perspectives, as a necessary way to avoid what he titles as “neurotic” entities (2002:7). Although my theoretical discussion relies mostly on Homi Bhabha, who is often viewed as “antinationalist” (Krupat, 2002:4), there are many types of nationalism.

As a microcosmic setting of the influences on identity, Coyote Springs is yet again motivated by the danger of becoming corrupt. The question “*what if we get rich and eat too much?*” (72), is closely connected to corruption and death: “*I’m scared to be famous. [...] And besides, the only famous Indians are dead chiefs and long-distance runners*” (73). That they all feel the same ambivalence toward the future of the band is reflected in their fears and hesitations. These moments of textual anxiety suggest that the colonising culture is “less powerful than was apparent” (Huddart, 2). They are proof of *agency*, moments that Bhabha suggests work to destabilize and question both Western civilization and self-image (Huddart, 2). They are constant reminders that the pact is an act of negotiation of identity as both cultural and individual: “Thomas knew it was just the beginning but *was already frightened by how much Victor and Junior had improved. Victor, especially*” (my emphasis, 41). In fact negotiation is also present in the dynamic of the group:

‘That’s too damn Indian,’ Junior said. ‘It’s always Coyote this, Coyote that. I’m sick of Coyote.’
 ‘Fuck Coyote,’ Victor said.

Lightning fell on the reservation right then, and a small fire started down near the Midnight Uranium Mine. Coyote stole Junior’s water truck and hid it in the abandoned dance hall at the powwow grounds. The truck was too big for the doors, so nobody was sure how that truck fit in there. Junior lost his job, but he had to take that truck apart piece by piece and reassemble it outside first.” (45)

The differences between the players provide a focus for all the changes in the story. Even naming the band is a serious decision that involves choosing tradition over a more progressive name. Resolving the differences drives the plot forward (even if momentarily), as well as revealing the ways the players perceive both their traditional values as well as the drive for success. As a focal point, Coyote Springs implies a multiple self, always located between different temporal points of negotiation on an axis of different opinions that always interact, change and contradict each other. Altogether, it also testifies to the variety of points of view within an ethnic identity. As cultural identity, the environment of the band is privileged in the text, as a way to focus the reading on the dynamic of transforming logocentrism. Yet other differences arise, stressing the identity dialectic further. For them success is not as much the idea of succeeding in white America as much as surviving with the help of money:

Victor understood the economics of the deal, how money equals power, especially on a reservation so poor that a dollar bill once changed the outcome of tribal elections. David WalksAlong was elected councilman by a single vote because he’d paid Lester FallsApart a dollar to punch the ballot for him. (46)

In this way, the text reveals that Victor is not running from his ethnic identity as much as the corruption and despair of reservation life. Similarly, Thomas writes songs about hunger. The first song written by Thomas is “Reservation Blues”. A song, mostly about hunger for food as well as “choices” (1): “*All I had for dinner was some sleep*”[...]/*My heart is empty and I’ve been so hungry*[...]/*And if you ain’t got choices/What else do you choose?* (1). The choice to write songs is both a social critique, whereby writing songs and telling stories are results of a disease in the womb (as quoted above), as well as an individual lack of freedom. The characters are always already split (Huddart, 23). That reservation life provides no other choices than poverty and despair is the important message of the passage, especially since the text explains that there are enough choices *in language*: “Thomas was hungry on a reservation where there are ninety-seven different ways to say *fry bread*” (47). Language and expression seem the only freedom assigned to the present condition. The possibility to express the problems of individual Native Americans in songs is confronted repeatedly with the communal response. For example, when given their first gig off the reservation, to play on the Flathead Indian reservation in Arlee, Montana, at the Tipi Pole Tavern, the band finds itself at a new “crossroads” (49) having lost their way:

“Let’s decide this the old Indian way,” Thomas said because *he tried to be as traditional as the twentieth century allowed*.

“What’s that?” Victor and Junior asked because *they were as contemporary as cable television*.” (my emphasis, 49)

It is worth noticing the phrasing of the way the financial promise also provides the promise of a future: in the text, “He would pay” is immediately transformed into Thomas’s perspective: “‘He’ll pay,’ Thomas whispered, then chanted, then sang” (48). That Thomas is ‘as traditional as the twentieth century allowed’ reflects the position of the narrator as well:

Traditional Spokanes believe in rules of conduct that aren’t collected into any book and have been forgotten by most of the tribe. For thousands of years, the Spokanes feasted, danced, conducted conversations, and courted each other in certain ways. Most Indians don’t follow those rules anymore, but Thomas made the attempt. (5)

2.2 Of Stereotype and Mimicry

Homi Bhabha defines the stereotype as the “major discursive strategy” of fixity and as “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’,

already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (95). Respectively, colonial mimicry “is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*” (Bhabha, 122).⁶ Louis Owens, an important Native American author and critic writes that Alexie “too often simply reinforces all of the stereotypes desired by white readers: his bleakly absurd and aimless Indians are imploding in a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing” (as quoted in Stephen Evans: 47). How the trope of the stereotype is interpreted and given meaning in different contexts differentiates between two contrasting readings (to start with). One, that may recognise that the reflection of the One in the Other, in other words, the act of mimicry is one way to achieve agency. The other, that focuses on the perpetuation of stereotypes that are supposedly the same even after the act of repetition. This chapter uses the notion that read-anew-stereotypes and mimicry are two of the ways Alexie uses to create textual anxiety. Textual anxiety inserts difference and produces a considerably different reading of the novel.

Chapter 3, “Indian Boy Love Song” focuses on the relationship between Thomas and Chess. They share a sense for poetry and storytelling where Thomas “had just met the only Indian who told stories like his” (67). But Chess is more realistic, in the sense that the lyrical aspect of her stories, which is reflected in the narrator’s style as phantasmagoric elements, is something she *used* to believe in (67). Their first conversation is mostly a conversation about overcoming the death of their family members, most deaths attributed to the damage of alcoholism. Backgammon, Chess’s younger brother dies because he has no way of consulting a doctor. As a result of that, the father starts to drink and the mother decides to commit suicide: “Linda Warm Water walked into the woods like an old dog and found a hiding place to die” (69).⁷

That they all have dysfunctional backgrounds is made very clear in the text; that they all bring their different influences in the collision that Coyote Springs symbolises as a group is reflected in their music as well. “Playing a mix of blues, rock, pop, gospel, rap and a few unidentifiable musical forms” (59), the band “created a tribal music that scared and excited the white people in the audience”, a music that “might have chased away the pilgrims five hundred years ago” (79-80). If it is not a music that will provide them with success, it enables

⁶ These terms are more extensively defined throughout the chapter “Of Mimicry and Man”.

⁷ Stephen F. Evans in his article “Open Containers: Sherman Alexie’s Drunken Indians” from 2001, has already provided a close and insightful analysis of the implications of alcohol uses in Sherman Alexie’s deconstructive project. For this reason, my analysis focuses on other unexplored aspects of the novel.

them to counter the superiority of the coloniser. As “the sign of a double articulation” (Bhabha, 122), the performance of mimicry reforms ‘normalised’ knowledges (Bhabha, 123). That the music is a combination of different styles, enhances the notion that the distinction between coloniser/colonised is never easily defined (Huddart, 2). Nor does it imply that Coyote Springs has now assimilated the white American identity. According to Bhabha, their gesture may easily be seen as a ‘double’, a way to destabilize the image of white America by performing a mimicry that produces “its slippage, its excess, its difference” continually (Bhabha, 122). What is ambiguous about this passage in the text is that Coyote music is compared to Wovoka’s Ghost Dance, a religious ceremonial dance and song that represents a mixture of the Christian religion and Paiute Native American beliefs. That the music is scary and exciting at the same time perhaps explains the attraction of the audience: “The audience reached for Coyote Springs with brown and white hands that begged for more music, hope, and joy. Coyote Springs felt powerful, fell in love with the power, and courted it” (80). The music is *tribal* only for the white audience, suggesting a counter-coloniser movement towards re-negotiation of Indianness also within the white, American gaze. Looking at the quote through this angle exposes another textual anxiety, where courting power no longer carries the corruptive meaning. As a process, negotiation is located in the hybridization of both Native Americans, white Americans, as well as the in-between process of hybridization of cultures.

Betty and Veronica, later additions to the band, provide another conflict of opinion between the band members. Chess’s nationalist beliefs are used to define the way Thomas differs from them. She “hated Indian men who chased after white women; she hated white “preservation”, because “Indian men need Indian women. [...] only Indian women can take care of Indian men. Jeez, we give birth to Indian men. We hold them when they cry. Then they run off with white women. I’m sick of it” (81). When Victor and Junior sleep with the two white women, she thinks they “are traitors” because they are “two of the last full-blood Indians” on the reservation. According to her, “Junior and Victor are betraying their DNA” (81). To this attitude, Thomas’s thoughts reflect a more hybrid understanding of the cultural crossroad:

Thomas agreed with Chess, but he also knew about the shortage of love in the world. He wondered if people should celebrate love wherever it’s found, since it is so rare. He worried about the children of mixed-blood marriages. The half-breed kids at the reservation school suffered through worse beatings than Thomas ever did. (82)

Homi Bhabha explains the same dialectic in different terms that give a new light to possible interpretations of *Reservation Blues*. He explains that “[T]he meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other. In other words, the cultural exchange is no longer defined as white or Native, since the borderline between the two is clearly resisted in the construction of Thomas. This ambivalence is emphasized when we realise that there is no way that “the content of the proposition will reveal the structure of its positionality; no way that context can be mimetically read off from the content” (Bhabha, 53). Thomas is open to these possibilities, accepting the fact that the reality of his reservation life is never fully present, that things recall their significance only partially, that defining oneself is a continuous yet coherent process. More importantly, his considerations profess to his ability to relate to various situations, especially to the suffering of mixed-blood Native Americans. His acknowledgment of the fact that they are equal and unfairly treated suggests that he also resists the notion of isolating Native American identity only according to blood quantum.

That Victor and Junior are among the last full-blood Native Americans on the reservation may also be a reason as to why Thomas considers the fate and future of reservation life. For him it is a reality that needs to be accepted and embraced with ‘love’. In another example of textual anxiety, the text depicts “the ways in which the Indian and mainstream America are inextricably mixed” yet resists the notion that it “depicts the same separatist discourse that frequently marks nationalist literature” (Andrews, 5). While Chess claims to use nationalist statements to preserve or contain her ethnic inheritance, she selects only one of the aspects of the Native American content. Her claim is however clearly enriched by Thomas’s different focus on the same statement. His outlook claims a future that is not yet in place and that may not easily be read just by questioning the present temporal location. By inserting a Third Space of enunciation, he resists her attempt at disambiguation, which changes perceptions of both the “structure of meaning and reference” as well as the view of culture as a “homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past” (Bhabha, 54). Thomas views culture as repeatedly located in the Third Space, as a result of contradictory and ambivalent cultural statements. Although he relates to the same social and ethnic discursive dilemmas, his approach is one that reads, transforms and adopts the *same* signs, “anew” (Bhabha, 55).

The process I describe includes Thomas’s hesitations, which *slightly* differentiates my focus from that of Homi Bhabha. For him, the “space of reinscription must be thought outside of those metaphysical philosophies of self-doubt, where the otherness of identity is the

anguished *presence* within the Self of an existentialist agony that emerges when you look perilously through a glass darkly” (Bhabha, 68). Freud defines the *uncanny* as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar (Huddart: 81-2). I find I need to differentiate between the space of reinscription and that of the *uncanny*, which is why I have approached Junior’s process of identification as more dependent on the *uncanny* yet not necessarily reinscribing identity. In addition, while I argue for meaning and depth in the process of *différance*, I do not argue that the play of signifiers is to produce “agency of depth” (as in pre-given identity), rather a “signifier [that] reveals the space of doubling” (Bhabha, 71) through play, with depth reflected as the coherent deferral of meaning and negotiation of significance. Junior’s dreams as repetitions construct therefore a whole other ‘reality’ than Thomas, whose act of repetition is fragmented yet based on a dialogue with the social and cultural doubling.

Chess reveals that her grandmother “was a little bit white” and yet she “did not look very Indian” (82). That she is ashamed of her grandmother’s decision to leave the reservation and her family behind is perhaps grounded on the fact that her grandmother does not define her identity as solely Native American. This reason justifies perhaps Chess’s present attitude toward white America, although this analysis would argue that even here, her feelings reflect a need for stability and continuity rather than blind hate. Yet, indirectly, for the reader and for Thomas, her grandmother’s decision to leave the reservation may also be a result of the impossibility to function as Native American when identifying with both cultures because of the simplistic categories in place. Perhaps she was not considered as Native American enough, a consideration that would insert dramatic irony in Chess’s statements about her grandmother. She is perhaps unaware that in taking such an essentialist approach towards defining the Native American, she in her turn, reproduces the power of the coloniser. In light of the ending, these different understandings that occur within the text suggest the same attempt to disambiguate anxiety from the act of reading.

Chess is however, very much engaged in what Bhabha terms as ‘colonial desire’ (63). In her process of identification, her wish to preserve her idea of ethnicity is profoundly tied with a fascination of the coloniser: ‘Like I was saying, everybody wants to be an Indian. But not everybody is an Indian. It’s an exclusive club. I certainly couldn’t be Irish. Why do all these white people think they can be Indian all of a sudden?’ (169). She focuses repeatedly on evidence that colonialism is still in place, confesses repeatedly to the desire of the coloniser’s power. Her targeting for example of Veronica and Betty as intruders reproduces the classification of the coloniser toward the colonised in a way that creates the image of the

coloniser from within the reservation. Although she has redirected “the mirror of representation” (Bhabha, 54), she is far from destroying it, for her focus is tied to binaries. Thomas however recognizes social and political injustice, yet still dismisses the notion of separation of the Other by repeatedly confessing his desire to leave previous locations:

“He had never felt farther away, never felt more *away* than at that moment. He didn’t want to get on the plane for the flight home to Wellpinit. He wanted to get on a different plane and fly to someplace different, somewhere he had never even heard of. Some strange place with a strange name. He wanted to grab a map of the world, close his eyes, and spit. He would live wherever his spit landed on the map. Still, he knew he would probably spit on his own reservation, just a green-colored spot on the map. (256)

Although his feelings confess to a notion of fate as unavoidable, his Native American condition is different for he *does* leave the reservation. In spite of his desire to leave and his wish for change, Thomas “still knew that every part of him was Spokane Indian” (256). As soon as Thomas tells her the story of the half-brothers, where Thomas explains it as a possibility that “drums make everyone feel like an Indian” (83), Chess dreams of the killing of the “unpainted Indian” by the “angry Indian” (85). The dream may be a re-enactment of the death of Sitting Bull, a Sioux Lakota Native American, killed by a Lakota law officer in 1890. As a major historical figure in resisting white domination, his example for Chess is reflected ambivalently, depending on whether she identifies with Sitting Bull or the angry Lakota. As Sitting Bull, she aligns herself as a supporter of anti-colonialist influences. If she identifies with the law officer, the reader assigns to her the same guilt as that of the law officer. In this angle, she is channelling the same necessity to classify the Native as the colonised, as a way of controlling both future and empowerment. For the reader, her anger toward Victor and Joseph and the white women may easily be compared to Michael White Hawk’s similar reaction to the band. Yet Chess may also feel that she is both a symbolic Sitting Bull and a law officer, suffering at the expense of Native Americans participating in a cross-cultural exchange with white America. This is shown in the parallel her dream makes when she is awake. She “called out her father’s name” (85), just after the end of the dream describes Sitting Bull calling for his father.

Whether or not referring to his literal father or his ancestors, the dream of Sitting Bull also opens up another level of identity formation, that of representation. It is however a representation that, although it introduces irregularity and hesitation (since when is the unconscious utterly trustworthy?) works as one of the elements that destabilise the grounds of their reality. In their dreams, relationships with fathers are explored through several angles: Checkers with Father Arnold, Chess with her father Luke as well as Thomas’s father Samuel,

Victor with his father, step father, the catholic priests at his school and Junior as a possible father in his past. Thomas's thoughts on the example of his father run as follows:

He had lost count of the number of times he's saved his father, how many times he's driven to some reservation tavern to pick up his dad, passed out in a back booth. Once a month, he bailed his father out of jail for drunk and disorderly behaviour. That had become his father's Indian name: Drunk and Disorderly. (95)

The narrator renders Thomas's experience as shared by Victor and Junior: "They saw too many drunks littering the grass of the reservation; they rolled the drunks over and stole their money" (96) and just after, by the Warm Water sisters: "They hated to see that old Indian man so helpless and hopeless; they hated to see the father's features in his son's face. *It's hard not to see a father's life as a prediction for his son's*" (my emphasis, 96). "Our father was just like this, too", Chess said. "Just like this" (96). The idea of inheriting a tradition is here encouraged by being different from their fathers. Perhaps that is the meaning of the title of the chapter, "Father and Farther", if we look at the song lyrics: "*Sometimes, father, you and I/Are like a three-legged horse/Who can't get across the finish line/ No matter how hard he tries and tries and tries*" (93). The relationship is further compared to "*a warrior/Who can only paint half of his face/While the other half cries and cries and cries*", to "*two old drunks/Who spend their whole lives in bars*" and finally to "*dirty ghosts/Who wear the same sheets every day*" (94). That they all need to break free from the example of their fathers is simple enough to deduce, yet the text plays with the word 'farther' and extends it to the need to also separate the group identities from the reservation:

The word *gone* echoed all over the reservation. The reservation was gone itself, just a shell of its former self, just a fragment of the whole. But the reservation still possessed power and rage, magic and loss, joys and jealousy. The reservation tugged at the lives of its Indians, stole from them in the middle of the night, watched impassively as the horses and salmon disappeared. But the reservation forgave, too. Sam Bone vanished between foot falls on the way to the Trading Post one summer day and reappeared years later to finish his walk. Thomas, Chess, and Checkers heard the word *gone* shake the foundation of the house. (97)

Coyote Springs refuse to leave the reservation except for gigs, until they start to receive death threats from the rest of the reservation. The ambivalent relationship they all share with their home is left ambivalent. More importantly, just before the basketball game begins between the tribal law officers and Samuel Builds-the-Fire, Thomas explains that his father was "Washington State High School Basketball Player of the Year in 1956" (97). His present condition is explained as a result of the pressure received from the rest of the reservation: "When any Indian shows the slightest hint of talent in any direction, the rest of

the tribe starts expecting Jesus” and is asked to “change a can of sardines into a river of salmon” (97). He later states that his father “had lived up to those expectations”, to which Chess replies that the “true test” is that she sometimes hates “being Indian” (98).

The desire to change roles coincides with her notion that culture is a progressive and open phenomenon. Bhabha adds an important distinction to such nationalist views. He states that another condition that helps to understand the process of identification is that “the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s *avenging* anger” (64). In other words, Chess’s wish to ascertain Native American freedom from colonial influences through separation, works at the same time to threaten that very same essence she is fighting for. Between these two, the colonialist Self and the colonised Other, the figure of “colonial otherness” (Bhabha, 64) is put together.

It is important to differentiate between the two processes of identification that Thomas and Chess perform. Without my attempting a definition, the two rely on different parameters that enable, as a result different outlooks: Chess believes in the notion of a “pre-given identity” (Bhabha, 64), while Thomas is, although ambiguously, engaged in “the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (Bhabha, 64). Their approach to hybridity and Indigenous values shows the same differentiation within both cultural and individual identity construction. The hopelessness of the reservation is clearly delineated as far as the future generation is concerned. The need for an individual identity is described by the narrator with lyrical sadness:

Thomas cried. Not because he needed to be alone; not because he was afraid to cry in front of women. *He just wanted his tears to be individual, not tribal.* Those tribal tears collected and fermented in huge BIA barrels. Then the BIA poured these tears into beer and Pepsi cans and distributed them back onto the reservation. *Thomas wanted his tears to be selfish and fresh.* (my emphasis, 100)

The act of leaving the reservation implies personal and cultural freedom through the appropriation of a dialogical relationship with the coloniser. The trips off the reservations are moments of insight into a *different* kind of mimicry, one that no longer views the appropriation of traditional images of the Native American as a way of fighting off white influence, rather, the mimicry/ies of the subject position with power. In their search for power, the insight into what constitutes the position itself is a revelatory moment in the text. The encounter is no longer just historically constructed, it is rather placed within a dialogue that may finally, through the acknowledgement that the colonised is equally affecting the coloniser, change rigid perceptions of both present and future. In fewer words, Thomas

wishes to affect the trail of tears by resisting stereotyping and influencing the distribution of tears back to the Native Americans. As a metaphor, tears refer to the position of the subaltern as doubling, and reproducing the image of itself (Bhabha, 64) as a false way of maintaining cultural distributions. Wishing for tears that are selfish and fresh suggests that Thomas is reflecting the mirror to the coloniser, while at the same time reducing cultural stereotypes of white influence. The liberation is revealed as an existential process of the mind.

When Checkers and Victor fight, the differences between the band members, although they seem trivial in the text, (Victor makes a bad joke about roasting Samuel Builds-the-Fire, when he finds only commodity applesauce in the fridge), reveal a darker and more meaningful subtext that foreshadows the ending. Thomas fights off Victor and as a result the text makes an important distinction:

‘I don’t give a shit what that guitar said. I don’t care.’
‘Well, call it off,’ Chess said. ‘Let’s kick them out of the band. We don’t need them. We can be a trio. Me, you, and Checkers. We’ll get a new name. We’ll move to a new place. Get the hell away from this reservation. Any reservation.’ (123)

In this way Thomas openly refuses to submit to the influence of the guitar, both in regards to his own hopes and the influence it has on Victor. His response is a clear declaration of the different ways of perceiving both the aims of the band and the belief system they all interpret differently. They both react to the hopelessness that Victor expresses, but mostly his de-sacralising attitude. To his joke, Checkers responds with “That ain’t funny. That ain’t funny” (122) and Thomas with “He can’t do that to people no more” (123). In this instance it becomes no longer possible to view the group as homogenous, neither as a group that either succeeds or fails. It is the contingency of the group’s journey that reveals what is the ‘right’ way of hybridizing, by excluding, repeatedly, the influences that are not productive of liberation.

This conversation is interrupted by another letter, this time from The Backboard, a bar in Seattle that offers the group a thousand dollars to come and play. Yet again, Coyote Springs postpones leaving the reservation for the temporary trip, in the hope that things would improve as a result of a better financial situation. Chess’s thoughts reveal that her plan is still in place, in spite of their decision to perform the gig: “With Thomas and his share, they would have enough money to dump Victor and Junior” (124).

Junior’s relationship with dreams explains a transformation that is the opposite of liberation:

Junior, who had always paid close attention to dreams, wondered which particular nightmare was filling Victor's sleep. He had majored in psychology during his brief time in college and learned a lot about dreams. In Psychology 101, Junior had learned from Freud and Jung *that dreams decided everything*. He figured that Freud and Jung must have been reservation Indians, because *dreams decided everything for Indians*, too. Junior based all of his decisions on his dreams and visions, which created a lot of problems. (my emphasis, 18)

The power of his cultural selection is explained in further dreams Junior has, as well as his final choice to commit suicide. His fault seems to be that he is unable to realise that his hybridization has the same potential as that of an act of empowerment. Instead, he focuses on the destructive trait of colonial history, a haunting presence of killing and destruction that programmes the way he approaches his own identity construction. His appropriation and transformation are fatal, because he is unable to forgive the past, in the same way as he is unable to forgive himself. For him, the liminal is impossible, because his personal approach is binary, constantly taking his own relationship to the reservation as the only location of culture. As a notion, Junior's concept of culture is very much identical to his Indigenous values, and therefore one that fails to acknowledge the Native American as an already split political and social entity.

His mental conflict is rather one that fails to overcome the stereotype: "Indians were *supposed* to have visions and receive messages from their dreams. All the Indians on television had visions that told them exactly what to do" (18). What is the problem is the fact that Junior seems to accept the televised image of the Native American identity without criticising it. The text, in this way, exemplifies a process of hybridization that is unacknowledged in its potential, and furthermore, constructed as a result of a mix of tradition and stereotype. Yet, the text also brings into question the lack of reversal, in other words, the lack of Junior's awareness that he *may* choose not to trust the stereotype, and more importantly to relate to different cultural tropes. In his identification, culture is a result of wishing only one ethnic categorization, something that Thomas, Chess and Checkers clearly oppose in their willingness to relate to the social and economic aspect of their lives. These latter choose to "resist the imperial colonizing thrust of contemporary culture through participation in it" (Rader, 2). Junior Polatkin views himself in terms of his past and his failures, something that identifies him with the communal suffering of his nation. He is almost never portrayed as wondering about the future, and never makes any clear plans that would engage him in the cross-cultural dialectic. His decisions are as the quote also explains results of his dreams.

When Coyote Springs is in Seattle, they are forced to sleep in the car. All the members show signs of anxiety at the sight of so many "white people" by which they are

“frightened” (133). Junior’s following dream extends this worry by revisiting the same horse massacre that is sporadically sprinkled throughout the text. His refusal to sign a “clean, white paper” (144) for Sheridan and Wright is on the one hand a way of resisting white American influences. Yet, it is a resistance that the coloniser has constructed through a history of power. The Native American who chooses death over submission is another stereotype that is, when exposed, a controversial resistance. One that at the same time submits to a stereotypical image of the coloniser, yet one that fails to engage in a hybridization that would, through noticing anxiety, interrupt the colonising gaze. His death suggests also that mentally, both consciously and unconsciously, he is always tied to his ethnic past in a way that disables him from forming an individual identity. On the other hand, his choice for death may simply be interpreted as a refusal to engage with elements that are already part of his identity, as a simple sign that he is unable to relate to conflicting realities within his identity formation. That he always applies the same differentiating politics of Native/White to his own experiences also shows the way his character construction in the text may not be seen as an on-going construction, or one defined by the play of *différance*, for he does not acknowledge the power of enunciation, or the constructive power of words.

Indirectly, Junior’s repertoire of metaphors for his own condition resemble Derrida’s notion of ‘metaphoricity’ as a process that describes, shapes and prescribes an event (Huddart, 20). His ‘poetic’ system of reference is one that relies on historical and cinematic images of soldiers and Native American warriors. As such, it is one that always refers back to itself and generates no ethnic continuity or preservation. Junior has attributed the destructive intention of colonial history in a way that keeps him from addressing the neo-colonial conditions of his status quo. What is interesting is that in killing himself he seems to run more from dreams and what haunts him rather than from his reservation and band members, which suggests that what haunts him is the way his mind “repeats traumatic experiences in order to deal with them” (Huddart, 82) as a construction that perpetuates only pain and suffering.

By not acknowledging the negotiating and mutual relationship between his subject position and the situation, or his subject and the statement, what Junior performs is rather a repetition of his wish to control the cultural processes he resists. It is significant that Junior dreams as a result of his encounter with mainstream America. His dream reveals that his mind is traced by notions inscribed by the colonial past, positioning a supposedly *original* culture in dialogue with the new location. They also refer to different examples of traumatic experiences: his alcoholic parents, the experience of poverty, the loss of his siblings and the loss of love. What Junior doubles is his sense of loss, not the coloniser image through a

différance that would become productive of meaning. Consequently, what he mimics is rather the process of colonization. His last dream reveals clearly that his memories have been colonised, and that “his mimicry has become so deeply ingrained that he has undergone a process of self-colonization” (Huddart, 74). Seen through this angle, Junior Polatkin’s resistance is rather submission. The powerlessness implied, explains why he is unable to envisage change. In Homi Bhabha’s words,

“The ‘right’ to signify from the periphery of authorised power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced *by the power* of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are ‘in the minority’.” (my emphasis, Bhabha, 2007:3)

In other words, it is the ambivalence of categorising tropes and their built in contradictoriness that reflect possibilities. The ability to accept the fact that the relationship between coloniser/colonised is no longer a relationship that distances the two, rather a relationship that needs to be actualised in order to reflect the in-betweenness of both culture and identity. The possibilities, what Thomas views as choices, are ways to liberate the cross-cultural discourse by repeated, ongoing negotiation:

The Indian world is tiny, every other Indian dancing just a powwow away. Every Indian is a potential lover, friend, or relative dancing over the horizon, only a little beyond sight. Indians need each other that much; they need to be that close, tying themselves to each other and closing their eyes against the storms. (151)

That dissemination is necessary is clear in the emphatic use of ‘tiny’, the repetition of ‘need’ that becomes ironic, the verbs ‘tying’ and ‘closing’ that become a metaphor for a violent image of exclusion: the anxiety here is located in the apparent uselessness of closing one’s eye against the storms. Moreover, the strength in numbers is undermined when the wrong action is taken. Hence, this is an exclusion that is based on the wrong counter-measures, that remains tiny by only referring back to itself, hoping that exclusion will do away with the lack therein.

2.3 A Reading of the Ending

The chapter, “Falling Down and Falling Apart”, starts with another song that may also be tied to possible readings of the ending. The chorus explains that “she don’t want a warrior and she don’t want no brave/And she don’t want a renegade heading for an early grave/[...] She don’t need no Indian man falling down and falling apart” (171). The song is connected to

the guitar and the pact with the Gentleman from the beginning of the same chapter, where Robert Johnson remembers the struggle:

And just when he began to allow himself *hope*, he would come home from his latest job to find that guitar, all shiny and new, on the bed in his cheap downtown apartment. Johnson had wept every time. *He had considered burying himself, throwing himself into the river, jumping off a tall building. That guitar made him crazy.*" (my emphasis, 173)

It is interesting that the process of identity formation is opposed to a guitar that will constantly repair itself, as if it had never been broken, an instrument that would kill hope and life, for the sake of remaining the same thing, over and over again. As if it were trying to create a stable dialogue with the object of its influence, Robert Johnson. The guitar becomes a symbol for the constant return to values that repeatedly do not recognize change, or for that matter, individuality. On the other hand, difference and deferral allow for hope, for the future, for the status quo of identity as entitled in itself. The renewing guitar is also compared to 'a new road':

Then the music stopped. The reservation exhaled. Those blues created memories for the Spokanes, but they refused to claim them. Those blues lit up a new road, but the Spokanes pulled out their old maps. Those blues churned up generations of anger and pain: car wrecks, suicides, murders. Those blues were ancient, aboriginal, indigenous. (174)

Since the reader already knows that the guitar drives Robert Johnson 'crazy', the possible explanation as to why the Spokanes refuse to appropriate it is left textually ambiguous: the blues create memories and light up a new road. The Spokanes use their old maps to 'understand' and transform it, which in the process, relates to the same old anger and pain. The old maps render the blues ancient, aboriginal, indigenous. The text does not make a distinction between the Spokane treatment of the blues and Johnson's. Nor does it explain whether it implies that the Spokanes are already subjects of the same blues, the same desire for success and therefore just as unable to respond to the newly lit road as Johnson is. Most importantly however, the passage explains that pulling out old maps changes the function of the blues. In other words, what the reader brings to the text, participates in the production of the novel's meaning. What the Native American brings to the value of the blues, participates in the creation of meaning that is *old* just like the maps. That they exclude a possible, positive use for the blues is possible. What is ambivalent is the fact that the guitar seems to have different functions that change in reaction to the one influenced. As a simulating instrument, the instrument may also be repeating its desire for control, order, the 'known'.

The textual examples of exclusion function to question both knowledge and experience. Exclusion also functions at another level, within the reservation: "Do we really

want people to think that the Spokanes are a crazy storyteller, a couple of irresponsible drunks, a pair of Flathead Indians, and two white women? I don't think so" (176). The open letter in *The Wellpinit Rawhide Press* written by Tribal Councilman David WalksAlong publicly opposes the image Coyote Springs reflects. As a result, they vote to send the women off the reservation. The Warm Water sisters remain as a consequence of Lester FallsApart whose vote is pivotal in countering the decision. The narrative inclusion of the newspaper article reflects a distance however between the position of the narrator and that of David WalksAlong which, in light of the whole novel, clearly answers the question in the quote positively. By association, the public image of the Spokanes is counter-sublated (Hudart, 26), implying that there is no Supra to the Native American, nor a universal Native American type. As a result, the way they are perceived by the narrator is enabled and further debated in the text through the choice to place them as focalisers and foibles to the reservation officials. In fact, the narrator deconstructs his characters by constantly placing them at the crossroads of contingency. Thomas "felt the weight of God, the reservation, and all the stories between (180). As a move, the gradual process of re-thinking, re-reading the world, is contrasted to the Cavalry Records wish to mould Coyote Springs: "We can really dress this group up, give them war paint, feathers, etc., and really play up the Indian angle. I think this band could prove to be very lucrative for Cavalry Records" (190).

The character of Big Mom plays the most ambivalent role. She warns them before they leave: "I don't think you have a chance at landing a contract without my help. In fact, there are many other complications involved in all of this" (195). When the reader revisits her part in influencing the ending, the reader engages in what Homi Bhabha explains as a "return to the performance of identity as iteration, the re-creation of the self in the world of travel, the resettlement of the borderline community of migration" (12). This process is concomitant with the one Coyote Springs is undergoing. Borders are negotiated in the same way her story is re-produced in the text, as one in "a million stories about Big Mom" (199). Her description seems often an exaggeration: "She was a Spokane Indian with a little bit of Flathead blood thrown in for good measure. But she was more than that. She was a part of every tribe" (199).

Big Mom seems to defy both time and categories. Her influence is that of a "musical genius. She was the teacher of all those great musicians who shaped the twentieth century" (201). As a consequence, it is difficult to define her role other than in terms of her advocacy for free, individual will. Although the reader is told that many of her students have broken her heart because they "couldn't cope with the incredible gifts she had given them" (201), it remains unclear at first whether the text refers to the gift as a musical talent or the gift of the

instruments. If Big Mom is the one that has called Robert Johnson to the reservation through his dreams, her influence seems to rely again on how some gestures are interpreted rather than on a separate, fixed representation of Big Mom. For example, she encourages Victor to throw the guitar away yet at the same time she gives them lessons to help them with the audition. Perhaps her influence is that for once she functions as an example that is neither essentialist nor openly contradictory to their intentions:

‘That guitar is Victor’s responsibility now,’ Big Mom said. ‘I just wanted to see it. I just wanted Victor to know he gets to make choices. He can play the guitar or not. *I don’t think he should*, but I won’t take it away. If you want, I can throw it away, Victor.’

‘Shit’ Victor said. ‘I’d like to see you try and take this guitar away.’ (my emphasis, 202)

When Big Mom asks Victor to choose his own fate, she asks him to forgive at the same time. Forgiveness is here seen as an impediment to Victor’s freedom. Power in Big Mom’s world-view is forgiveness:

‘Victor’ Big Mom said, ‘*you should forgive that priest who hurt you when you were little. That will give you power over him, you know? Forgiveness is magic, too.*’

[...] Victor couldn’t talk. He was frozen with the thought of the priest’s life. He had prayed for his death for years, had even wanted to kill him, but never once considered forgiveness.” (my emphasis, 203)

The most powerful message of the “Big Mom” chapter is that she encourages them to change their minds (210). This sentence suggests that she is aware of the power individual constructions or representations may have when adjusted to free will:

‘I ain’t Jesus, I ain’t God,’ Big Mom said. ‘I’m just a music teacher.’

‘But look what you did to us.’

‘I didn’t do anything to you. You caused all this. You made the choices.’

‘What can we do?’

‘You can change your mind.’ (210)

At the same time as Big Mom denies the mythical qualities that both text and characters attribute to her, she opposes free will to the notion of God. Suggesting that the characters’ fate is built according to their choices and their individuality rather than divine ordination provides a different frame to the reading. As specified, her larger-than-life characterisation is constructed by others. The exaggeration of her actions is something that becomes obvious in her humble confession of being “just a music teacher”. Her claim gives different significances to the figure of Coyote, the horses and hybridity. Free will no longer requires betrayal of cultural values rather, taking responsibility. Furthermore, the sentence “You can change your mind” is equally significant whether taken literally or figuratively.

Before they leave for the Cavalry Records studio audition, Coyote Springs become increasingly aware of the implications of signing a contract. When Thomas states that he is “scared to be good” and “scared to be bad” (211), the statement is another critique of the fact that his actions are unable to reflect his identity because of the expectations of reservation life as either heroes or failures:

We have to come back as heroes. They won't let us back on the reservation if we ain't heroes. Unless we're rock stars. We already left once, and all the Spokanes hate us for it. Shit, Michael White Hawk wants to kill all of us. Dave WalksAlong wants to kick us completely out of the Tribe. What if we screw up in New York and every Indian everywhere hates us? What if they won't let us on any reservation in the country?

The collective pressure that Samuel Builds-the-Fire witnessed is in this instance repeated, as a mentality that is falsely fixed: leaving the reservation constitutes a betrayal, returning short of the expectations of the reservation, constitutes ethnic and cultural death:

“Meanwhile, the reservation remained behind. It never exactly longed for any Indian who left, for all those *whose bodies were dragged quickly and quietly into the twentieth century* while their souls were left behind somewhere in the nineteenth. But the reservation was there, had always been there, and would still be there, waiting for Coyote Springs's return from New York City. *Every Indian, every leaf of grass, and every animal and insect waited collectively. [...]The reservation waited for Coyote Springs to fall into pieces, so they could be dropped into the old women's stews.*” (my emphasis, 220)

It is very useful to apply what Homi Bhabha describes as the necessary “*negation of an originary narrative of fulfilment*”, as one of the main conditions that work for the the “*emergence of the human subject as socially and psychically authenticated*” (Bhabha, 72). Though “Victor, Thomas, and Junior had fallen apart in the face of all that” (287), the text suggests that they emerge within the dynamic of the twentieth century. Although the same ambivalence is kept, by suggesting that their souls are left in the nineteenth, there is hope in the act of leaving that is distinctly different from what the other Native American treat as both treason and ingenuity. The text leaves the question open: “Junior could never be put back together again, but maybe the rest of them could” (287). The reservation waits ‘collectively’ for the band to fall into pieces, which sheds a darker significance to the act of collective definition. On the other hand, Alexie plays again by rendering the text ambiguous even on this point: “Coyote Springs was gone. Thomas, Chess, and Checkers packed all their stuff into the blue van and *left Coyote Springs behind in the house*. Victor didn't want anything to do with Coyote Springs, either” (my emphasis, 297). Perhaps ‘falling apart’ is no longer a description of failure as much as a description of separation from the collective identity (ethnicity excluded from this separation), since it is so insisted upon in the text. The new split of Coyote Springs from Thomas, Checkers and Chess, retrospectively questions all

the previous uses of the band name to designate the group, as carrying the split all along. In this way, the reading addresses its own progressive look, revising and changing even the reading so far. If the text has always made a distinction between the group members and the name of the band, the act of designation is yet another subterfuge at ambiguity.

Différance is contoured in different ways in this novel. If before it could be traced through and vis-à-vis an *already* hybridised and continually hybridising culture, it is now in addition traced in-between nationalist, Indigenous and cosmopolitan perspectives on several locations. *Indian Killer* explores the imagined reservation through the perspective of the metropolis. *Reservation Blues* provides as the location of culture the mental processes of understanding the following: the reservation, the metropolis, the liminal. It is only natural that Bhabha would follow binary oppositions of Subject/Object with the “social process of enunciation” (Huddart, 21) since understanding is never fixed or finished, rather it is on-going and therefore liberating. *Reservation Blues* carries the reader through these different locations to assert the result of negotiation as transformation, in a manner that concomitantly *creates the subject while the subject creates* (Huddart, 21). This narrative structure intensifies the act of reading, especially in poststructuralist terms. If the text and its plurality of perspectives and interpretations are variables, as well as the relationship between the sign and its signifier, the multiply-faceted selves exist equally varying. Difference and deferral are also present in the actual constructions of characters, as a close influence on the ending of the text (as deferral and recognition of *différance* between Victor and Junior versus Chess, Checkers and Thomas who leave the reservation).

Chapter 3:

***Flight*: Disseminating the Native American ‘I’**

Just now everybody wants to talk about ‘identity’ ... identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.⁸

In this chapter I wish to examine Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* (2007). It depicts a boy who is “cut off from his Native American heritage and who suffers immensely”, in the same way as the protagonist of *Indian Killer*. Although both novels “depict stark moments of violence”, the author also stated in a speech he held at the *Native American Literature Symposium* in 2007, that he wrote *Flight* as an “answer” to *Indian Killer* (Peterson, xv). What is so particular about *Flight* is the way uses of *deus ex machina* function to influence directly the formation of the character as well as that of the plot. Repeatedly. I am interested in the process of literary identity construction which Alexie both negates and confirms through deconstruction and deferral. As stated before, my argument is that reading Alexie deconstructs the subject of Native American identity to change the literary representation of “the Indian” in narrative frames. I wish to trace out some of the productive outcomes of both ambiguity and ambivalence in representations of Indianness, this time through looking at plot manipulations and their concomitant reversal.

Significantly, the traces of meaning achieved through negotiations seem to influence the way the reader reads the technique of *deus ex machina*: as having major impact in perceptions of identity construction and definition. Its ramifications enrich the text rather than mock it. J.T. Townley, however, in the 33rd issue of the *Harvard Review* is harshly critical of the novel’s narrative structure. He states that “the book feels cobbled together as a series of time-travelling vignettes without a compelling central narrative. Worse still, at almost every turn the fantastical elements of *Flight* are explained away by one hokey *deus ex machina* after another” (p.172). The Oxford English Dictionary defines the technique as a “power,

⁸ K. Mercer, ‘Welcome to the Jungle’, in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p. 4.

event, person, or thing that comes in the nick of time to solve a difficulty”. Yet, while some critics consider the use of the technique to be a “forced and improbable device” (Abrams, 2009:77), this chapter, as shown above, explains the necessity of such usage as closely connected to the deconstructive thematics of the novel. Here, *deus ex machina* produces a reversal, hybridizing both text and truths to the point that literary techniques are undermined by identity construction processes. Leaving aside conventions, Alexie adjusts Native American literature to the complexity of many Native Americans that relate to different social and cultural categories.

However, in this chapter I wish to further my interest from ambiguity and ambivalence to dissemination. While *Indian Killer* opens up new possibilities for the literary Native American identity construction, through emphasizing the role of death, lack and exclusion, *Flight* explores the act of dissemination more thoroughly. In *Indian Killer* dissemination is present as a subtler textual construction, in the resulting multiplicity of meanings the murders produce along with the possibility of reading John Smith’s death as a further dissemination of selves. While ambiguity allows for varied interpretations and meanings that may be deduced from either context or social and cultural constructions, dissemination furthers the play of signification endlessly. In my previous chapters I argued that anxiety, ambiguity and ambivalence reveal significantly different meanings than the ones occurring from ignoring the subtext of both themes and structure. Yet, the concept of dissemination allows me to explore the textual construction of *Flight* in a way that enriches both the discussion as well as my subject of deconstruction. By suggesting that meaning is produced endlessly, I maintain that identity in process is coherent, although defined by identity processes that are far from becoming static (Huddart, 87). Thus, when the narrator inserts another example of *deus ex machina* by inserting another character or event, he at the same time maintains the same focaliser which works towards coherence even when the plot is moving forward through ‘unlikeliness’. Furthermore, most instances of *deus ex machina* are controversial and multi-faceted in themselves. Jacques Derrida discusses the “event” that alters the “concept of structure” as having the “exterior form” of a “rupture and a redoubling” (Derrida, 351). The events that are introduced through *rupture* and redoubling, produce various results or, better, further disseminations that change with every re-reading. How the process of *différance* takes place both through the continual demonstration of difference and deferral between Zits and his ‘hosts’, provides a paradoxical concomitance/coexistence/cohabitation of individual and cultural formation. Tracing itself out, the resulting

coherence is never inconsequential or insignificant; rather, it is located in a constant negotiation of momentary, postponed significations.

The problem at hand lies in the textual interpretations of what Alexie writes as controversial and often mutually-cancelling traits of Native Indian literary identity. For example, a subtext of the protagonist's journey is rich with questions of whether subjectivity functions as a result of both ethnic and cultural deferral. While it is clear that the journey through various cultural locations and historical moments, works to enrich and develop the protagonist's identity, the question of whether the same character is enabled as a hybrid within ethnic categories remains to a large extent indeterminate. This chapter would argue that at the same time as Alexie questions stereotypical ideas of 'the Indian', the reading produces disseminations that work to revise and re-inscribe that same category, through repeatability and deferral. It is valid to ask whether Alexie suggests that hybridity and dissemination work to erase valuable constructive traits of Native American identity. However, the focus of this reading is on the productive and liberating quality that interpretations produce. In fact, this chapter evaluates some of the structural choices as a reason to undermine that very same idea.

3.1 The constructive journey

Zits is half Native American and half Irish. His auto-ethnic view is conflicted to the point that he suggests that his lack of upbringing in Irish or Native American ways equals his lack of any identity whatsoever: "Yes I am Irish and Indian, which would be the coolest blend in the world if my parents were around to teach me how to be Irish and Indian. But they're not here and haven't been for years, so I'm not really Irish *or* Indian. I'm a blank sky, a human solar eclipse" (5). The statement may be read ambivalently: on the one hand it is a requirement for the journey he embarks on that his auto-ethnic views are not rigid. On the other hand, the lack of ethnic categorization is an advantage that disseminates the way he perceives his ethnicity: "Everything I know about Indians (and I could easily beat 99 percent of the world in a Native American version of Trivial Pursuit) I've learned from television" (12). He later states that: "I know all this stuff because it makes me feel more like a real Indian. Maybe I can't live like an Indian, but I can learn how real Indians used to live and how they're supposed to live now" (12). The text provides a clear departure from the

‘television’ version of Native Americans and from what he assumes is a straightforward source of identification. It questions his knowledge openly.

In light of his trans-position into actual situations that enable him to question the influence of the mediatised ‘Native American’, his statements are filled with subversive irony: “I know about famous chiefs, broken treaties, the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Indian wars of the nineteenth century” (12). His journey reveals that knowledge is far from straightforward, more importantly, that enabling a subjective interaction with both history and culture creates, repeatedly, valuable critical perspectives within the subject formation of the self. In addition, it openly re-writes the character through additional narrative change. Derogative statements such as “So that’s me, a screwed half-breed who can’t do anything but spit and kick and bite and punch” (17), although placed closely to more constructive ones that argue for subjectivity, change towards the end of the novel through a corrective juxtaposition of the same meaning. For example Zits asks rhetorically: “Don’t those wimps realize that each and every word only has the power and meaning you assign to it?” (14), a statement that is clearly adjusted within his own process of formation. Demonstrating that he is aware of the constructive power of words and the possibility to subjectively understand the world, Zits meets the requirements that are necessary for his re-evaluation of both history and stereotypes.

When Zits meets Justice, the latter influences him into feeling that his anger and rebellion may have a positive outcome. The significance of the Ghost Dance is here manipulated into producing both ethnic guilt (suggesting that he may not be a real Native American until he practices Indigenous ceremonies), as well as encouraging him to kill:

‘The thing is,’ Justice says, ‘what if this Ghost Dance is real? What if you can bring back your parents if you dance?’

‘I don’t have rhythm,’ I say.

‘Be serious,’ he says, and flashes the pistols at me. ‘What if you could resurrect your parents with these? Would you kill a white man if it would bring back your mother?’

Jesus, what a question.

Justice lets me think about my answer for two or three minutes, but I can’t say yes or no.” (32)

The text reveals that his insecurity is resolved through performance: “I practice killing people until it feels like I am killing them” (33). Whereas before he is unable to answer whether he would kill a white man to bring back his parents, the association of believing in Indigenous ceremonies implies agreeing to kill, because of the context it is placed in. The manipulation is in the association of two distinctly contrasting methods. Whatever doubts he held before, he is now able to push aside through the repetition of the act of shooting:

Every night, after hours of talking and practice-shooting with the real gun and fake-shooting with the paint gun, Justice asks, 'What would you do if the Ghost Dance is real?'

His question echoes in my head. It stays there and I want to give Justice the best answer. The only answer. The answer he wants.

'What if the Ghost Dance is real?' Justice asks me again and again.

The question crawls into my clothes and pushes its way through my skin and into my stomach. The question feeds me.

'Do you think the Ghost Dance is real?' Justice asks.

After hearing that question a thousand times, I finally have the answer.

'Yes', I say. (34)

Justice symbolises a temporary influence within the process of identity formation of the protagonist. His influence is strong enough to change Zits from the insecure teen to a more assertive character, even though he is misguided. The possibilities implied by the question 'What if the Ghost Dance is real?' are also answers that Zits relies on to explain his future or solve the situation he is in. In order to bring back his parents, he allows himself to become dependent on a belief system that is in the text shown as infectious. The image of the question crawling into his clothes, pushing its way through his skin and into his stomach is also ambivalent: it portrays concomitantly the signification of both the infectious quality of misperception as well as the desire and need for that same influence. Revealing that he is at the same time dependent on influence and on dissemination as in the image of a question that feeds him, the text eventually changes the influences he acknowledges. Before that, it seems necessary to qualify what may be represented as the way of reproducing an act of killing as also an act that kills the process of identity formation. Before Zits is transposed into a different subjectivity/character, the significance of his death is left open.⁹ This is suggested in the statement of the eye witness/hostage in the bank:

'You're not real,' he says.

What a strange thing to say to a boy with a gun. But then I wonder if he's right. Maybe I'm not real. And if I'm not real, none of these people are real. Maybe all of us are ghosts? (35)

The question of whether he is real or not is in the text a clear extension from the question of whether the Ghost Dance is real. Before he meets Justice, Zits claims that he is not a ghost: "The rich and educated Indians don't give a shit about me. They pretend I don't exist. They say, *The drunken Indian is just a racist cartoon*. They say, *The lonely Indian is just a ghost in a ghost story*" (7). Perhaps it is possible to view the novel as a corrective journey, one that attempts to readdress the flaws leading to the point of death. It may be even possible that Zits from before his encounters is so different from the one in the end that death

⁹ Dissemination functions in ways that I hope to reveal (at least partially and playfully) both as I move on in my analysis as well as in my return to some of the inconsistencies of this act.

is another necessary use of *deus ex machina* to symbolize the nature of his split self. It is also possible that in order to differentiate Zits from the label of the killer from before, it is necessary for him to die and repeat the encounter with death and the implications of killing, until he is able to put the guns away. The alternative truths that *deus ex machina* reveal are significant in the way the text is read.

Chapter 4 transposes Zits into the body of Hank Storm, an FBI agent. The time he is placed in is 1975, and the location is Ed River, Idaho, on the Nannapush Indian Reservation. The most poignant aspect of the narrative episode is the way Zits identifies with his host. “Yes, I am looking at a very handsome white guy in the mirror” (40) changes from a reflection to a direct recognition: “this guy is me” (40). A closer look at the way he expresses recognition implies also a fast adaptation to what he views as momentarily ‘real’: “My arms are huge. I have the face and body of a bodybuilder white guy. I am beautiful” (41). The fact that Zits remembers his past provides continuity to the narrative progression. The same continuity is disseminated as soon as minor details are given greater importance. For example, the progression is interrupted repeatedly by statements that question both the narrative technique of *deus ex machina* as well as the actual continuity provided by the presence of the protagonist. His interior dialogue may be seen on the one hand as a denial of self-presence because he cannot recognise his whereabouts, as in the following thoughts:

I laugh. But Art is not kidding. He’s telling the truth. Oh, my God! Those damn doctors changed my face and body and put me in a time machine. No, wait. I realize the bank guard did kill me when he shot me in the brain. And I did die, and now I’m living in Hell. I’ve been sent to Hell. And Hell is Red River, Idaho, in 1975. (47)

On the other hand, once he assumes that he is in fact dead and sent to Hell, his resistance to the new location diminishes and it affects the way he views his actions. The IRON encounter mimics an encounter with actual historical references yet one that is true within the text only: “And then I realize that Elk and Horse are double agents. They are traitors to IRON. This is major news. Back in the future, these guys are still heroes” (49). Interestingly, Zits may not only return to witness but also influence both past and present. During the meeting between the FBI agents and the IRON traitors, Zits witnesses the murder of Junior, one of the leaders of IRON. He is forced to shoot Junior after he is killed, simply to prove his allegiance. This flashback is both perceived as a repetition of his supposed initial death by Zits: “I think I’m going to die tonight. Again” (49), as well as a *different* encounter with death.

At this point Zits realises that his passion and desire to become like Justice is anything but simple. The ways in which he constantly reviews and corrects his past is through the realisations that his flashbacks provide. Understanding their motivation for hurting Junior indirectly provides him with knowledge about his own misgivings:

I look at Elk and Horse. They're smiling. I realize they aren't freedom fighters or anything like that. They don't care about protecting the poor and the defenceless. No, man, these guys just like to hurt people. And I look at the weird light in Art's eyes. He isn't a lawman. He doesn't protect our country. He just likes to hurt people, too. (50-1)

This setting is a clear example of the change happening in Zits. The distance that he is able to achieve through closeness, only an apparent paradox, allows him to question and understand the reasons that motivate murders as anything but justice. His subjectivity changes from the admiration he had shown for Hank's body to a strong feeling of empathy towards Junior. Calling him "amazing little Junior" (51), Zits understands that sometimes the victims are equally heroic and just. This episode demonstrates that dissemination functions to open up the interpretative possibilities to the point of suggesting that the meaning that is produced is always a result of the duration of evaluation. One question would be to consider whether Zits, although he is able to influence Hank Storm during his presence within his body or reality, is also a continuing influence over Hank after his departure into the next flashback. Another, to ask whether Hank is in any way aware of Zits. In fact, the more the reader reflects on the terms of interaction between Zits and his hosts, the harder it is to provide a clear answer. Perhaps the point is to outline some aspects of the contingency Zits is placed in. In the following passage, the differentiation between Hank and Zits is blurred to the point that hybridization is an unavoidable possibility:

Have I killed somebody out here on the reservation? Why don't I remember it? Maybe Hank Storm killed people. But then I remember the bank. I'm not any better than these men. I'm not any better than the *real* Hank Storm.

I am Hank Storm, too.

'Don't worry about Hank,' Art says. 'He isn't himself tonight.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'I am most definitely not the old Hank Storm. I'm a *whole different kind of Hank.*' (my emphasis, 52)

Even more controversial is the fact that while Zits claims to be Hank Storm as well he also claims to be a whole different kind of Hank. The juxtaposition of similarity and difference is closely connected with the disseminated idea of presence. Similarity is also positioned alongside sameness. When claiming that he is not better than any of the characters in this episode, Zits also views himself as the same. At the same time, the use of 'the real Hank Storm' implies that although he is located in the body and reality of Hank Storm he has

no insight into his thoughts and memory. Real also implies that the Hank Storm Zits is in contact with is either imaginary or under the all-encompassing influence of the teen.

From a different interpretative angle, the text questions important cultural constructions while at the same time playing with its own subtexts. It is interesting that he is able to feel empathy when he is observing a Native American get killed, although he is in Hank Storm's body. With the 'right' cover, power and race, he is still able to feel empathy. Moreover, he wonders whether he has "always been Hank Storm and was only Zits in a nightmare" (54) which at the same time denies that same racial differentiation. Even more compelling, that he shoots Junior even though he does not need to. His pain is acknowledged, yet also desired. The dissemination is necessary, in order to allow for more learning, for the journey to continue.

This way of gaining experience is what is fascinating about Alexie, that he is able to carry his character *through other* personae. The selective counter-movement works as if to secure the only system of reference as that of Zits. Yet that of Zits is obtained indirectly through confronting his views with all the others, in different times, for, against, without a linear temporality. Joseph Bauerkemper considers "the exploration of the social and political significance of nonlinear histories and chronologies in American Indian literatures" as "neglected" (p.27). A possible explanation to the structural inclusion of *deus ex machina* in *Flight* may be to reveal the focus in contemporary critical thought on nonlinearity as a way of emphasizing the difference between Native American literary tendencies. The nonlinear characteristic is "crucial to [...] narrations of indigenous nationhood" (Bauerkemper, 28), while it is also a method of rewriting Native American literature.

The forward movement is best described by the continuity provided by the protagonist. His textuality becomes the steadfast departure and return of all of the issues debated. Homi Bhabha describes a similar concept, stating that "the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now" (Bhabha, 10). In other words, the act of killing is at the same time progressive and reversed: while Zits thinks that he has already killed enough people, he moves on to shooting Junior who is already dead, and further, to not shooting at all. (More closely, the episodes that follow the Hank Storm narrative function as a way of adjusting the first episode in the bank. Although this is unclear to the reader during the reading, the ending immediately reverses the way the text is read, with the ending changing the beginning). At the same time, Alexie complicates the relationship between Zits and his 'hosts', as never clearly defined as Self and Other. For

example, Zits confesses to his inability to control the bodies he ‘borrows’. Yet all the other characters are impossible without the narrating ‘I’.

Every time he shoots a gun he passes out. Every time he comes to a crossroad, Alexie suggests that we encounter difference in others in order to also be/become ourselves. As if Zits (Michael)¹⁰ were constantly readdressing and correcting his mistakes from the past, the past seems to be intervened, as well as erased by the sudden stop and chaos of time. Independent from his hosts, although they are necessary in order to forgive and gain the power to empathise, the text suggests its refusal to continue with the story every time violence and death come into question. The major experience Zits’s journey confers is to understand the other side of death from the side of the grieved. Loss in this way becomes something that is more than inherited or personal; a loss that forgives in spite of its greatness and understands the in-between spaces. Which may be why the text repeatedly thematises impossible situations.

There is little to suggest that Zits is not the narrator. I have previously stated that the other characters are impossible without the narrating thread of Michael because of the way their interaction is in focus. Of course, as stated before, one question so far is whether Michael in return is able to influence the lives of the other characters. It is plausible to argue that Hank Storm is able to show mercy and empathy towards the people he victimised before. His compassion is closely connected with the relationship he has with Art. As a chain of little events, his influence is more than balanced. The result of communication, forgiveness, empathy and inclusion are time after time paralleled as a way to resolve both racial differences as well as paralleled as the only way to enable hybridization. Understanding and desiring the Other are now concomitant significances to the ambivalence of the fact that physically or mentally Michael is *one* with his hosts, *yet not quite* (Bhabha, 86).

The degrees of difference are never established, never left as simply racial distinctions, neither historical or cultural ones. However, the time machine effect suggests that the uses of *deus ex machina* belong to a different narrator, because Michael either does not know how these ‘jumps’ occur, or he is unwilling to reveal. Of course the reader need not eliminate either one or the other, simply for the fact that the narrating voice *may* be already split. This multiple use of the narrative ‘I’ is clear in all the instances where Zits wonders about the future. “I wonder if I’ll get to have sex with her” (58) suggests that he has no

¹⁰ The protagonist only accepts his real name, that of ‘Michael’ at the end of the novel.

control over the narrative progression or his future. On the other hand, that may be precisely the point: *différance* destabilises plot structures as well as narrative structures.

Another significant moment in the narrative is when the reader is intentionally perplexed. The purpose of statements such as “I am a father” (57) when the reader knows that Hank is the father is obfuscated: it may signify that Michael is able to relate to the agent in a way that implicates both erasure of identity as well as further negotiation. ‘Father’ also suggests the paternal hierarchy as a way of *fathering* meaning. Meaning production is revealed as an ambiguous process that necessitates addressing patriarchal notions as well as changing them. The power Michael claims in this brief statement is perhaps that of a father, or his shedding of this role as constructed through the presence of *other* fathers, the absence of his, as well as the realisation that he may do without. More importantly, it suggests that although he functions as a system of reference for all the other characters, he is also textualised as an amalgamate of several viewpoints. When Michael describes Hank as “a good and loving husband and father. *He is one hundred different versions of himself, and only one of them is a killer*” (my emphasis, 58), the observation becomes an image that describes him as well. This instance of colonial mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha, 122) is important if it may, as this chapter suggests, also produce the meanings of the protagonist.

Chapter 7 carries Michael into the body of an “an old-time Indian kid” (63) at the camp of Little Big Horn, on the verge of General Custer’s last stand. Even here, he questions the significance of another instance of *deus ex machina*, attributing logocentric importance to an act that seems to be performed by a non-presence:

I wonder if this is Heaven. Maybe God sent me to Hell first. Maybe he made me watch Art kill Junior because I needed to learn from my mistakes.
Maybe I learned something. Maybe God forgave me and sent me to Heaven.
Maybe this Indian camp is Heaven—a stinky Heaven.
And, okay, maybe God didn’t forgive me completely, so he put me in the body of a kid without a voice. But that’s okay.” (65)

He does not speculate as to why he is sent back to a Native American camp, why ‘God’ would send him to a camp that is filled with full blood Native Americans. This works to destabilise racial separatism. The ambiguous use of “I have a family. A real family. A true family.” (65) when he may not necessarily be identifying with the Native American ethnic security as much as the “love lightning” (65) he is supposedly hit with, reveals several subtexts working underneath the surface. A powerful one may be to suggest that the act of dissemination inserts cultural difference in a way that places the subject in-between the

double-narrative: the narrative of the episode and the overall narrative of the protagonist. Cultural difference acts through the notion that context changes the significance of an iteration (Huddart, 33). In this episode, the context of 'authentic' historical and social Indianness is looked at through association rather than separatism. The difference remains a difference of context, history and temporality that focuses more on the continuity of dissemination as a productive process than on the reader's possible necessity to define and categorize the ethnic implications.

Interpreting the text is just as much an act of negotiation for the reader as it is for the narrator. Alexie plays so subtly with issues that are to a certain extent clichéd: they work in this context to destabilize both stereotypical views of Native Americans as well as the reader's probable guess that the feeling of love is triggered by his having found 'his roots'. The notion of 'God' or 'logocentrism' as Derrida terms it carries connotations to the structural technique of *deus ex machina*. The reversal of assumed forgiveness on the next page works against the assumptions of both reader and protagonist. In chapter 8, "Happiness never lasts long, does it?" (67), denies the perceived purpose of the technique itself: "All these old-time Indians are doomed" (66). The way Michael perceives his relocations in time and space is anything but linear in the repeated revision and denial of progression. At least at this point in the narrative.

Although he does not initially identify with the full blood Native Americans, he compares himself with Crazy Horse, the Oglala Lakota Chief, saying that he "is a half-breed mystery" (68). He at the same time attributes the quality of mystery to Crazy Horse and to himself. A closer look reveals that although defined through difference, the two are seen by him as similar: "I think this legendary killer of white men *is* half white, like me" (68). As soon as he witnesses "Indian men, women, and children [are] desecrating the bodies of the dead white soldiers" (73), the war triggers traumatic recollections from his own past as well as that of his host. When Michael remembers how the Native American boy lost his voice, he associates that pain to his:

I remember, back when I was Zits, back when I was eight years old, and I was living in this foster home on a mountain near Seattle. [...] Then my new father took me into another dark room in the basement, one without any trains, and did evil things to me. Things that hurt. Things that made me bleed. (75)

In spite of the connection the flashback ends without providing the reader with clues as to whether Michael kills the young soldier or not. It is left open in the same way as the

episode of abuse is left unexplored. Michael questions whether his traumatic experience may be a reason for his anger: “And then I wonder if that’s the reason I killed all the people in the bank” (76). Chapter 10 starts with a continuation of the last gesture of chapter 9. It is however, not fully a continuation, for as soon as Michael opens his eyes, he realises he has jumped into a different time. As Augustus Sullivan, the “best Indian tracker in the entire U.S. Army” (84), Michael is this time embodied in the reality of an old man. The last two episodes seem to be connected either by the same war or by the fulfilling aspect of providing a different angle to the experience of war. “I wonder who I might have to kill now. *I want this to stop*” (my emphasis, 79) he states just before he repeats his questioning of both ‘God’ and *deus ex machina*:

Then I remember that God is really, really old. So maybe God has God arthritis. *And maybe that’s why the world sucks*. Maybe God’s hands and fingers don’t work as well as they used to. Maybe God looks down on earth and sees the bad guys and tries to pick them up. Maybe he wants to squish them like bugs. But God’s arthritis is so bad he can’t make his fingers work. Maybe God saw me pull out my guns in the bank and tried to reach down and squish me before I could kill anybody. (my emphasis, 81)

The repetition of maybe suggests the coherence of the process of identification. The attempt to understand provides no answer, rather more questions. In my second chapter on *Reservation Blues*, I connected similar situations with Homi Bhabha’s notion that “the very question of identification only emerges *in-between* disavowal and designation” (2007: 72). In-between denial and signification, Michael attributes his flights to ‘God’ because of the structure of the narrative and his own nature as “a time-travelling mass murderer” (84). He is repeatedly proven wrong in his notion that the acts of flight or uses of *deus ex machina* are a way of punishment, for as soon as he witnesses an “act of love” from a soldier who chooses not to take revenge he focuses on the significance of the action. His prediction that “the dead will stay dead. And the world will keep going on like that” (81), is altered by the proof that one individual may change and influence others.

Gus Sullivan’s mission is “to lead one hundred white soldiers into an Indian village” (85). Although he is able to understand the wish for revenge, “And Gus remembers—and I remember—what he saw when he came upon those slaughtered white settlers” (86), Michael tries to control Gus and lead the soldiers astray. He finds that he can “move his arms and legs”, “talk with his voice” (86), however, Gus is stronger than Michael. In addition, Michael has access to the past and the emotions of the Indian tracker:

These are not my thoughts. This is not my sadness. This all belongs to Gus, and his grief and rage are huge, so my grief and rage are huge, too, and I scream as I lead one hundred soldiers down the hill into the Indian camp. (87)

His motivation changes the progression of the narrative, where his unwillingness to kill “I had wanted to kill, but now I just want to stop. I throw away my rifle. I don’t want to use it” (89) changes into the desire to kill himself and his host: “I think I want to die. I think I want Gus to die” (89). Moreover, he is clearly no longer just a witness, although he refuses to experience more: “I don’t want to see anymore. I want to be blind. I want to leave this place. I don’t care where I go. I don’t care about which body or time period is waiting for me. *I will gladly float in the nowhere.* I will gladly be a ghost, if I can be a ghost who can’t see or hear” (my emphasis, 91). Negation is closely tied to actual gain of power over the past and his host:

“Some part of me, *the part that is Gus,* wants me to stop, to turn around and re-swear my allegiance to the other soldiers. But I can defeat Gus now. I am doing the right thing. I am trying to save the soldier who is trying to save Bow Boy. (my emphasis, 95)

That Michael is now involved in defending the deserting soldier places him in an existential conundrum. Although he is aware that subjectivity influences meaning by encouraging contrasting and unending readings of the same act, his inability to decide upon the sign that attributes the meaning of killing-as-pardonable is evident in his question “Is there really a difference between that killing and this killing? Does God approve of some killing and not other killing? If I kill these soldiers so that Small Saint can escape, does that make me a hero?” (105). The same quote suggests that *différance* implicates the appropriation of difference as a continuing act that is itself unstable, by performing what Homi Bhabha terms as a repetition of “the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (2). As soon as we look at Michael as an enriched character by the encounter of different spaces, times, plus Hank and the Native American boy, *in the moment of enunciation of difference*, the possibilities rising thereof are endless. Since possibilities do not always lead to a final point of signification they are nevertheless not meaningless. Although, there is “a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement” (Bhabha, 2), Michael is able to decide on his actions. As a way of assigning meaning to his own dilemmas, the answers he finds that lead the narrative forward coincide with significations that are not always clear for the reader. That, however, may be the intention of the text, allowing the reader to read and re-read, because of that very same ellipsis. In Derrida’s words:

“...the return of the book is of an *elliptical* essence. Something invisible is missing in the grammar of this repetition. As this lack is invisible and undeterminable, as it completely redoubles and consecrates the book, once more passing through each point along its circuit, nothing has budged. And yet all meaning is altered by this lack. Repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same, the ring no longer has exactly the same center, *the origin has played*. Something is missing that would make the circle perfect. But within the *ellipsis*, by means of simple redoubling of the route, the solicitation of closure, and the jointing of the line, the book has let itself be thought as such” (373)

Most of the *flight* takes place through other mentalities in a way that confuses the narrative even as it is in fact moving forward. Yet the narrative also circles upon itself, having excluded the death of both protagonist and witnesses. The return of the book is located in the correction of the episode in the bank. Dissemination alters the ending because the textuality of the protagonist has changed. Yet at the same time, as Derrida puts it, ‘the origin has played’, which suggests that the concomitance of loss and possibilities (Wood, 153), works to destabilise the concept of origin, the first bank shooting or, the origin of the text. Although the second episode in the bank is also a repetition of the first, within *ellipsis*, the text plays through alteration, never specifically stating the reason. Is the second episode another jump in time, or is it a corrective re-inscription? The lack of answers in other words, provides more questions and allows for re-readings. The simple repetition of flight, or of the beginning, if so, “carries with it an unlimited power of perversion and subversion” (Derrida, 373) a double movement that substitutes the value of the beginning while at the same time re-writing it. On a meta-textual level, repetition is synonymous with the act of writing identity in a way that decentralises the very same center, the very closure which identity formation would imply in the finality of a novel. In the same way, when Alexie plays, he does so through a decentering of time, origin, identity and narrative. The hesitations produced in the reader, reveal the various forces of signification at play, an intended elliptical sign of dissemination.

Moreover, Michael’s flight of identity may be seen as a “series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center. Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names” (Derrida, 353). For example, when jumping through time and space *into* the young Native Indian boy, the movement is back in time yet forward from the Hank Storm narrative. This look towards the past is a look that enables looking at the past through the perspective of the one that may look at both sides without taking either side. This is such a clever way of bringing together a dialogue of different identities without excluding one or the other. With Michael rooting for both, it is the

ethical and 'humane' quality that seems to rise above racial and ethnical categories. Perhaps the same purpose explains why Alexie repeatedly focuses on the act of killing, as one that is unjust either way. Some of the views that Michael shares, for example the confession that he is no longer able to see the difference between good and bad is enough to freeze him.

The Small Saint is for Gus a similar example yet one that helps Gus regain his trust in mankind. The soldier's compassion and integrity are important enough for Gus to abandon his revenge plans. This example functions as an explanation to Michael of the difficult psychological impacts resulting from trying to combine individual and collective determinations of the moment of transit. The moment of transit, as Bhabha intends it, is however not defined by "a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities" (6). His point emphasizes my look at endless possibilities from above, suggesting that although providing meaning, *différance* is meaning in itself. In other words, while the continuity of differentiation propagates through more deferral, the shortage or endlessness of meaning is important enough to define not only identity processes as much as identity itself as discontinuous. For example, *différance* in this context, suggests that Michael is not attributed meaning because he is different from the traditional Native American, rather because he is different from Hank, Gus and the others.

A significant point made by Homi Bhabha to which this chapter hangs on, is the following: "I am not arguing for 'a pluralist anarchy', rather the "changed basis for making international connections" (8). In the same way, the reading and re-reading of *Flight* does not treat dissemination as a way of producing "alternative histories of the excluded" (Bhabha, 8), rather a dissemination that changes the finality within the process of interpretation. Dismissing the notion of a 'right', 'fixed' interpretation of reading historical, cultural texts coincides with the possibility of reading anew. Reading, as shown before, through an interrogation, a repetition that marks a difference; a difference that changes the subject, or the assumed notion of the totalised subject.

Chapter 13 transposes Michael into the body and memories of a pilot named Jimmy. This episode explores the context of another type of terrorism that bears similarities with the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11. The pilot Jimmy trains Abbad, an Ethiopian Muslim, to fly airplanes in spite of his suspicions that he may be a terrorist. He chooses to trust and befriend Abbad. The latter, however, takes over a passenger airplane and kills himself and his family along with a large number of passengers, crashing the airplane in the middle of Chicago. Although Michael states that he can "fall so far inside a person, inside his

memories” (112) that he can “play them like a movie” (112), and “play the pilot’s emotions” (112) he later questions the authenticity of the memories as well as the performative act of the intra-personal dialogue: “Do I really remember that? Or am I pretending to remember it?” (113). When the episode in the bank is looked at through the meaning and questions rising from the episode with Jimmy the angle of perspective is that of the others in the bank:

I think of how I betrayed those people in the bank. Those people in the bank trusted me to be sober and smart and kind. *I betrayed them, I’m a betrayer.*

I want to weep, but *it’s kind of hard to do that when you don’t have a body.* I want to make Jimmy weep for me, but his eyes are filled with his own tears. (my emphasis, 120-21)

As a circle of signification, the return to the episode in the bank changes the episode itself and the way it is understood. However, the juxtaposition of two different kinds of guilt, the ‘patriotic’ and the ‘personal’ one represents a focus that Michael was not interrogating before. The patriotic focus of this episode demands that Michael define his own views of the US nation. When viewing his guilt adjoined to that of Jimmy (and the other hosts), he desires his death as the only way to make amend: “But Jimmy is strangely disappointed. He wants to be punished for his crimes. I want to be punished for my crimes” (125).

When Michael states that “Flight is supposed to be beautiful. It’s supposed to be pure” (128), the opposite is implied as soon as the reader learns about the terrorist attack. The same sentence in different contexts is valid for other statements such as “All first-time pilots have this moment, when they see the face of God in the sky ahead of them” (129). Depending on which God it is referring to, the statement has significantly different readings. So does: “To flight! Abbad toasted” (129) because the flight in his view is finally a suicidal flight. On a different note, flight may symbolise the flight from death scenes: as in either a re-birth or a hoped for *deus ex machina*. In addition, flight designates the duration of the journey that Michael, Jimmy and Abbad are all involved in at this point: Abbad as a memory, Jimmy before he kills himself and Michael as a witness. The guilt they share is the focus of what determines both life and death. What the re-reading exposes therefore is that the themes of nation, trust, guilt, love and duty are subjective to the point that they are given different and sometimes contrasting meanings depending on the cultural context they are placed in. What trust means to Jimmy, to Abbad provides the possibility of revenge. What nation signifies for Jimmy, for Abbad is just a place he lives in because his home has been destroyed. Furthermore, what for Abbad represents sacrifice, for Jimmy is only suicide and murder.

Chapter 16 takes Michael into the body and reality of his father, “a street drunk, a loser whose belly is torn apart by booze” (132), “thirty miles from Seattle” (134) in 2007. It also provides a twist on the theme of terrorism, narrowing the notion of patriotism to the Native Americans: “I look down at my dirty T-shirt, emblazoned with a black-and-white photograph of the Apache warrior Geronimo and the ironed-on caption FIGHTING TERRORISM SINCE 1492” (133). At the same time, the average American is in this context given the connotation of terrorist. He is not aware of occupying his father, until he sees a picture of himself which his Native American father is carrying with him.

Introduced into the context of his father, the protagonist is able to understand some of the constructive influences that affected his father both in his childhood as well as his cultural setting. The possibility to relate to and forgive his father also allows the narrative to return to the episode in the bank, before Michael is killed. Unless the final episode is also another jump in time and space. This episode closely examines some stereotypical notions within the Native American/White dichotomy, to the point that when the father encounters a white couple who wish to help him he refuses their “reflexive compassion” (136) for fear of becoming “an anecdote to tell at dinner parties” (135):

‘White people did this to Indians. You make us like this.’

I don’t even know if I believe that. But I think this homeless body believes it. I think this fifty-year-old guy wants to blame somebody for his pain and his hunger.

But what if it’s his fault? What if he made all the decisions that led him to this sad-ass fate?

Fuck me, I think, and fuck this body I’m occupying.

‘And fuck you,’ I say to Pam and Paul. ‘And fuck your whiteness.’

Jesus, I wonder if this homeless guy understands the difference between white and whiteness. And then I wonder if I should be so condescending, considering that I am this homeless guy.

‘Please,’ Pam says. ‘We’re just trying to help.’

‘Fuck you,’ I say again. I don’t want to say it. Not really. But this homeless guy’s anger is even stronger than my anger. And anger is never added to anger. It multiplies.” (136)

The concomitance of father and son allows for the same statements as read through the perspective of the father and re-read through the perspective of the son. Adding that/those of the reader/s, the changes of meaning that occur are textualised and signified as hesitations that discourage a constant interpretation. Questions such as ‘But what if it’s his fault?’ change the way the character is read although they do not answer with a final meaning. The difference between white and whiteness is left as a question. There are, it is implied, several endless ways to read the character because none are conclusive enough to include that very same dissemination. Since there is no possible way to include all of these versions, fluxes and traces, situations function as a result of their confrontation with the system of reference that Michael brings to them, and vice versa. The meaning of anger multiplying produces a violent

image of changes of meaning, now located in a past that also determines the way Michael interprets his own past. Therefore, the Michael reading/viewing this episode is also adjusting the Michael from the beginning. After the father gets hit by Paul, it no longer becomes possible to separate the father from the son in statements such as: “I don’t remember the in-between, I have lost time. Losing time: That’s all I know how to do now. Jesus, I’m pathetic. Didn’t I just force that poor guy to hit me? Didn’t I want his violence?” (140). Is Michael speaking about his father, is his father speaking about himself or is Michael talking about himself?

When Michael’s father asks out loud for “some respect”, the question ‘How do I show you some respect?’ separates the two again: “Shit, I don’t have an answer for that. And then I realize that respect isn’t exactly what I want. This body wants respect. *I don’t know what I want. And I don’t know how to define respect, for me or for this homeless guy.* So I take a guess. ‘Tell me a story,’ I say” (my emphasis, 143). The guess though is the one thing that helps the two strangers laugh together and bond, which allows them to relate to each other as people in spite of their class differences. The two are able to communicate secrets “precisely because” (143) they do not know each other. The bird story leads to mutuality because of the act of sharing a secret, but more importantly because it destabilises the assumed distance between both race and class. The human element of compassion allows for various feelings to be felt concomitantly:

‘It is funny. It’s horrible, too. But it’s hilarious at the same time. And when I saw the bird hooked up to those tiny little machines, I laughed.’

‘No.’

‘Yes, I laughed so hard that I forgot my wife and daughter were standing there. And when I remembered, I turned and looked at them, and they were staring at me with those eyes. Do you know what kind of eyes I’m talking about?’

‘Disappointed eyes.’ (148)

The statement “I want some respect” (141) is given meaning after the story is told, in a way that could not foresee what exactly it would translate into. Just after he realises he is located in his father’s body, the statement “I am my father” (150) recognizes the cultural programming that fathers perform in constructing the identities of their sons, while at the same time it also symbolises a reversal in suggesting that he is as much a recognition as a re-inscription of the dichotomy. The dichotomy is at the same time generated by the statement as well as denied by the idea that Michael has in fact escaped this constructive influence when his father left him. Although it is nonsensical to say that Michael is his father, the kinship relationship is complicated if we see the statement as one that appropriates the power

his father has exercised over him and repeats that power with a marked difference. If in the beginning Michael states “I am a father” (57), an iteration that carries significant psychoanalytical connotations¹¹, the second statement marks a difference, a repetition and a re-inscription of the same role. His father functions as one instance of cultural programming that is destabilised; a prescribed identity that Michael is now renouncing and claiming at the same time. The gained position is that of one able to construct and disrupt stereotypical notions of identity, one able to change the *logos*. Change suggests the altered view of his father with the gain of subjectivity, a change that enables the recognition and therefore the representation of the protagonist within cultural and social contexts. A sudden advantage, the story continues by explaining the fatherly influence of his grandfather: “Say you ain’t worth shit” (155) is explained as the reason for leaving while in the hospital. Michael is abandoned because of the powerful influence of constructing in a system of language: “I ain’t worth shit” (155).

Chapter 19 succeeds in changing the novel and the cultural programming of both self-destruction and rage. Even here, Michael compares his action to a model he seems to use as a stereotype: “I’m supposed to pull them out and shoot everybody I see. Yes, I’m *supposed* to kill for Justice. I did it before: a long time ago, a while ago, a second ago. I don’t understand how time works anymore” (157). ‘I did it before’ would suggest that this episode is as mentioned before another jump into a different body and reality. The text states that Michael is shot in the beginning. Michael states that he has done it before. Simultaneously, the location in time is deferred and absent (non-present), to the point that the boundary between beginning/ending, real/imaginary become a little unclear. “There’s that man again, the one who told me I wasn’t real. I think he’s wrong. I think I am real” (157), provides a correction, a re-inscription that also accompanies difference and deferral because of the difference acquired during the journey. The convergence of continuation, sameness, difference, denial and correction that take place in this short statement are additionally complicated:

I have returned to my body. And my ugly face. And my anger. And my loneliness.
And then I think, Maybe I never left my body at all, Maybe I never left this bank. Maybe I’ve been standing here for hours, minutes, seconds, trying to decide what I should do. (158)

¹¹ In order to limit my theoretical range, I have left my reference to Psychoanalytical theory to stand on its own. I do acknowledge that some may choose to look into outcomes of what J. Lacan terms as ‘bad grammar’, ‘The Name of the Father’, the Pre-Symbolic and the Symbolic. I feel that this parallel theoretical interpretation would detour the flow of my analysis.

This episode is necessary in order to change meanings. Independent from the insecurities, Michael sees the world in new and constructive terms that help him to decide on what is meaningful for him. It is important that the questions are still there, for deferral of meaning is endless. At the same time, the act of questioning and acquiring a critical and moral perspective testify for the notion that deferral is not meaningless and that having identified with different realities, even briefly, has helped him see other angles to his personal situation. This time around, he is focused on the others as directly influenced by his actions: “I am surrounded by people who trust me to be a respectful stranger. Am I trustworthy? Are any of us trustworthy? I hope so” (159). Michael may now see the influences that have kept him angry and the impact of his actions. His awareness of personal choices and the power to change the progression of misdemeanours from the age of eight until he is fifteen reflect in the decision he takes: “But I am tired of hurting people. I am tired of being hurt” (161). Michael leaves the bank without using his guns. The valuable lesson he has learnt, although he states that it is “too complicated, too strange” and “simple” (163) is at the same time a progressive act and an erasure of suicide: “Maybe you’re not supposed to kill. No matter who tells you to do it. No matter how good or bad the reason. Maybe you’re supposed to believe that all life is sacred” (163). Indirectly, sparing the life of the people in the bank saves his own. The protagonist turns himself in to Officer Dave with words that point back to his father: “I want you to know that I respect you” (163).

If all identities are multiple and the process of identity formation fluid, the transit is as previously stated, coherent through the performance of *différance*. Repetitively, the text refuses categories and classifications as a way of refusing an origin or an essentialist centre. The centre however is there at the same time as it is deconstructed. In Derrida’s words,

By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today, the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself. Nevertheless, the center also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible. (Derrida, 352)

As soon as the reader posits the dissemination of the protagonist identity as no longer a crisis of identity, but as a/the deferred centre, the notion that all the episodes become a part of what constructs that same identity qualifies the experience as deep according to difference and not a pre-given identity. In other words, the protagonist no longer recognises his identity as fixed or predestined, rather an identity that is in a process of constant negotiation and re-negotiation. Derrida explains this same process as:

...it became necessary to think both the law which somehow governed the desire for a center in the constitution of structure, and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence—but a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute (353).

One of the uses of *deus ex machina* is to extend the search for identity to several sources, creating a dialogue not only between history and culture through connecting the episodes, but also between their various possible truths. The protagonist is able to look at his status quo as a result of historical and cultural wars, yet in order to do that he is exiled into a substitute. The substitute represents the transformation of both the protagonist and the host. We may not state that the protagonist from the beginning represents a central presence in essentialist terms. For if anything, the substitutions and transformations are as disseminated as the question of 'presence' is: "On the video, my image disappears for a second. I'm gone. And then I reappear" (166). He may change most of the predictions he lays out in the beginning of chapter eight, in his *individual* choices. What Michael leaves behind in his returns and departures (funny how that connects to the title) are previous figurations of society and culture. At the same time, the fact that he obtains experience through looking back in time emphasises the importance of history, more importantly, of history as seen through various locations of the self. In other words, Michael is brought to the historical context as a source of difference, by providing a different understanding.

That the same historical events may be read anew or additionally signified also reveals the possibilities of meaning already located in the historical event. Derrida explains the same process as "repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always *taken* from a history of meaning [*sens*]*—that is, in a word, a history —whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence*" (353). Furthermore, the notion of taking any historical event and approaching it through difference and dissemination also destabilises the notions of knowledge and origin. As shown before, knowledge becomes an amalgamate of viewpoints as well as re-reading, which suggests that nothing is inherently meaningful (in an essentialist fashion), rather given meaning by its evaluative, differentiating process. At the same time, meaning is always already there, located within the split self, the multiple identities of the protagonist. There is little to suggest that in this postmodern identity, meaning may *only* exist within the truth of the *logos*. The novel is a thesis in this sense, because it examines the concept of creation that creates, as in a character that while he becomes also re-creates his self and that of others: "A

few months from now, you'll be brand new.' That just gets me in the soul. Right there, I start to cry. Really. I just weep and wail." (180). In clearer words, meaning is not destroyed, it lives on a multiple level of difference through deferral.

CONCLUSION

I intended this thesis as an interrogation of the ways in which the textual meanings of Native American identities are constructed in *Indian Killer*, *Reservation Blues* and *Flight*. My purpose was to provide a deconstructive reading combined with post-colonial elements, with specific attention given to the concepts of textual anxiety, ambiguity, ambivalence and dissemination. I argued, through my theoretical focus, that identities are in a constant negotiation of meaning, that difference and deferral of meaning reveal the process of identity formation as never fully formed, never static, yet coherent. Informed by poststructuralist views on identities, and plurisignation, I then tried to insert my reading within the current debates in Native American literary discourse, arguing all along for an identity formation process that would not exclude the relevance of debates such as that on sovereignty, tribalism, nationhood, ethnicity, etc. My choice of constructivism focused on the reductive and exclusive quality of definitions of Native American identities. My starting point was to explore at the same time some of the ways Alexie's novels have been read by other critics, and attempt to examine the validity of some of these critical views. I then argued that Sherman Alexie's novels deconstruct and leave open the question of 'What is an Indian?' (Alexie, 221), which separates his literary project apart from the normalizing tendencies of the Native American discourse.

In chapter one, I argued that the arbitrary relationship between the signs of death and the Indian Killer and their binary cultural signifiers creates ambiguity in both the intention of the text as well as its interpretative outcome. I considered the role of difference and deferral, the emergence of new hybrid identities and what I traced as overtly emphasized exclusion in the reading of the end, positing the textual construction of the Native American identity of John Smith as an engendering of a 'new' and certainly un-prescribed identity. *Différance* was at the same time located in the cultural understanding of the murders, the binary of White/Native American that the discourse of panic, rumour and rage created. I then read the process of *différance* in the process of identity formation of the characters of Marie Polatkin and John Smith. I argued that Marie and John function to destabilize the limits of the cross-cultural exchange through their difference from the essentialist views. That John, in his dissemination through the necessary use of a textual death, is represented as a disruption of the signifiatory

chain of White/Native American readings and that his emergence as a new identity also broke itself apart from that same binary as a liberating gesture. The reading I proposed in this chapter concludes the invalidity of critical statements that have viewed the novel as “racist” (Peterson, xv), along with the invalidity of statements that have classified the novel as “less successful” (Blewster, 74), showing in this way how the ending changes the whole outlook on the preceding narrative, as a return and a re-experience/remembrance of the novel.

In my second chapter, I worked with the same theory and the same method and asked whether moments of textual anxiety and textual ambivalence would, through Homi Bhabha’s concepts of ‘the stereotype’ and ‘mimicry’, act as emerging resistance that would equate the survival of the characters as also located within the cross-cultural negotiation of Native American literary identity. Of their textual construction, I have asked whether it enables the representation of these characters within the same cross-cultural discourse. As a focal point, *Coyote Springs* implies a multiple self, always located between different temporal points of negotiation on an axis of different opinions that always interact, change and contradict each other. Altogether, it also testifies to the variety of points of view within the Native American identity. As cultural identity, the environment of the band is privileged in the text, as a way to focus the reading on the dynamic of transforming logocentrism. The conclusion of the argument is important in the way Alexie’s texts have been read. As shown in the introduction, so many critics have interpreted his characters as either anomalies or perpetuating stereotypical notions of Native American identities, (e.g. without stating the difference between David Walks Along and Thomas). The focus of this chapter, to reveal the way identity politics function within both the group (*Coyote Springs*) and the individual identity formation, changes significantly both the structures that the reader approaches the text with as well as the notions of identities itself. When ambivalence is kept and not normalized through essentialist notions of identity politics, the reading produces liberating outcomes. Through mimicry and read-anew-stereotypes, along with the contingent act of negotiating and transforming understandings of the world and of the selves, meaning is coherent in its affirmation of a movement, a progress that defeats both time and historical prescription. Reading anew the historical context reveals new meanings, which has been one of the strongest points of the reading. Many critics have been critical to Alexie’s suggestion that these identities may be liberated through their leaving the reservation. This reading has read the act of crossing the reservation border as a success that does not implicate assimilation as much as resisting through participation, in the whole American identity politics discourse. I have also interpreted ‘leaving the reservation’ as a necessary textual

effect that would implicate the disruption of the border as well. Although this external journey is connected with an implosive, fragmented self, one that is Native American through inclusion of/in spite of that inclusion of colonial influence, I have argued that through re-reading and re-negotiation, the reservation itself is an outdated, pre-figuration of society, no longer defining Native American identities through the concept of the border. Thus, the emergent 'newness' that I argued for in Chapter 1 is at play in the second chapter as well.

Reading *Flight* through the trope of *deus ex machina* enhanced the points I made in the second chapter. The choice of this novel has also provided me with the possibility to examine and interrogate the notion of dissemination of identity more thoroughly. The textual construction of identity, the flight of identity comprised in the journey of the protagonist validated the deconstructive notions I valued as constructive moments of ambiguity and ambivalence in the other novels. Opening and closure as shown in the first two novels became in *Flight*, an actual demonstration of my purpose as well. I argued that *Flight* as a novel is a thesis on the idea of deconstructing identity through furthering difference, deferral and that the outcome was both a movement of affirmation and return/re-negotiation of both narrative structure and signification. I wanted to follow the text and not modify the text according to my theoretical range, a condition I have followed, I hope, in all my chapters. With *Flight* however, the coherence of deferral as a process that argues for an identity that is in constant flux and re-evaluation was less difficult to portray. The focus was comprised in the same way as in the other readings, on the question of how to read the ending. As a positively textualised ending, yet one that apparently closed off the play of signification with the apparent solution of all the narrative intrigues, I argued that the process of *différance* left the question of identity as an ongoing negotiation; that even though the beginning of the novel was adjusted through reading the protagonist's Native American identities through all the contexts it is placed in, the apparent closure of the plot did not apply to the question of identity as neither fully formed, nor totalized. In fewer words, the *différance* of literary identity construction was still at work, yet coherent in the sense that it offered as closure the emergence of a new hybrid identity. The concomitance of opening/closure I believe achieved the projected answers I had aimed for.

Looking at Native American identities through the filter of poststructuralist theory, reconsiders the individual identities of John Smith, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Chess Warm Water and Michael (Zits), as vehicles that encourage a re-definition of the forces influencing the structures of representation (the colonizer, through mimicry) and the individual. In this reading, Sherman Alexie's novels contribute largely to debates valid in both the Native

American and the mainstream American discourse. The only conclusions I am offering, are traces of my readings, which I have tried to enhance through theoretical variation in order to reflect my playful reading. As paradoxical as it seems, I cannot help but think that in offering conclusions I am limiting somewhat the purpose of Alexie's writing. That in the need to attribute either deductive or inductive logic to my argument, the reading would suffer. Another endeavor was to use these propositions as also significant in differentiating Alexie's deconstructive project within the Native American discourse and evaluate his contribution to identity politics in light of Native American identities/American identities. With the use of deferral of meaning, I argued that the process is defined by the cross-cultural negotiation of meaning. Through a method that destabilizes both definitions of Indianness as well as the essentialist focus of identities in general. My purpose is reflected in Sherman Alexie's ideas on his deconstructive intentions. In Sherman Alexie's words:

"You know, I believe the American culture is so infused and so assimilated and so combined that all of us contribute to it. Being a part of it confirms all of us. And my entrance into the mainstream has changed the mainstream—forgive the immodesty—but I think my career has totally altered many people's idea of what an Indian can do and can be. Especially other Indians. (Dellinger, 127)

WORKS CITED LIST:

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Ninth Edition, (Wadsworth CENGAGE Learning, Canada, 2009).
- Andrews, Scott. "A new road and a dead end in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*", *Arizona Quarterly: a Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory* (Univ. Of Arizona, Tucson) (63:2), [Summer 2007] 137-153. *Literature Online*. Web. 17.09.2009
- Alexie, Sherman. *Indian Killer*, (Grove Press, New York, 1996),
- , *Flight*, (Harvill Secker, London, 2008),
- , *Reservation Blues*, (Minerva , London, 1997),
- , *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, (Vintage Random House, UK, 1997).
- , "One Good Man" in *The Toughest Indian in the World*, (Vintage Random House UK, 2000).
- , Interview by Bellante, John *et al.* "Sherman Alexie, Literary Rebel". *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2009) 3-16. Print
- , Interview by Blewster, Kelly. "Tribal Visions". *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2009) 71-83. Print
- , Interview by Davis, Tanita *et.al.* "Sherman Alexie". *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2009) 187-193. Print
- , Interview by Dellinger, Matt. "Redeemers". *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2009) 121-128. Print
- , Interview by Harris, Timothy. "Seriously Sherman: Seattle's Favorite Pissed Off Poet Talks about Truth, Terror, Tradition, and What's So Great About America

- anyway?". *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2009) 180-187. *Literature Online*. Web. 17.09.2009
- , Interview by Mellis, James. "Interview with Sherman Alexie". *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2009) 180-187. Print
- , Interview by Purdy, John. "Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie". *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2009) 36-53. Print
- Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text* (trans. Stephen Heath; London: Fontana Press, 1987).
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*, (Semiotext[e] Foreign Agents Series; trans. P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Beitchman; New York: Semiotext[e], 1983).
- Bauerkemper, Joseph. "Narrating Nationhood: Indian Time and Ideologies of Progress". *Studies in American Indian Literatures* (19:4) [Winter 2007], p. 27-53, *Literature Online*, 17.09.2009
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*, (Routledge Classics, London, 2007).
- Chadwick, Allen. *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
- Coulombe, Joseph L. "The Approximate Size of His Favorite Humor: Sherman Alexie's Comic Connections and Disconnections in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*". *American Indian Quarterly* (26:1) [Winter 2002], p. 94-115. *Literature Online*. Web. 17.09.2009
- Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*, (trans. Alan Bass; London: Athlone Press, 1987).
- , *Points ... Interviews, 1974-1994* (ed. Elisabeth Weber; trans. Peggy Kamuf *et al.*; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- , *Writing and Difference*, (trans. Alan Bass; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).
- Dix, Andrew. "Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America", *Modernism/Modernity* (Baltimore, MD) (12:2) [April 2005], p. 346-348, Rev. of *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America* by Eva Marie Garoutte, *Literature Online*. Web. 17.09.2009

- Evans, Stephen F. “‘Open Containers’: Sherman Alexie’s Drunken Indians”, *American Indian Quarterly*, (25:1) [Winter 2001], p. 46-72, *Literature Online*. Web. 17.09.2009
- Georgi-Findlay, Brigitte. “Transatlantic Crossings”. *Transatlantic Voices-Interpretations of Native North American Literatures*, (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2007). Ed. Elvira Pulitano
- Huddart, David. *Homi K. Bhabha*, Routledge Critical Thinkers, (Routledge: London, 2006).
- Huggan, Graham. *The Post-Colonial Exotic-Marketing the Margins*, Routledge: London, 2001)
- Krupat, Arnold. *Red Matters: Native American Studies*, (University of Philadelphia Press, Philadelphia, 2002).
- Leitch, Vincent B., *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (London: Hutchinson, 1983).
- Miller, Jacques-Alain. “Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier”, *Screen* 18,4 (1977-78).
- Mooney, James. “The Messiah Letter: Mooney’s Free Rendering”. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*-Shorter Sixth Edition, (Norton & Company, NY, 2003) General Ed. Nina Baym, 1789-92
- Pulitano, Elvira. *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* (Lincoln:University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
- Rader, Dean. “Word as weapon: visual culture and contemporary American Indian poetry”. *MELUS* (Univ. of Southern California, Los Angeles) (27:3) [Fall 2002], p. 147-168. *Literature Online*. Web. 17.09.2009
- Goodwin Webster, Sarah. *et al. Death and Representation*, (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993).
- Van Styvendale, Nancy. “The Trans/historicity of Trauma in Jeanette Armstrong’s *Slash* and Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*”, *Studies in the Novel* (University of North Texas, Denton) (40:1/2) [Spring 2008], p. 203-223,
- Townley, J.T. “Flight”, Rev. of *Flight* by Sherman Alexie, *Harvard Review* (33) Cambridge 2007., Iss.33; 172-176, *Literature Online*. Web. 17.09.2009

Womack, Craig S. *et al. American Indian Literary Nationalism*, (University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2006).

Wood, Sarah. *Derrida's Writing and Difference*, (Reader's Guides, Continuum, 2009).