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SHERMAN ALEXIE**

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Prohlašuji, že jsem práci zpracovala samostatně a použila jen uvedené prameny a literatury.

Plzeň, duben 2013

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Děkuji vedoucí mé bakalářské práce Mgr. Kamile Velkoborské,
Ph.D. za pomoc a podporu při zpracování.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with social issues in contemporary Native American literature, more precisely it is focused on the work of Sherman Alexie, a charismatic author of American Indian origin. There are several reasons why I chose this theme.

Firstly, I wanted to learn more about aspects of Native American culture and society, which seem to be neglected in my home country. People usually have very distorted and stereotyped ideas about Indians. In the worst cases they believe, that Indians still live in tepees. Secondly, I was wondering what is the best way to learn something about unknown culture and I decided to do it through its literature. So the aim of the first half of the thesis is to introduce Native American literature, summarize its history and present some features which are specific for Native American literature.

When I was collecting the materials, works by Sherman Alexie attracted me the most, although Alexie differs from traditional Native American authors. I was excited about his sense of humour and engaging narrative forms. On the other hand, I was shocked by Alexie's description of current situation of American Indians, which includes number of social problems Indians have to face up in the modern world. I wished to find out whether Indians really live in such conditions that Alexie depicts in his works. And it is also the main objective of the thesis. Last but not least, I would like to know if Alexie was influenced by his own life experience.

The thesis is divided into five main chapters and several subchapters. A brief introduction to the Native American literature and summary of its development from the oral form to modern authors is followed by the chapter dealing with characteristic features of Native American literature. The next part is dedicated to the personality of Sherman Alexie. It provides biographical information (facts concerning his childhood, education, literary career and works) and description of his

writing style and frequent themes and characters. After it, a chapter focused on destruction of Native American traditional culture follows. In the last part concrete social problems which I found in Alexie's books (mostly in *Ten Little Indians*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *Indian Killer*) are individually considered and compared to the information about Native Americans provided in print media and research articles in order to find out how much Alexie's books reflect the Native American reality in the United States.

2 THE HISTORY OF NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

2.1 Definition of the term Native American literature and facts

Before I say something about Native American literature, it is important to specify what this term includes. This literature is written (or composed, it depends on its form) by Native American people (American Indians) on Native American themes. Books written by white people on Indian subjects are not considered as works of Native American literature. [1]

Although Native American literature in today's America is ranked among minority literature, it is possible to say that traditional Native American literature was the first American literature. Contemporary Native American literature was preceded by ancient myths and songs from the olden times. These myths and songs continued to the tales, poetry and oratory composed after the arrival of Europeans. According to Alan R. Velie, Native American literature may be divided into two different types: traditional and mainstream. [2]

Traditional literature includes tales, songs and oratory. It was (and still is) primarily in oral form, because before they encountered the whites Indians did not use writing. One of interesting things about this minority literature is the fact that Indians themselves rejected written form for a long time and why it was like this I will explain later. [3]

Traditionally, all the members of an Indian tribe used to sit and listen to the storyteller's tales and, of course, to compose and sing songs. All of these works were always intended for the whole tribe and it was a part of their everyday life. [4]

Tales and songs were composed in tribal languages. When America was “discovered” by Columbus, there were over two thousand independent Indian tribes speaking five hundred (or even more) languages from fifty language groups. It was a difficult mission for Indians to modify traditional forms of expression in order to conform them with means and limitations of written language and to translate their experience into English, the dominant language spoken by colonizers in the North America. [5][6]

Mainstream Native American literary works are written in one of standard American literary genre: fiction, poetry, biography, history. [7]

However, the term mainstream is slightly misleading in the case of Native American literature, because this literature remains, in many cases, true to its original substance. This fact differs Native American literature from other falling into the mainstream category. [8]

2.2 Oral tradition - myths and mythology

2.2.1 Definition of myth

As it was just said, traditional Native American literature was passed down only orally from generation to generation. The stories called myths were essential and constituted an important part of Native American spiritual beliefs. Among Indians, nobody doubts their truthfulness. [9]

“Mythologies...are sacred, timeless stories considered true, living and exemplary.”[10]

The Webster’s dictionary defines the myth as “traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon“. [11] However, many various definitions exist all around the world and it is

difficult to choose the best universal one. This may be caused by the fact that the perception of myth is very individual and it means for each culture or each person something little different. For example, Creation Myths explain how human beings came to exist and Origin Myths tell us how the phenomena like the sky, the sun or stars came to be. They can also be a part of the same story helping people to understand the origin and the sense of the world. There are also myths of death and destruction or myths about cultures heroes. [12]

2.2.2 Characters

Although the Native American peoples do not share a single, unified body of mythology and their beliefs and sacred myths vary from tribe to tribe, there is something they have in common. And even there can be found some resemblance to the myths and legends of European peoples and some mythic themes, characters and stories can appear in many of the cultures. [13]

Native American mythology includes great number of gods, tricksters, heroes and other mythical beings. Heroes of the tribes and ancestors are, beside gods, very often those ones who gave the world its present form in Native American mythology. Characters such as tricksters or animals can be endowed with their positive as well as negative qualities. Sometimes they prove helpful and entertaining and at other times they can be unpredictable, misleading or even violent. Characters of Native American mythology do not always belong to the same category. [14]

A trickster may act as a culture hero, a culture hero may be an animal, an animal may be a creator figure, and a creator may have a capacity for destruction. [15]

In many Native American mythologies the *Great Spirit* appears who is responsible for giving existence to the world (or even the whole

universe) and for establishing or restoring order. Other creative forces playing important role in Indian myths are the *Father Sky*, the *Mother Earth* or the *Mother Corn*. The secondary gods are often personifications of natural forces, such as the wind or the rain. [16]

Culture hero is a mythical figure who gives people the tools of civilization, such as the language and fire. Sometimes he creates, transforms or improves the world and turns it into the place suitable for living by changing the wrong into the good. [17]

Trickster is common and very important term among Indian cultures. According to T. Highway, a Canadian Indian dramatist, the Trickster is the character so crucial that it can be compared to Jesus Christ in Christian mythology. The term trickster indicates the creature gifted with exceptional qualities and having various appearances. In traditional Indian mythology the trickster, who is always male, is directly involved in the storyline, as well as spirits or animals. In principle, the trickster is the representative of uncertainty. He mixes up things and events and spreads confusion. Sometimes he plays the role of a comic prankster, but he often has also a cruel side. [18][19]

Trickster often takes the form of an animal. Common trickster figures in Native American mythology are for example *Rabbit* in the Eastern regions, *Coyote* and *Spider* in the Plains and the Southwest regions, and *Raven* in the Pacific Northwest. [20]

Animals and even other natural phenomena like stars in Native American mythology act like humans (they can talk and interact with people) and often change their appearance between animal and human. Indians believed that before human and animal forms became fixed, animals could change their appearance whenever they wanted. [21]

2.3 Transition from oral to written form of literature, first works

2.3.1 Words in the blood

Indians began to learn European languages (English, Spanish, French) very soon after the first contact with colonizers. These languages were useful for negotiations with whites, but it took more time until they started to put their literature in writing. They resisted the written form, this attitude is linked with their nature – Indians tend to be verbal people and they prefer learning their myths and songs by heart. They called it the “words in the blood“, as a holy woman explains: [22] [23]

When you write things down, you don't have to remember them. But for us it is different... all that we are, all that we have ever been, all the great names of our heroes and their songs and deeds are alive within each of us... living in our blood. [24]

2.3.2 The first written records

At the end of 19th century white missionaries and anthropologists who came to the North America noticed the immense beauty and power of Indian stories. They admired profoundly these stories and so they decided to save them in writing. With the assistance of Indians they collected and translated a great number of traditional stories and songs and helped to preserve them up until today. [25]

2.3.3 Works by whites on Indian themes

In the 19th century the picture of Indians, Indian world and Indian living was strongly idealized and there appeared white writers by whose works was this idealization and stereotypes supported and spread out. A well-known example of this is *The Leather – stocking Tales* by J. F. Cooper who created the stories even without going to the West. However, this book full of adventures was very popular among white readers. [26]

Another work which should not be omitted while talking about books written by white people about Indians is *The Song of Hiawatha* by H. W. Longfellow. This narrative poem was published in 1855 and deals with a tradition of a miraculous birth. [27]

2.3.4 Collaborations between Indians and non-Indians

As the next step to the written Native American literature we consider the works created in collaboration between Indian and non-Indian writers. The most common type of literature expressing Indian view of world was autobiography. One of the most important works of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century is *The Autobiography of Black Hawk* (first published in 1833). The book called *The Black Elk Speaks* is apparently the most notorious example of this genre. The book is founded on records from meetings of John G. Neihardt and Black Elk during which Black Elk was narrating his memories. The question for many people is how much these white “editors” (how they are often called) influenced the stories, principally in the case of Black Elk. It was the subject of numerous academic controversies for many years and the question remains been unsolved until today. These books were popular among non-Indian readers thanks to the fact that the picture of Indians in them corresponds with the predominant ideas and stereotypes describing indigenous inhabitant of North America: a lonely, well-balanced person, a noble savage resisting his inescapable fate. [28] [29]

2.3.5 Written form of Native American Literature

The first book really written by an Indian author was *Queen of the Woods* by Simon Pokagan in 1899. But it looked somehow unnatural for Indians, or even ridiculous. The stories intended to be passed down orally and be listened by the audience simply did not fit in a written form. English

language did not dispose by means which an Indian storyteller needed to express what he wanted to say, his feelings. [30] [31]

Then Charles Eastman's (Sioux) autobiographic works followed, inter alia *Indian Boyhood* from 1902, built on his memories of childhood, and *From deep Woods to Civilization*. *Indian Boyhood* is great example of realism used by Indian authors at the beginning of their written literature when they tried to imitate this European literary method in order to express the unique Indian reality. It showed that realism is very limiting and it will not be the best way for them. [32]

Some of Indian writers crossed the frontiers of autobiography and experimented with other genres. It was for example journalist and writer John Rollin Ridge ("Yellow Bird", Cherokee), who in 1854 published the first novel written by Native American called *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* or Gertrude Bonin ("Zitkala-Sa", Sioux), the author of short stories published in prominent journals of this period, or. However, their works were not appreciated by the period readers and gained the appreciation retrospectively when modern literary critics started to search for antecedents of contemporary Native American literature. [33] [34] [35]

2.4 Literature from 1968

2.4.1 N. Scott Momaday

Year 1968 was a breakthrough for Indian literature. In this year N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) published his novel *House Made of Dawn* which is considered a classic in Native American literature. A year after, the book won the Pulitzer Prize, the most prestigious literary award and Momaday became the first Native American writer who achieved great

success among critics as well as readers. In 1969 he published the book called *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, “a unique blend of history, folklore, and poetic memoir”. [36] It is considered as a beginning of the period called Native American Literature Renaissance. [37][38]

2.4.2 Leslie Marmon Silko

Then in 1970s and 1980s real explosion of Indian author's production appeared. These authors began to write and publish more and more poetry, short stories, novels and drama and gain more and more fans. It is worth mentioning principally Leslie Marmon Silko, author of a mixed origin of Laguna, Pueblo, Mexican and white, who writes novels, short stories as well as books of poetry. She was well influenced by her grandmother's traditional storytelling. Her works are permeated by the vision of inseparability of human life and nature. She started her career in 1974, when a short story collection *Laguna Woman* was published. Her first and also the most famous novel is *Ceremony* (1977). [39] [40]

In 1981 Silko won MacArthur Foundation Grant and in the same year she published a collection called *Storyteller* where prose is combined with poetry and interwoven with Indian mythology and personal family memories. After it, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) followed. She is also the author of essays focused on relationships in traditional society (she analyzes mainly the role of women) of Laguna Pueblo, where she comes from. These essays are collected for example in *Yellow Woman* or *Beauty of the Spirit* (1996). [41]

2.4.3 Louise Erdrich

Another important Native American writer is Louise Erdrich (Ojibwa). She debuted with novel *Love Medicine* (1984) which is based on her short story “The World's Greatest Fisherman” awarded by the 1982 Nelson Algren fiction prize. *Love Medicine* is the beginning tetralogy that

includes *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). Novel *The Round House* (2012) is considered the greatest success of her recent years for winning the National Book Award. [42] [43] [44]

3 CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF NA LITERATURE

3.1 Border crossing

It is interesting that works of these modern authors are often not limited by one genre. So that it may be more difficult to rank the author among poets, prose writers or dramatists. On the other hand it enabled them to use miscellaneous ways and means of particular genres while expressing diverse aspects of their life experience and thoughts. Indian authors often combine particular genres also in scope of one work. An excellent example of this is recently mentioned books *Storyteller* or *Ceremony* by L. M. Silko in which she combines prose and poetry. [45]

3.2 Conceptions of time and space and the sequence of events

Another boundary frequently exceeded by Indian authors represents the western linear concept of time. Instead, they often work with the idea of cyclical nature of the world including its history and time itself. For example, the Hopi Indians have no special tenses for expressing the past, present and future, because they perceive time as a constantly flowing continuum in accordance with natural processes. In Native American perception of the world time and space are not separated from each other. Instead, they are united in a sort of “space-time”. [46] [47]

Sometimes there are two or more stories plaited together in one literary work, another time the story is told in order which may seem random to uninformed readers. This feature is most noticeable in longer works, as is once again Silko’s *Ceremony* or Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. [48]

3.3 Humour

Another typical feature of Native American authors is their good sense of humour. This humour can be gentle, ironical and self-critical. But often the humour may be characterized as sexual. To reader who never before encountered Indian literature it may seem surprising or even shocking, but that is just the Indian naturalness, sincerity and the ability to say things how they really are and how they feel about it. And sometimes humour is the best way of defence for Native American characters in the literature. It helps them to deal with problems such as racism, discrimination or injustice they face up. [49]

You Indians. How the hell do you laugh so much? I just picked your ass from off the railroad tracks, and you're making jokes. Why the hell do you that? Two funniest tribes I've ever been around are Indians and Jews, so I guess there's something about the inherent humor of genocide. [50]

3.4 Storytelling

As it was already mentioned, Indians did not preserve their culture in writing in the ancient times, instead of it they passed their stories down orally from generation to generation, thus storytelling was particularly important for them. To be a storyteller was viewed as a gift by Native Americans, because storyteller was usually one among number of listeners and in fact, the whole tribe was depended on him or her. However, storytelling is not just a matter of times long past, it represents a part of tradition that contemporary Native American writers are trying to renew. For example, Sherman Alexie and Leslie Marmon Silko are great storytellers. [51]

4 SHERMAN ALEXIE

The following part of my thesis is dedicated to the personality of Sherman Alexie (see Appendix 1) who is currently one of the most popular Native American writers. His works of fiction fall under mainstream literature and are intended for general public, so he became also one of the most acclaimed US authors.

After the summary of some biographical information follows the description of development of Alexie's literary career which includes principal works and awards he won. At the end of this chapter, there is something about Alexie's style of writing, typical themes and characters.

4.1 Family background and childhood

Sherman Alexie was born on October 7, 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit in eastern Washington State. Alexie's father, of Coeur d'Alene Indian descent, was a heavy drinker who worked only occasionally as a truck driver or a logger. Because of his alcohol problems he was often able to disappear and leave the family behind for a few days. His mother, a Spokane Indian, worked as a clerk and occupied herself with sewing to feed him and his five siblings. In addition, Sherman Alexie was born with hydrocephalus which means in medical terminology "a condition in which the primary characteristic is excessive accumulation of fluid in the brain." [52] [53]

This disorder is commonly known as "water on the brain". When Alexie was born, doctors were not sure about his surviving. Fortunately, in his six months he underwent the surgery which saved his life. However, his whole childhood was accompanied by frequent seizures and fevers. [54] [55]

His brain damage also left him number of physical problems. He had ten extra teeth which were so crowded in that he could barely close his mouth, so it was necessary to pull them. In addition to that, he was nearsighted in one eye and farsighted in the other. There was only one solution for him – to wear glasses: [56]

...those ugly, thick, plastic ones...I started to wear glasses when I was three, so I ran around the rez looking like a three-year-old Indian grandpa. [57]

He wrote in his first book of fiction for young adults called *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (see Appendix 2) which is partly based on his own memories from childhood and its main character Arnold (Junior) suffers from hydrocephalus as well as the writer. He also had a stutter and a lisp. [58]

A five-year-old is cute when he lisps and stutters...And jeez, you're still fairly cute when you're stuttering and lisping six-, seven-, and eight-year-old, but it's all over when you turn nine and ten. After that, your stutter and lisp turn you into retard. And when you're fourteen years old, like me, and you're still stuttering and lisping, then you become the biggest retard in the world. [59]

Because of his physical abnormalities, he received a number of derogatory nicknames from his peers who bullied him. Besides “retard” they called him “globe”, “hydro head” or just “hydro”. [60]

4.2 Education

He was taught to read by his father at the age of three. He attended very bad reservation public school, where he excelled among other children. He loved books and his first literary influences were traditional, in Euro-American sense: Steinbeck, Faulkner, Hemingway, Walt Whitman, Stephen King etc. Since a long time he did not know that Native American literature might exist. He never saw anything written by an Indian while he was growing up on the reservation. “Indians are poor so our culture is poor American culture... I didn't know until I was twenty-

one of Leslie Silko's Ceremony, which is probably the book of Native American literature." [61] [62]

The turning point of his life (as well as Arnold's) came when he was fourteen years old. He decided to go to high school in nearby Reardan, where he was "the only Indian except for the mascot" [63], because Reardan was a German immigrant community. This decision represents the step ensuring his future as very successful writer. He finished high school with honours and began to attend a Jesuit school in Spokane, Gonzaga University. However, he dropped out after two years because of alcohol problems. Fortunately, he managed to win over drinking and continue his studies. Although he initially planned a medical career, in 1991 he graduated in American studies from Washington State University in Pullman. [64]

4.3 Literary beginnings

After finishing his studies, he worked as an administrator on an educational exchange program. Alexie's first published work was the poem "Distances" and it was printed in 1990 by Hanging Loose, the literary magazine. In 1992 his first book of poetry called *The Business of Fancydancing* was published by Hanging Loose Press. It gained surprisingly good reviews, for example from the New York Times. In the same year, a small poetry chapbook, *I would Steel Horses*, was published and shortly afterwards, in 1993, another collection of poetry called *The First Indian on The Moon*. [65] [66]

After it, because of good reviews, he was asked by publishers and literary agents to write a fiction manuscript. So he wrote *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* which comprised twenty-two interconnected stories with recurring characters and may be considered as his breakthrough book in view of the fact that it was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. His follow-up book, the novel *Reservation Blues*,

was published in 1994 and it won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award and Murray Morgan Prize. [67]

4.4 Further career development, filmmaking

In 1996 he came with a book of poetry, *The Summer of Black Widows*, and with one another novel, *Indian Killer* (see Appendix 3), which is considered as his most controversial work as well as the darkest. This murder mystery was Alexie's reaction to the literary movement where a lot of white authors are writing Indian books. He was angry with them, so he created a character of white university professor teaching Native American literature. The book is full of obvious contrasts between Indian and white society. In that same year (1996), the magazine *Grant* named him as one of the best American novelist under the age of forty. [68] [69]

Shortly afterwards, Alexie turned his attention to filmmaking. The short story "This Is What It Means to Say, Phoenix, Arizona" together with another stories from the collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* were his inspiration for writing screenplay for *Smoke Signals* (see Appendix 4). The film is directed by Chris Eyre and tells the story of two absolutely different Native American men brought together by an unfortunate event in their childhood. I would say that is "the originally Indian film", because it is written, directed, co-produced and played only by American Indian people. And finally, this Indian film was successful among critics and won the Audience award at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998. Last but not least, it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. [70]

In 2000, the range of his poetry and prose works extended. He wrote the mixed-genre collection *One Stick Song* and subsequently, in 2001 a short story collection called *The Toughest Indian in the World*. This book is full of Native American characters, which could be said quite unusual to appear in literature. It includes middle and upper class Indians: poets, bureaucrats or white-collar workers are good example of it. [71]

Another short story collection written by his hand, *Ten Little Indians* (see Appendix 5), appeared in 2003. All of the characters in these stories have one in common – they find themselves in situations which are difficult to solve, in sense of both personal and social life. [72]

Meanwhile, in 2002, he came with his second independent film *The Business of Fancydancing*. Like in his his first movie, he was the author and producer. Unlike the first film, he took over the direction. However, the second film was not so successful like the first one. [73]

4.5 Recent successes

In the science fiction novel *Flight* published in 2007 Alexie used the motive of time travelling. In that same year he won the 2007 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature for his first young adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The novel tells story of a 14 years old Indian boy who leaves the reservation school to attend all-white high school and he must face up a lot of unusual situations and challenges which Alexie describes by means of his bitter humour and irony. Neil Gaiman, a famous writer, was not amiss when he claimed: “I have no doubt that in a year or so it’ll be winning awards and being banned.” [74] Shortly after the publication some complaints appeared from the parents whose children had the title prescribed by their school as the summer reading book. Parents argued that the book “uses foul, racist language and describes sexual acts.” [75] [76] [77]

In 2010 Alexie became the winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for his collection of stories, essays and poems called *War Dances* (2009) and his latest published work is a collection of short stories *Blasphemy: New and Selected Stories* (2012). [78]

4.6 Alexie's style

What is the most typical for Sherman Alexie is his specific type of humour, which together with irony and sarcasm permeates his work. The evidence of that he is really gifted is his occasional performing a stand-up comedy. Humour and his way of storytelling together cause that his books read well. [79]

And in view of the fact that Alexie never writes about anything sacred and he more likely describes how Indians live in the contemporary modern world (what includes a lot of problems Indians have to face up), humour is very necessary in his work, because he often writes about things which are not actually funny.

He has a penchant for writing about bad things and describing them in the finest and sometimes also the darkest detail. This is probably the most noticeable in the thriller full of hatred, rage and violence *Indian Killer* which he wrote in order to show his another strong point in addition to humour. It was his anger and dissatisfaction what motivated the writing of it. As he explains in the interview with Joelle Fraser, the first impulse came when he was sitting at the Washington State University and some white guys in the back row were annoying him and he wanted to kill them. [80] [81]

Although Alexie's work is principally focused on everyday life, it does not mean that imagination is completely left out. It is visible especially in his works of poetry. He also offers the equation regarding it: poetry = anger x imagination. He uses imagination in his works of fiction, too. For example, in *Reservation Blues* a guitar can talk and the novel *Flight* is about time travelling and its main character transforms into many different historical characters. [82]

It seems that the main goal of his work is to explain feelings of Indians in today's American society and to show his pride of being Indian.

Alexie's books contain his own social and political opinion. For example, *Indian Killer* demonstrates harsh criticism of white society. His rejection of established stereotypes and prejudices is also evident at first sight. He tries his best to break down these stereotypes and prejudices and literature is one of the most effective ways.

4.7 Characters and themes of Alexie's work

Although Sherman Alexie's novels and short stories fall into the genre of fiction, it is no secret that he draws inspiration for many of his characters from real people he met and knew. In connection with this, there appeared a number of negative reactions on the reservation. People do not like his writing about their problems, it seems that he makes fun of them and they feel wounded by it. As musician Jim Boyd, Alexie's collaborator and friend, explains: [83]

On the reservation, we had our little secrets. Sherman has gone against that and sometimes the truth hurts. A lot of things he writes about just weren't out there before. But a lot of the things he talked about needed to be said. [84]

Although his works contain a variety of characters different from each other, some of his characters are repeated. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a misfit storyteller of the Spokane tribe; Victor, an angry alcoholic guy and Junior, "the happy-go-lucky failure"; appear both in the novel *Reservation Blues* (1995) and in the short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), and in the novel which was published two years after the collection, they are older. Alexie calls these three characters "the unholy trinity of me." [85] [86]

The main character of *Indian Killer* is a Native American, who was adopted out by a white couple. According to Sherman Alexie, Indians call Indian children adopted out by non-Indian families "lost birds". One of Alexie's cousins was adopted out and that inspired him to create such character. [87]

As regards the themes he depicts, it is possible to say that the majority of his works have some in common. It includes despair; poverty; alcoholism; alienation in today's society and the search of one's cultural identity; tensions between the white and Indian communities with the elements of racism and also sexual acts, especially inter-racial between Indian and non-Indian people. Last but not least he likes to write about basketball, which is so popular among American Indians that on reservations it gained a new name, they say to play "rezball". (see Appendix 6) Alexie himself used to be a school basketball star. [88]

5 DESTRUCTION OF NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Sherman Alexie likens the way settlers treated the Indians to genocide. In fact, he is not far from the truth. This way of treatment comprised forced removals and killings. Before the European settlers came to America, Native Americans formed 100 % of the population and today they represent barely 1 % of the total US population. Although the European settlers are often accused for the decline of Native American cultures, it was found that some tribes had died before the “discovery” of America. The population of Native Americans declined from estimated 12 million in 1500 to 2.9 million today (according to the last US Census in 2010). Together with a lot of Indian lives most of their traditional cultural heritage disappeared. It was inevitable due to the fact that this culture was based primarily on oral tradition. [89] [90]

5.1 Forced assimilation

In the late 19th century, when the settlers took definitively control over the American continent, the whole Indian tribes and nations were moved by force and restricted to reservations. Children were taken from their parents and put into boarding schools created especially for this purpose. In these schools the Indian children were taught to assimilate into the white culture. They had to learn English language, speak only in English and they were not allowed to practice their traditional spiritual beliefs and use their tribal languages under the threat of punishment. [91] Sherman Alexie describes something similar in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Here is a snippet of conversation between Arnold and his white teacher from the reservation public school, called Mr. P:

...That's how we were taught to teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child... We were supposed to make you give up

being Indian. Your songs and stories and languages and dancing. Everything. We weren't trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture. [92]

5.2 Extinction of Native American languages

There were more than five hundred languages from fifty language groups when America was “discovered”. In 1997 approximately 175 of Native American languages were still alive. The research made in 1997 showed that many of these languages were spoken especially by elders, only twenty of them were used widely by children. About fifty-five of them were spoken by one to six people and because Native American languages existed only in oral form, most of these which were spoken by a handful of people are now dead. In these days, UNESCO documents only 139 Native languages which are spoken in North America. The prediction is that seventy other languages will be lost in five upcoming years, if some immediate action for their rescue is not taken. [93]

5.3 Interracial marriages

However, it is not just the extinction of languages what causes that traditional Native American culture is gradually disappearing. Interracial marriages also play a large role in that. In view of the fact that socio-economic conditions on the majority of reservations are not suitable for living and founding a family, many young people leave reservations and follow the vision of a better life. It is the trend of recent years. Very often they marry non-native people, become fully integrated into the white society and interested in mainstream culture. A lot of them leave their old life definitively behind, along with their traditional culture. [94]

5.4 The birth of interest in Native American culture

Growing interest in Native American culture in the United States originated in the 60s in connection with the hippie movement. Its members

were inspired by Indians not only in their style of clothing which included number of Native American elements. Hippies were also influenced by Indian relation to nature. [95] [96]

Since 1990s the interest in Native American culture interferes also the academic level, although Native American culture was previously suppressed on purpose. About twenty years ago universities started offering Native American Studies programs to the public, so that Indians living in the cities and integrated into the white culture have a chance to learn something about their original culture. [97]

5.5 Reservations

Sherman Alexie often describes life on an Indian reservation in his work. He draws on his own life experience, because he grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation.

An Indian reservation is a piece of land that was been given to Native Americans after Europeans had started to settle on the American continent and develop permanent settlements. The first Indian reservations were established in 1851 under the Indian Appropriations Act. President Ulysses S. Grant, who served from 1869 to 1877, continued to remove and isolate Indians in order to help settle the growing conflict between them and the early settlers. Some of new rules and laws set up by settlers prohibited Native Americans from hunting and ordered them to start with farming. Hunting was the way of life many Indians were accustomed to, the “blood of hunters” flowed in their veins and they were not able to become farmers immediately. In addition, lands allocated to them by the government were not much fertile. So they resisted the farming and a lot of them starved to death. [98] [99]

Native Americans do not have full power over the land, their tribal council has limited governmental rule. In these days, the United States of America include 310 Indian reservations, which range “from beautiful, lush

Flathead Reservation in Montana, to the barren desert reservations of the tribes in Southeast California.” [100] The largest one is the Navajo Indian Reservation which has approximately 16 million acres of land stretching from Arizona to New Mexico and Utah. Reservations in the United States count approximately million people from 564 recognized tribes. [101]

Not each single individual lives on some of Indian reservations, there are also those who live among whites in towns or cities and in urban ghettos, but still a large number of Indians stay on reservations. And currently, reservations are no longer homes only for Native American people. In some of them even a small percentage of poor whites live. [102]

Living conditions are appalling and shocking in many cases. Some of reservations are home for the poorest people of the country. According to Gary D. Sandefur [103], some Indian reservations may be defined as underclass areas and some others would say that reservations may be identified as “nearly Third World.” [104] The isolation of the life on the reservations caused that Indians are currently facing up number of problems which are linked to poverty, such as alcoholism, unemployment, insufficient health care, lack of education, violence, crime, high rate of suicide etc. These problems are separately considered in following chapters. [105] [106]

So why so many Indians still live on reservations? Gary D. Sanderfur argues that “the reservation is a cultural base” [107] and it is the only place where they can communicate in their tribal languages. Secondly, members of an Indian family have very strong ties. [108] As writes Alexie in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*:

Indian families stick together like Gorilla Glue, the strongest adhesive in the world... For good or bad, we don't leave one another. [109]

This strong sense of family and community is characteristic for Indian reservations and it rarely happens that an Indian leaves the

reservation and abandons his family. And when this happens, Indians consider it as a betrayal. Sherman Alexie confirms it in his books, for example in recently mentioned *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, where Arnold's sister leaves the Spokane Indian reservation to marry a Flathead Indian from Montana and the whole family is shocked by it. [110]

5.6 Indian life in urban areas

It may seem that the opposite of living on the reservation is to live in an urban area, in some town or city among whites, but neither there Indians have easy lives. Sherman Alexie wrote in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*: "Indians can reside in the city but never live there." [111] He was, of course, persuaded that it is true at the time when he wrote it down. However, he now lives in Madrona Valley in Seattle and does not believe it anymore. Alexie deals with the experience of living in the city from the view of white-collar workers (once mentioned collection of short stories *The Toughest Indian in the World* is almost exclusively targeted at this theme) as well as from the view of blue-collar workers. [112]

The main character of *Indian Killer* is a young Native American man who lives in Seattle and works as a worker at a skyscraper construction. It is obvious from this book that the main problem (at least in Sherman Alexie's eyes) which Native American people face up to in contemporary cities is alienation accompanied by prejudices and racial tensions. These issues arise from the fact, that Indians who come from reservations form a minority in every community they enter. [113]

A lot of native culture has been destroyed. So you already feel lost inside your culture. And then you add up feeling lost and insignificant inside the larger culture. [114]

For Native Americans, one of the few advantages over reservation life is that towns and cities offer them more opportunities in the area of

education and consequently greater chances in their future professional life. It is possible to demonstrate it on Sherman Alexie's case. He left his reservation to study at the university and became one of the most successful American writers.

Sharon and I were Native American royalty, the aboriginal prince and princess of western Washington. Sure, we'd been thoroughly defeated by white culture, but ang it, we were conquered and assimilated National Merit Scholars in St. Junior's English honors department.
[115]

6 SOCIAL PROBLEMS

6.1 Poverty

Poverty represents very frequent topic in Sherman Alexie's works. He has a great inspiration, because he experienced the life in poverty first-hand. As it has been already mentioned above, he comes from several siblings, his father worked only occasionally and his mother who worked as a clerk had to earn some extra money by sewing in order to feed the family. As Alexie writes in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*:

My parents came from poor people who came from poor people who came from poor people, all the way back to the very first poor people. Adam and Eve covered their privates with fig leaves; the first Indians covered their privates with their tiny hands. [116]

According to great number of newspaper articles dealing with the problem of Native American poverty, it is possible to say that Alexie reflects the real situation of reservation Indians in his books. However, in some cases the reality is even worse. It may be caused by the fact that individual reservations are scattered throughout the territory of United States and they differ from each other. [117]

6.1.1 Housing on reservations

Native Americans live in some of the worst housing conditions in the United States. This fact goes hand in hand with their terrible poverty. Caravans and mobile homes represent typical reservation housing and people who live in them can be often considered as the lucky ones, because it is estimated that over 90.000 Native American families are homeless. They are doomed to spend nights in cars, in tents or in abandoned houses. [118] (see Appendix 7 and 8)

What is also typical is that Native American people often live at the same places where they were born or grew up. The question is whether it is the evidence of their tribalism or whether it is only the consequence of poverty.

My mother and father both lived within two miles of where they were born, my grandmother lived one mile from where she was born. Ever since the Spokane Indian reservation was founded in 1881, nobody in my family had ever lived anywhere else. [119]

Thus it can happen, not exceptionally, that three or four generations share the same two-bedroom house. According to the U.S. commission on civil rights approximately one third of houses inhabited by Indians are overcrowded. On the average, more than 15 people live under one roof. In addition, more than one third of Native American reservation households live without running water (see Appendix 9), electricity and telephone services. Fewer than 50 % of households are connected to a public sewer. Houses are not thermally insulated or otherwise protected against unfavorable weather conditions. Especially the lack of adequate plumbing and running water means huge health risk. [120] [121] [122]

The problem of housing probably arises from the absence of suitable and stable property rights on reservations. The majority of the land on the reservation is held communally, by tribe. And it happens quite often that a reservation has no property rights. Due to this fact, residents cannot receive clear title to the land on which their house is situated. It becomes harder for Native Americans to borrow money and they have no desire to invest in something that does not belong to them officially. [123]

6.1.2 Unemployment

The lack of job opportunities has long been a serious problem for Native Americans and it is considered as a disaster for them. In some areas the unemployment rate currently reaches nearly 80 %. In the past,

sons used to fight in wars, such as the Vietnam War, in order to support the whole family. In 1990s there was 160, 000 Indian war veterans, which represented 10 % of all living Indians. [124] [125]

6.1.3 Insufficient health care

In general, Native Americans have very poor health and shorter life than white people. Scientists think that it is due to colonization, because before they encountered Europeans, Indians traditionally used to survive to old age. Colonizers brought with them diseases that Indians did not know and were not able to fight them. In these days the poor health is caused primarily by a lack of money and lifestyle which Indians lead. [126]

Only one third of American Indians have private health insurance, the rest is dependent on the Indian Health Service (IHS). Indian Health Service is a US federal government agency which was established in 1955 in order to raise health of Native Americans and assure them access the healthcare, it does not matter whether it is a physical or mental health. [127] [128]

However, only 60 % of the demand for care is covered by federal funding for IHS. This shortage of funding causes lowering of the quality of care offered to Native Americans. There is not enough money for sufficient preventative care and treatment of chronic diseases in their early stages. [129]

6.2 Alcoholism

Sherman Alexie often deals with the problem of alcohol in his work, as it is something inherent to American Indians. Maybe the reason is that alcoholism was a big problem in his family. For example, in his short story called "The Only Traffic on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore"

(in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*) he tells the story of a young boy who was considered a reservation basketball star, but his promising future was destroyed by alcohol. In another short story titled "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" (in *Ten Little Indians*) he gives a number of metaphorical names to alcohol, "a bottle of fortified courage" [130] or "bottles of imagination" [131] are good examples of it.

The stereotyped image of a "drunken Indian" [132] is commonly known across the United States probably also thanks to American movies dealing with Indian themes, but only few people think over it profoundly and try to find the causes and circumstances of Native American drinking. [133]

Alcoholism and issues connected with it have long represented the problem and it continues into the present, but in the last decades researchers advanced in understanding the causes and especially solutions of these problems. And according to the study made by Don Coyhis and William White, it helped to destroy the so-called firewater myths "that misrepresented the history, nature, sources and potential solutions to Native alcohol problem". [134] These myths included assertions that Native American people "had an insatiable appetite for alcohol" or "were hypersensitive to alcohol". [135] [136] Despite the fact that these two researches consider it as a myth, other sources claim that Indians are often genetically predisposed for alcoholism. [137]

People long blamed the Europeans for causing Native American alcohol dependency by introducing alcohol on the American continent, but researches showed that alcohol and other psychoactive drugs have had their place in Native American communities since ancient times; it means long before the first Europeans encountered Indians. Native tribes used these psychoactive drugs, including also tobacco and peyote [138], exclusively in rituals and ascribed them a sacred role. In these times,

alcohol would rarely be abused outside socially prescribed customs and rituals. [139]

Today, Indian dependency on alcohol is linked to the destruction of their traditional culture, alienation in the modern world and hopelessness caused by hard living conditions on reservations as well as outside them. Native American alcoholics often do not realize that alcohol only deteriorates their situation and a majority of problems is caused or somehow related to alcohol. Indian Health Service noted that the rate of alcoholism is six times greater than the U.S. average. [140]

The first thing seen on the arrival on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, which is one of the largest (about 2,800,000 acres) in the United States, is a sign announcing that “alcohol is not allowed on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.” Pine Ridge tribal police knew why to place the sign here, alcohol had already destroyed the life of many of them. The sale of alcohol on the Pine Ridge reservation is banned as well as its possession since 1832 when the reservation was created. However, only the sign does not prevent reservation people from drinking. There is a town of Whiteclay with only fourteen permanent residents, but four alcohol shops. These shops sold illegally almost 5,000,000 cans of beer in 2010 to 40,000 reservation residents. On the reservation, every fourth child suffers from fetal disorder which is caused by their parent’s alcoholism. [141]

According to research made by Paul Spicer (from the University of Colorado’s Health Sciences Center), reservation Indians often start drinking when they are still children and it is linked to socialization. They want to fit into the collective of their peers and they use alcohol as the primary means. They meet up and imitate adults and alcohol helps them in establishing relationships. As one of the respondent in Spicer’s research said, “those with alcohol were never alone.” [142] The sad thing is that these children do not realize consequences of their actions. Many

of them end up as heavy drinkers with a broken health and no hope for improvement of their lives. [143]

The impact of alcoholism is devastating in lot of cases. It was found that a large percentage of premature deaths in Native American communities are somehow linked to alcohol. In general, one of ten deaths among Native Americans is alcohol-related. That number is third time greater that the average is in the United States. These deaths caused by alcohol abuse include accidents (especially those involving motor vehicles), diseases (mainly alcoholic liver disease and also diseases for which alcohol is an important risk factor such as colon cancer or pneumonia), homicides and suicides. [144] [145]

6.3 Racism

Native Americans, as well as members of other minorities, sometimes do not avoid racism. It can begin by a subtle or not-so-subtle reference to skin colour and end by grievous bodily harm or another crime motivated by race.

Sherman Alexie frequently writes about racism-related experience by Native Americans. And what is important, he writes about racism which he experienced first-hand. It seems that he also enjoys describing differences between whites and Indians. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* the main character, Junior, who represents the embodiment of a young Alexie in the book, starts to attend all-white high school.

Then the white kids began arriving for school. They surrounded me. Those kids weren't just white. They were translucent. I could see the blue veins running through their skin like rivers. [146]

Although the mascot of school football team is an Indian, Junior becomes the victim of racial-related insults from the very beginning.

“Hey, Chief,” Roger said. “You want to hear a joke?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Did you know that Indians are living proof that niggers fuck buffalo?”

I felt like Roger had kicked me in the face. That was the most racist thing I’d ever heard in my life. [147]

However, Sherman Alexie does not write about racial tensions only from the perspective of an Indian victim of racism. *Indian Killer* is about a young Native American, who was named John by his white adoptive parents. Later in the book, John begins to hate all white men.

But John could not convince himself that the richest man in the world deserve to die. It was too easy. If he killed the richest white man in the world, then the second-richest white man would take his place. ... John could kill a thousand rich white men and not change a thing. [148]

It is obvious from this quotation that John does not hate only white people, he hates all white society. He is angry at them for what they have done to the world. He blames white men for his own bad situation, as well as for the miserable life of the other Indians.

“Fucking Indian!”

... “What the fuck are you staring at?”

John was staring at the white boys. They were pale and beautiful. John pointed at them

“What the fuck you are pointing at?”

... John knew these white boys. Not these two in particular, but white boys in general. He had been in high school with boys like these. [149]

He hates them for who they are. John thinks that white people have better lives because of their skin colour and he resents their arrogant and haughty behaviour.

As regards to real situation of Indians, whites and racism here is a case which happened in Albuquerque (New Mexico) in 2011. Three supporters of the “white power” assaulted and tortured a young Native American boy, who was, in addition mentally disabled as a result of fetal alcohol syndrome. While he was sleeping, his torturers shaved a swastika [150] into his hair and on the back of his neck they drew words “white power”. After it, they covered his mouth by a towel and burned the sign of swastika on his arms. It was for the first time in New Mexico that somebody was sentenced for a hate crime. [151]

6.4 Suicide

Suicides are actually one of the most discussed topics in relation to Native Americans. Since 1980 suicide rates among young Native Americans (15 – 24 years) has increased 200 – 300 %. Suicide rates among Native Americans are three times greater than the national average in the United States. And it was recorded that young Indian males are more likely to commit suicide than females. [152]

In June 2007 New York Times published an article targeted at this topic. The main focus of interest was Rosebud Sioux Reservation, which is located in the Great Plains, with its extreme rate of suicides. Plains reservations are among the poorest and suicide rate among young Native Americans are even ten times greater than the US national average. The number of committed suicides and failed attempts led to the declaration of the “state of emergency” on Rosebud Sioux Reservation. From the beginning of year 2007 until June 2007 doctors recorded 144 suicide attempts on the reservation with the population of 13,000. The suicide phenomenon culminated in May, when “seven youths who tried hanging, poisoning or slashing themselves to death were admitted to the reservation hospital in one 24-hour period. [153]

To live means to kill. To live means to die. To live means to survive your own damned life. [154]

What causes that so many young Indians decide to end their lives voluntarily and prematurely? Maybe, it is possible to mention here all of the issues considered in previous chapters such as poverty, alcoholism, hopelessness, loss of their culture, racial discrimination etc. However, scientists believe that historical trauma also contributes to it. According to a young girl from Rosebud who tried to kill herself, suicide is “permanent solution to temporary problems. “ [155]

Sherman Alexie deals with the theme of suicide in novels *Reservation Blues* a *Indian Killer*. In both books, the main reason for committing suicide is a deep identity crisis that characters suffer from. [156]

He was not afraid of falling. John stepped off the last skyscraper in Seattle. John fell. Falling in the dark, John Smith thought, was different from falling in the sunlight. It took more time to fall forty floors in the dark...John's fall was slow and precise...He had time to count the floors of the office tower across the street, ten, fifteen, thirty, forty. Time enough to look up and find the one bright window in a tower of dark glass across the street...Because he finally and completely understood the voices in his head... John was calm. He was falling. [157]

7 CONCLUSION

The objective of my thesis was to introduce Native American literature with its history and typical features, present the personality of Sherman Alexie and subsequently find out if his works are realistic. I wanted to know if he was influenced by his life experience, too.

I introduced the development of Native American literature from myths to contemporary authors and focused on Sherman Alexie and his work. I have read three of his books: *Indian Killer*, *Ten Little Indians* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

Sherman Alexie in his works portrays the everyday life of contemporary American Indians in all its aspects, even the negative ones. The negative aspects include problems such as extreme poverty, alcoholism, racism, feelings of loss of culture and identity. A potential reader of Sherman Alexie's work who is not initiated into issues of contemporary Native Americans, will be probably shocked in the first moment. And when the reader begins to be interested more in this topic, one shock comes after another.

The sixth chapter called Social problems provides facts which are most often taken from the newspaper articles and my text is interspersed with quotes from books by Sherman Alexie in order to prove that his characters deal with similar problems as real Native American people.

However, the real current situation of Native American communities seems to be worse than Alexie depicts in his work. In my opinion it is due to the fact that characters of Alexie's books face to their problems with humour. That is the main difference between characters from books and real Indians from hopeless reservations who live from hand to mouth and often do not see any other way out from the harsh reality than heavy drinking or, in the worst cases, a suicide.

I also asked myself if Alexie's writing is somehow influenced by his own life. The result of my study reveals that it definitely is. He grew up on the Indian reservation and then he integrated into the white society of Seattle. Almost all of the problems which are analyzed in the thesis he experienced firsthand.

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10 ABSTRACT

The aim of the thesis is to present Sherman Alexie, an author of Native American origin, and subsequently find out if his work is realistic and influenced by his own life experience. I describe the development of Native American literature from the times of oral tradition up to contemporary writers and then I focus on life and work of Sherman Alexie. An important part of my thesis comprises the description of the destruction of Native American traditional culture and its impact on Native American communities. Finally, the main part of the thesis deals with particular social problems depicted in Alexie's books which are compared to the real current situation of Native Americans in the United States of America.

11 RÉSUMÉ

Cílem této práce je představit spisovatele indiánského původu, Shermana Alexieho, a následně zjistit, jestli je jeho dílo realistické a bylo ovlivněné autorovou vlastní životní zkušeností. Popisují vývoj literatury původních Američanů od ústní slovesnosti až po současné spisovatele, a poté se zaměřuji na život a dílo Shermana Alexieho. Důležitou část práce představuje popis zkázy tradiční kultury původních Američanů a dopad, jaký to má na indiánské komunity. Nakonec se v hlavní části práce zabývám jednotlivými sociálními problémy, které Alexie popisuje ve svých knihách, a srovnávám je se skutečnou současnou situací ve Spojených státech amerických.

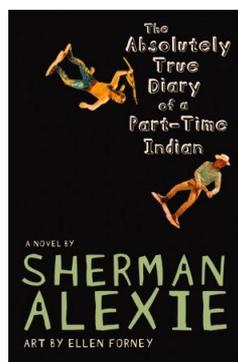
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Appendix 1 Sherman Alexie



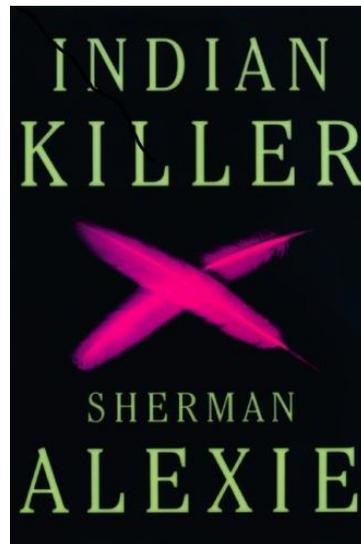
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Appendix 2



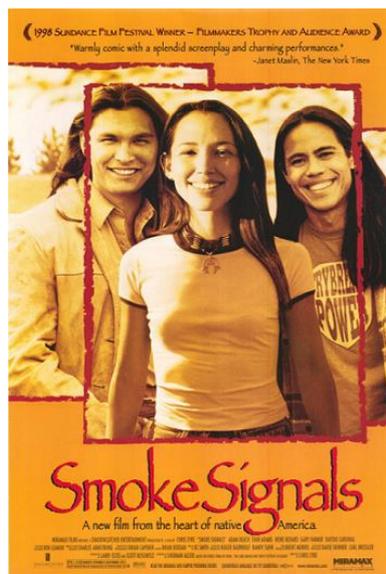
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Appendix 3



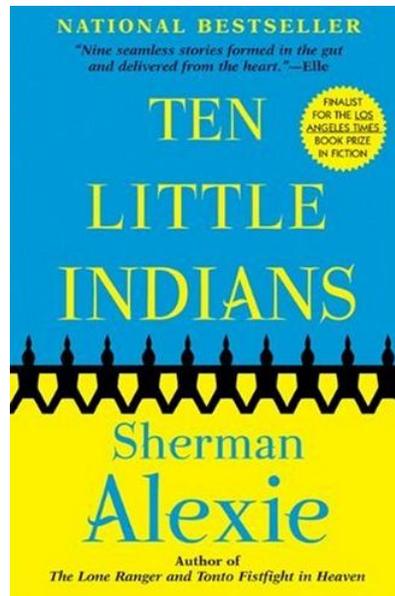
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Appendix 4



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Appendix 5



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Appendix 6

Indian children playing “rezball”



http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/04/6_native_american_basketball_facts_inspired_by_the_schimmel_sisters.html

Appendix 7

Poverty - housing



<http://sleeplessinturtleisland.blogspot.cz/2012/08/native-americans-poverty-un-report.html>

Appendix 8

Poverty – housing



<http://simplyscott.blogspot.cz/2009/05/new-amor-location-apache-reservation.html>

Appendix 9 Bathing a child on the Pine Ridge Reservation



<http://sleeplessinturtleisland.wordpress.com/2012/08/06/native-americans-poverty-un-report/>