

## On “Survivance” in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*

ZHANG Qian<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> School of Foreign Studies, Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 5 January 2023; accepted 9 March 2023

Published online 26 April 2023

### Abstract

The development and continuation of ethnicity has always been one of the most crucial issues faced by ethnic minorities in the United States. This issue is particularly prominent in the literary works of contemporary American Indian writers including Sherman Alexie, who is a representative figure of the new generation of American Indian writers. Based on the theory of “survivance” by Gerald Vizenor, the present paper explores that in the social and cultural atmosphere where multiculturalism was hindered and minorities in America were still ostracized by a portion of mainstream whites in the 1990s, American Indians in Alexie’s *Indian Killer* fight against mainstream media’s smear of Indian images, the dominance of their culture by white academics and the disregard of the white government for their living conditions. This paper contends that through the representation of American Indians’ counterattacks, Alexie calls for American Indians’ resistance against the Indian stereotypes as the Other in the mainstream ideology and adherence to the subjectivity of their culture and identity in the process of integrating into the mainstream.

**Key words:** Survivance; Sherman Alexie; *Indian Killer*; Gerald Vizenor

Zhang, Q. (2023). On “Survivance” in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*. *Canadian Social Science*, 19(2), 35-42. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/12985>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12985>

### INTRODUCTION

As the representative of American Indian writers of the new generation, Sherman Alexie pierces “modern Indian

life” (Cline, 2000, p.197). A Spokane/Coeur d’ Alene Indian born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington state, Alexie is a prolific poet, filmmaker and novelist, who has published four novels, twelve books of poetry, six collections of short stories and two plays, and is hailed as “the future of American fiction” by *The New Yorker* (qtd. in Fraser, 2000, p.59). He sees the presentation of American Indians’ survival in a multicultural society as his duty, with a focus on the exploration of how American Indians can keep the continuance of their culture and attributes in the multicultural situation in his literary works, especially in *Indian Killer*, which reveals that American Indians resist the dominance and persecution of mainstream society, to struggle for the continuation and subjectiveness of their culture and identity.

On the basis of American Indian writer Gerald Vizenor’s theory of survivance, the present paper delves into how American Indians in *Indian Killer* keep the continuity of their culture and identity. As a mixed-blood descendant of the whites and American Indians, Gerald Vizenor contemplates how American Indians can sustain tribal cultures and their identity under the internal colonization, cultural assimilation and infiltration of the whites. Besides, he objects to American Indians’ recognition of themselves as passive victims or survivors. In his opinion, once American Indians accept themselves as victims, they “complete psychologically the not-quite-entirely successful physical genocide” (Kroeber, 2008, p.25). In order to appeal to American Indians to actively strive for cultural continuity, he revives the old English word “survivance”<sup>1</sup> that has become obsolete in the nineteenth century. He combines it with the history

<sup>1</sup> According to Karl Kroeber, “survivance”, “originally a good English word roughly synonymous with *survival*, became obsolete in the nineteenth century. Gerald Vizenor revived it a couple of decades ago, injecting into the old word red coloring and teasing connotations” (2008, p.25).

and characteristics of Indian people, and puts forward the theory of survivance. In "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice", Vizenor declares that the definitions of "survivance" in dictionaries such as "relic, survival" and "succession to an estate, office, etc., of a survivor nominated before the death of the previous holder" cannot meet with his thoughts on the survivance of Indian people (2008, p.19). In his view, "survivance" is "more than the instincts of survival, function, or subsistence" (2008, p.11); that is, he asserts that American Indians' survivance is more than physical survival. More importantly, he claims that "survivance" means "an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry" (2008, p.11). Considering the whites' assimilation of their tribes, cultures and languages, he maintains that American Indians should resist the white cultural subjugation and persecution as well as protect tribal traditions and ethnic features.

That is to say, "survivance" is not just about physical survival, nor does it convey that American Indians should resign themselves to mainstream society for its recognition and acceptance. Vizenor emphasizes that the survivance of Indian people must be founded on maintaining its cultural and ethnic subjectivity. Therefore, when the subjective position of Indian nation is manipulated by white society, American Indians should resist. More importantly, their resistance is not to engender racial antagonism. It aims at striving for the continuity, independence and definition of their culture and identity as well as the integration based on keeping their principal position, just as Vizenor claims, "[n]ative resistance is survivance, not separatism" (Vizenor & Lee, 1999, p.179).

The present paper concentrates on *Indian Killer*, which is in the situation where the development of multiculturalism in America was impeded and minority people were still excluded by a portion of the whites in mainstream society in the 1990s. Published in 1996, remaining Alexie's "most controversial book to date" (Cooper, 2010, p.32), *Indian Killer* gives a deep insight into racism. It is closely related to the Neo-conservatism which prevailed in mainstream society in the 1990s. Neo-conservatism was advocated during the administrations of Presidents Ronald Wilson Reagan and George Herbert Walker Bush. During the administration of William Jefferson Clinton, Neo-conservatism "continued to be in power" (Li, 1997, p.18). Furthermore, Neo-conservatism repelled multiculturalism, holding that it "threaten[ed] the United States and the West" (Huntington, 1996, p.318). Therefore, Neo-conservatism "worsened racial relations" (Li, 1997, p.29). In 1996, California voted to "prohibit the implementation of 'Affirmative Action Plan' in the state" (Li, 1997, p.28), and no longer gave preferential treatments to minorities in civil servant recruitment, education, etc. The paramilitary organizations of white supremacists even "occurred in more than 40 states"

(Li, 1997, p.28). In addition, the neoconservatives are primarily intellectuals like newspapermen, professors, celebrities, etc. They keep a hold on mainstream media, influence public opinion, and have power in government decisions.

Consequently, in the 1990s, Neo-conservatism in mainstream society hinders the development of multiculturalism in America. It exerts a negative impact on the living conditions of minority groups including American Indians and makes their integration into the mainstream more difficult. As an American Indian writer who is concerned with the living situation of American Indians, Alexie presents such case in *Indian Killer*, and responds to this. In *Indian Killer*, the urban American Indians in Seattle don't surrender to the persecution of the mainstream, and are not the passive victims under the dominance of white society. These American Indians who leave reservations and seek a foothold in Seattle, counterattack the racist smear of mainstream media, white scholars' simulation, vilification and occupation of their culture as well as the white government's overlook of their living circumstance. Additionally, they are not intent on creating the opposite, but on arousing mainstream society's attention to their ethnic and cultural continuity as well as on striving to merge into America as a cultural subject.

---

## 1. FIGHTING BACK THE SMEAR OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA

---

In the novel, for receiving better education and improving lives, American Indians from more than two hundred tribes gather in Seattle, a city that once belonged to Indian tribes but was plundered by the whites. Though a multicultural metropolis, Seattle "is full of racial discrimination and segregation" (Zheng, 2016, p.107). The novel reveals that these American Indians in Seattle resist mainstream media's denigration of Indian images as the Other. Resorting to violent attacks, they fight against the white broadcaster's traducement of Indian image as "the butcher" and incitement of racial violence to block their integration into the mainstream. Beyond that, they expose the mainstream bestsellers' misrepresentation of Indian images as "the rebel" and "the killer", organize petitions and gatherings to boycott these books, and try to protect the authenticity of Indian images in the mainstream.

In *Indian Killer*, mainstream radio stations defame Indian image as "the butcher" and instigate the whites to assault American Indians in Seattle. In the novel, there have been several serial killings in Seattle, which involves the deaths of a few whites with obvious Indian color—the murderer usually scalps the white decedents and leaves two bloody owl feathers at the scene of the crimes. Because of this case, Truck Schultz, the white host of Seattle's most popular talk-radio show, who is "rabid" and

“conservative” (Chen, 2005, p.164) and has “a hundred thousand listeners” (Alexie, 1996, p.55),<sup>2</sup> arbitrarily conveys to the public that the killer is an American Indian. What’s more, on the radio show, he constantly denigrates American Indians from the perspectives of race and religious beliefs. He insults them as “barbaric butchers” who repay the whites’ kindness with enmity, and incites the whites to attack them in order to impede their integration into the city.

The novel recounts that the urban American Indians in Seattle also use violence to strike back the mainstream broadcast’s incitation of racial violence. In a brawl between three white men and an old American Indian lady, facing the provocation of these strong white men, the old Indian lady is not afraid of danger and intends to use a knife to show her power. Another character in the novel, Reggie Polatkin, an American Indian youth who drops out of the University of Washington, tortures a white college student called Harris on the football field of a high school with another two American Indian youths. They regard the white student as Schultz who smears Indian image as “the butcher” and abets the whites in beating American Indians, project their hatred of Schultz on him, and angrily gouge his eyes out. The novel also exhibits when three white youths hit John Smith, a young American Indian who works diligently in Seattle, other American Indian passersby kick, scratch, and slap them (p.374), causing them to flee in a hurry. Although these American Indian passersby are seriously injured, they are no longer the passive victims of the whites’ violence. They loudly celebrate as well as exchange high fives and hugs for their victory against the whites (p.375). Nevertheless, though these American Indians violently counterattack Schultz’s instigation of racial violence against them, they don’t aim to induce confrontation between them and the whites, but are for their survival and foothold in Seattle. In brief, the urban American Indians in Seattle violently fight back the mainstream broadcaster’s fomentation of violence against them, and their resistance represents their opposition to the mainstream host’s slander of their image as “the butcher”.

Not only that, but these American Indians in Seattle unwrap white bestsellers’ falsification of Indian images, so as to establish true Indian images in the mainstream. In *Indian Killer*, Marie Polatkin, an American Indian female student at the University of Washington, unmasks the reality that the white writer Jack Wilson distorts Indian images in his bestsellers. As a best-selling writer, Wilson has a lot of readers in the mainstream. He not only lies about being a “Shilshomish Indian” in the interviews (p.264), but also misrepresents Indian images in his books according to hearsay and guesswork. In many of his bestsellers, he fabricates an American Indian protagonist

called “Aristotle Little Hawk”, presenting him as “a rebel” who is seemingly tamed by the whites but is “actually working within the system in his efforts to disrupt it” (p.246). As a result, this Indian image as “the rebel” in his popular books makes the whites hostile to American Indians and repel their integration. Yet, Wilson’s perversion of Indian image as “the rebel” is questioned by Marie. Visiting many American Indian organizations to investigate Wilson’s identity, Marie discloses to the white reporter of the mainstream that Wilson is “a fraud” and has no documentations to prove his Indian identity (p.264). She even exposes to the reporter that Wilson’s books are “dangerous and violent” and “actually commit violence against Indians” (p.264). Beyond that, Marie criticizes Wilson as the “cannibal”, the “scavenger” and the “maggot” (p.267), condemning him for using Indian stereotype of “the rebel” to please the white readers, and indicating that American Indians are not what he has written.

What’s more, Marie brings out Wilson’s distortion of Indian image as “the killer” in his popular books. As the incident of the “Indian killer” who kills several whites triggers more and more attention, Wilson, afraid that someone will publish a book about the “Indian killer” before him, defames an American Indian youth he has randomly encountered as the “Indian killer”. He also spreads how this American Indian youth brutally murders the whites in his new book. However, Wilson’s fabrication of Indian image as “the killer” meets with protest from Marie. She reveals to a white policeman who believes in Wilson’s book that Wilson is “a liar” and “doesn’t know shit about Indians” (p.415). In fact, in *Indian Killer*, Marie’s efforts of unmasking Wilson’s misrepresentation of Indian image as “the killer” are devoted to guarding true Indian images in mainstream society.

In addition, as the novel shows, led by Marie, the urban American Indians in Seattle also organize petitions as well as rallies to boycott Wilson’s bestsellers, with the purpose of maintaining the purity of Indian images. In order to stop Wilson from continuing to propagate Indian images as “the rebel” and “the Killer” in his popular books, American Indians in the novel organize a petition. They collect more than two hundred signatures from their tribes, jointly compelling him to “quit writing books about Indians” (p.264), so as to prevent the suffusion of the contorted Indian images as “the rebel” and “the killer” in the mainstream. These American Indians even voice their desire to get more signatures from thousands of other American Indians to reject his books. As a result, their petition makes Wilson “stunned” (p.264) and “dizzy” (p.265). Additionally, they hold gatherings to remonstrate Wilson’s books. They block the entrance of the Elliott Bay Book Company where he gives a public reading, carrying billboards with words like “Wilson is a fraud” and “[o]nly Indians should tell Indian stories” (p.263). They even march in front of the bookstore, pounding drums

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, all references to the text come from *Indian Killer*, and only page numbers are displayed in the following.

and chanting "Wilson is a fraud" to protest against his books. In short, resorting to petitions and protest rallies, the urban American Indians in Seattle strive against the false Indian images as "the rebel" and "the killer" in mainstream bestsellers, defending the pure Indian images in mainstream society.

"Survivance is an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry" (Vizenor, 2008, p.11). In *Indian Killer*, in the face of mainstream broadcast which smirches Indian image as "the butcher" and stirs the whites' violent attack on them to restrain their integration, the urban American Indians in Seattle strike back with violence. Moreover, they unveil the reality that mainstream popular books falsify Indian images as "the rebel" and "the killer", petitioning as well as organizing rallies in an effort to keep veritable Indian images in the mainstream. Besides, the mainstream media's denigration of Indian images as "the butcher", "the rebel" and "the killer" denotes that to mainstream whites, the Indian images appear as the Other. Therefore, these American Indians' resistance represents that they try to subvert the Indian images as the Other in the mainstream ideology.

## 2. COUNTERING WHITE CULTURAL DOMINANCE

In *Indian Killer*, American Indians also counter white scholars' dominance of their culture. For the sake of the genuineness, integrity and independence of their culture, these American Indians in Seattle not only debunk white experts' utilization of the academic book list to simulate their culture and verbally counterattack these savants' vilification of it, but also denunciate these so-called academic authorities' occupation of their cultural heritages. In doing so, they strive for the subjectivity of their culture and identity, and try to disseminate real Indian culture in mainstream society, which can lead the whites to correctly understand their culture and to be more willing to embrace their integration.

In the novel, for the authenticity and the subjectiveness of Indian culture, Marie, the American Indian student at the University of Washington, exposes her white professor's simulation of Indian culture with an academic reading list. In the Introduction to Native American Literature class where the majority of students are the whites, Clarence Mather, the white professor and "the official dispenser of 'Indian education' at the university" (58), recommends a list of academic books about Indian culture written or edited by white scholars as follows:

One of the books, *The Education of Little Tree*, was supposedly written by a Cherokee Indian named Forrest Carter. But Forrest Carter was actually the pseudonym for a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Three of the other books, *Black Elk*

*Speaks, Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*, and *Lakota Woman*, were taught in almost every Native American Literature class in the country, and purported to be autobiographical, though all three were co-written by white men. Black Elk himself had disavowed his autobiography, a fact that was conveniently omitted in any discussion of the book. The other seven books included three anthologies of traditional Indian stories edited by white men, two nonfiction studies of Indian spirituality written by white women, a book of traditional Indian poetry translations edited by a Polish-American Jewish man, and an Indian murder mystery written by some local white writer named Jack Wilson, who claimed he was a Shilshomish Indian. (p.58)

As the novel displays, Marie oppugns the credibility of Indian culture reflected in Mather's academic book list. She directly states to Mather that the author of *The Education of Little Tree* on the book list has no "Cherokee blood" (p.59), and is a white man who writes under the guise of an Indian identity. She further sets forth that this book is "a total fraud" (p.59), and is a simulation of the real Indian culture without "real origin" or "original reference" (Vizenor & Lee, 1999, p.85). She also exposes that the three autobiographies on the book list written by both the whites and American Indians are actually "written by white guys" (p.59). She holds that these autobiographies are also the cultural simulations which "can take the place of the real" (Vizenor & Lee, 1999, p.83), and can disintegrate the subjectivity of Indian culture. Besides, though Mather asks her to "recognize the validity of a Native American literature that is shaped by both Indian and white hands" (p.61), and attempts to "build bridges" between them (Laminack, 2017, p.30), she shows her disapproval. She retorts that he defends for those white academics who intend to replace the real Indian culture with a simulated one, "reinforce[s] white power and undermine[s] indigenous authority" (Dean, 2008, p.31). In a word, to preserve veritable Indian culture and its principal status, Marie unwraps the white specialist's conspiracy of cultural simulations through an academic reading list.

As a matter of fact, Mather's academic book list makes the real Indian culture become "a simulation, an absence" (Vizenor & Lee, 1999, p.82). However, for Alexie, survivance "means a native sense of presence" (Vizenor & Lee, 1999, p.93). As a result, he lets American Indian characters like Marie in the novel give out their voice of resistance against white scholars' simulation of their culture. Moreover, in order to introduce mainstream white students to the actual Indian culture, Marie points out to Mather that "there are so many real Indians out there writing real Indian books. Simon Ortiz, Roberta Whiteman, Luci Tapahonso" (p.67). She insists that he should add academic books written by these genuine American Indian scholars to the book list. Besides, she even raises a question that "why isn't an Indian teaching the class?" (p.312), querying Mather's identity as a white professor teaching American Indian literature (p.312).

In addition to unmasking Mather's simulation of Indian culture, Marie strives against his slander of casinos on the reservations, aiming to present the true situation of the casinos. "In order to alleviate their poverty and dependence on the federal funds, as well as to improve their economic condition, some Indian tribes began to run casinos in the late 1970s" (Hu, 2013, p.38). These tribes operate casinos with the permission of the federal government, and "the earnings of the casinos are used by them to maintain their livelihoods, to protect their culture and to improve their lives" (Hu, 2013, p.40). However, in *Indian Killer*, by virtue of the experience of having worked with dozens of Indian tribes, in class, Mather defames the casinos on the reservations. He denigrates them as a means of American Indians to start "fiscal rebellion" against the whites (p.83), "intending to put American Indians in the role of rebels and to trigger white students' resentment of them" (Zhang & Zheng, 2020, p.30). However, Marie indicates that he knows nothing about the reservation casinos (p.84). For the sake of demonstrating the real circumstance of reservation casinos, Marie explains to Mather as well as the white students in the classroom that American Indians are not "planning a rebellion", and that they run casinos just "for food, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner" (p.84). In fact, Marie's protest against Mather's defamation of reservation casinos not only wards the actual Indian culture, but also prompts white students to have a correct understanding of Indian culture and to accept American Indians.

The novel also shows that Marie berates Mather for calumniating the ideology of American Indians, for the purpose of keeping white students from being misled. In class, to white students, the arrogant Mather also expresses his viewpoints about the incident of "Indian killer". In his view, the "Indian Killer" "is an inevitable creation of capitalism" and represents the resistance of the poor and powerless American Indians against the powerful whites (p.245). Mather's opinion is greeted with Marie's protestation. She unmasks his intention that he ostensibly strives for justice for American Indians, but in fact still places them in the position of "rebels" to stir up white students' hate of them. More importantly, in class, she makes clear to Mather and the white students that American Indians do not have these ideas of insurgency or the hostile thought of taking revenge on the whites (p.246). She even rebukes Mather as an "arrogant asshole" (p.267). As a matter of fact, Marie's efforts to resist Mather's calumny of American Indians' ideology show "her authority in these matters" (Liu, 2011, p.80), and deconstruct Mather's dominance in the field of Indian culture studies. Besides, she hopes that "the other students know the real story" (p.329). Therefore, her counterattacks against Mather's calumny can let white students know American Indians more objectively and lead them more willingly to recognize American Indians.

Apart from fighting back white experts' traducement of Indian culture, the urban American Indians in the novel disclose their misappropriation of Indian cultural heritages, so as to protect the cultural lifeblood of tribes and the subjectivity of Indian identity. As is exhibited in the novel, Reggie, the American Indian youth who once studied at the University of Washington, for the integrity of Indian culture and the subjectiveness of Indian identity, stops Mather from usurping cultural heritages of tribes. Firstly, as Reggie finds that for academic achievements, Mather, who believes that "every good story that belongs to Indians belongs to non-Indians, too" (p.61), privately keeps a tape which records the stories of an Indian family, he asks Mather to destroy the tape immediately. He doesn't want a white person like Mather to possess Indian cultural heritages because he does not know what the whites will do with them. Just as Liu Kedong expounds, "Reggie holds that he has a responsibility to preserve his tribal cultures" (2011, p.59). More importantly, Reggie is aware that once ancestral traditions are embezzled by the whites, the cultural identity of American Indians including him will be lost. In addition, he even sues Mather's appropriation of the tape to the dean of the university when he discovers that Mather actually does not destroy it. What's more, to protect the tape, he even fights with Mather in public at the risk of being expelled from the university. In general, to guard the cultural lifeline of their tribes and the subjectiveness of their cultural identity, American Indians in the novel counter the white savants' encroachment of their tribal cultures.

In an interview, Alexie stresses that *Indian Killer* is about "how the dominant culture is killing the First Nations people of this country to this day, still" (Highway, 1997, p.40). However, for American Indians, cultural continuity is "central to survivance" (Helstern, 2008, p.166). In the novel, the urban American Indians in Seattle don't yield to white authorities' cultural dominance. They create "the new stories of survivance over dominance" (Vizenor, 1999, p.4). For safeguarding their cultural homeland, they unveil white scholars' simulation of their culture, and verbally fight against the cultural vilification of these white specialists. They also expose these white academics' occupation of their cultural heritages. What's more, their resistance can protect the subjectivity of their culture and identity and showcase actual Indian culture to the mainstream, which can make the whites really understand them.

---

### 3. STRUGGLING AGAINST THE DISREGARD OF GOVERNMENT

---

Arnold Krupat points out that "a considerable number of Native people exist in conditions of politically sustained subalternity" (1996, p.30). However, for American Indians, survivance is "an active resistance and

repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry" (Vizenor, 2008, p.11). In *Indian Killer*, resorting to American Indian organizations and "Ghost Dance", American Indians in Seattle protest against the white government's negligence of their tough living conditions, to gain a footing in Seattle and to achieve acceptance into the mainstream.

The novel reveals that the white government in Seattle neglects the living situation of the urban American Indians, letting them fend for themselves in the city and rejecting their integration. For improving their lives, a lot of American Indians in the novel leave their backward reservations to Seattle, but some of them still cannot find jobs in this white city. Due to extreme poverty, many homeless American Indians can only sleep on the streets, suffering the "trauma of homelessness, alienation, and dislocation" (Van Styvendale, 2008, p.220). However, the whites in Seattle can enjoy a relatively pleasant and comfortable life. The novel mentions that they can sail leisurely on the Lake Washington, "[e]verything so simple for them" (p.217), and are offered secure living guarantee by the white government. Yet, as a part of the U.S. citizens, those roofless urban American Indians in Seattle are in a precarious position and get no help from the white government.

In the novel, Cornelius and Zera, a couple of homeless American Indians gathering in downtown Seattle, can only keep warm beside the furnace of a doorway, have spent "a year of nights in that doorway" (p.212), and receive no governmental aid. Beyond that, the novel presents that King, a Flathead youth from Montana, gets injured at work "without any access to disability or workers' compensation", and has been roofless "for most of the last ten years" (p.233). Besides, some homeless American Indians take the Alaskan Way Viaduct in downtown Seattle, an ugly monstrosity that will "surely fall to pieces during a major earthquake" (p.143), as their shelter from the wind and rain. Under the viaduct, these poor American Indians wait for the tourists to "empty their pockets of loose change" (p.143), but the white government in Seattle does not provide them with shelters. Moreover, vagrant American Indians in Seattle are often driven away by white police. The Seattle Police Department sends police officers to the Occidental Park every Thursday to dispel the homeless American Indians in the park, for the sake of ensuring that the concert held in the park can go on normally (p.228). For the Seattle Police Department, these vagabond American Indians in the park pose "a threat to the public image of the urban core" (p.362). The white police are unwilling to care about if these deported American Indians have a place to sleep. What's more, the number of the dispossessed American Indians in downtown Seattle even shocks the whites (p.218), and many of these homeless American Indians surrender and plunge into inebriation as an escape from

cruel reality. Actually, the white government's negligence of these urban American Indians in Seattle signifies that these American Indians are not greeted with acceptance into the white city.

Not only the living circumstance of the urban American Indians in Seattle cannot draw the attention of the white government, but also their life safety is unworthy of notice for the white police. The novel reveals that an American Indian woman called "Beautiful Mary" is brutally murdered in Seattle, but gets no attention from the Seattle police. For the whites, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" (Morris, 1992, p.343-344). Thus, for the white police, the death of an American Indian is "a low priority" (p.160), and is not worth to be noted. They treat American Indians as dispensable people with little power, and do not care for life and death of these American Indians. In a word, it can be seen that in the novel, the Seattle white government also dismisses the lives of the urban American Indians, intending to let them run their course.

In *Indian Killer*, the urban American Indians in Seattle set up American Indian organizations which can improve their living conditions, to counterattack the Seattle white government's overlook of them. Being Indian is "mostly about survival" (p.61), and for American Indians, survivance is "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion" (Vizenor, 2008, p.1). Since the U.S. government implemented "Relocation Program" for American Indians in the 1950s, in order to move out of poverty and seek development opportunities, more and more American Indians have come to white cities. "[A]ccording to the 2010 U.S. Census, the population of American Indians in cities accounted for more than 70 percent of their total population" (Zhao & Kang, 2017, p.21). However, white cities are not as friendly as these urban American Indians imagine. Due to the inadequate support of the U.S. government for these urban American Indians, since the 1950s and 1960s, they began to establish many American Indian organizations like "the National Congress of American Indians", to improve their living quality. In the novel, the urban American Indians in Seattle also build many American Indian organizations to improve their living standards, and fight against the white government's disregard of their survival. In a refuge surrounded by "gentrified apartment buildings and dive bars, trendy restaurants and detox centers" in downtown Seattle (p.329), the urban American Indians found an organization called "Seattle Open Heart Mission" (p.231). In this organization, those urban American Indians living in slightly better condition provide food for the roofless American Indians in Seattle. The novel displays that Marie, the American Indian student at the University of Washington, is also a volunteer of this organization. She makes sandwiches for the homeless American Indians with her companions (p.330). If it weren't for this American

Indian organization, the displaced American Indians neglected by the white government could not even eat sandwiches (p.144). Moreover, the "Seattle Open Heart Mission" also brings care and warmth to these vagrant American Indians to support their faith in survival. When Marie distributes food to them, she always asks them how their day is going, comforts them and encourages them to live even if they are dismissed by the white government (p.145). In short, the urban American Indians in Seattle build organizations to ameliorate their living situation, and counter the white government's overlook of them.

The novel exhibits that apart from the "Seattle Open Heart Mission" that offers essentials, the urban American Indians in Seattle establish many other American Indian organizations. They build organizations such as "the Seattle Urban Indian Health Center", "the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation" and "the Native American Students Alliance" (p.67), to struggle for their improvements and equal rights in healthcare, education, etc. As a matter of fact, for the white government, the urban American Indians are not as important as other ethnic minorities like African Americans. Compared with other minorities, the urban American Indians are at the bottom of American society. However, the indomitable urban American Indians in the novel possess the beliefs in resisting unfair treatment of them by the white government in areas such as education and medical care, etc. Just as the principal of the American Indian Center in Minneapolis deems, every American Indian who comes to cities has a dream of success and improving life (qtd. in Li, 1992, p.10). Actually, on a deeper level, these organizations concerning education and healthcare reveal that these American Indians want to take root in Seattle, a city where their ancestors once lived, and to live equally with the whites in cities, instead of being forced to live on the remote reservations.

Additionally, faced with the Seattle white government's intention of letting them run their course, the urban American Indians in Seattle express their protest with "Ghost Dance". In Indian culture, the "Ghost Dance", "over five hundred years old, was performed in hopes that it would dispel the invading whites and resurrect dead relatives and loved ones, while returning the land to a precolonized state" (Grassian, 2012, p.315). In the novel, the white government attempts to leave the urban American Indians in Seattle alone by dismissing their living circumstance and life security. However, these disregarded American Indians are angry at the neglect, and fight against it by means of "Ghost Dance". As the novel narrates, Marie believes that the "Indian killer", who has made the Seattle white government panic, is "a product of the Ghost Dance" of American Indians in Seattle (p.313), and aims at countering the government's unjust treatment of those homeless urban American Indians. Beyond that, the novel mentions a nameless American Indian man

who is a veteran of U.S. Army, receives no preferential treatment from the white government and lives on the streets. He claims that the "Indian killer" created by the urban American Indians' "Ghost Dance", gets "Crazy Horse's magic", "Chief Joseph's brains", and "Geronimo's heart" (p.219). In other words, he contends that the "Indian Killer" is the aggregation of American Indian warriors who fought against the whites in history. Moreover, he believes that he is also a part of this "Indian Killer" aggregation, which refracts his rage and protest against the white government. This homeless American Indian veteran represents all of those displaced urban American Indians in Seattle whose living circumstance is ignored by the white government. For these roofless urban American Indians in Seattle, they create "Indian Killer" by virtue of "Ghost Dance" to strike back the white government's overlook of their living situation. More importantly, with "Ghost Dance", they are not intent on a riot, but hope that the white government will attach importance to their living conditions and help them with their integration into the mainstream as well as their foothold in Seattle.

In a word, in *Indian Killer*, the Seattle white government brushes aside the urban American Indians' living status and holds back their integration. Facing the white government's negligence, these urban American Indians resist by American Indian organizations and "Ghost Dance", and seek to live on an equal footing with the whites in Seattle.

---

#### 4. CONCLUSION

---

To sum up, in *Indian Killer*, the urban American Indians in Seattle don't succumb to the subjugation, detraction, and negligence of mainstream society. They strike back mainstream media's calumny of Indian images as "the butcher", "the rebel" and "the killer", aiming at protecting authentic Indian images. They also fight against white experts' simulation, vilification and encroachment of Indian culture, striving for the continuance of ancestral traditions and the cultural equality in the mainstream. Additionally, they counter the white government's disregard of their difficult living situation, try to keep a foothold in white cities and live equally with the whites. With the exhibition of American Indians' resistance in *Indian Killer*, Sherman Alexie puts forward his thoughts on American Indians' survivance in the circumstance where multiculturalism was obstructed and a portion of the whites in the mainstream still repelled ethnic minorities in the 1990s. He argues that American Indians should resist the suppression and persecution of mainstream society, to overturn stereotypical Indian images as the Other in white ideology, and to stick to the subjective position of their culture and identity while integrating into the mainstream in this context.

## REFERENCES

- Alexie, S. (1996). *Indian killer*. New York: Grove Press.
- Chen, T. (2005). Towards an ethics of knowledge. *MELUS*, (2), 157-173.
- Cline, L. (2000). About Sherman Alexie: A profile. *Ploughshares*, (4), 197-202.
- Cooper, L. R. (2010). The critique of violent atonement in Sherman Alexie's *Indian killer* and David Treuer's *the Hiawatha*. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, (4), 32-57.
- Dean, J. (2008). The violence of collection: *Indian killer's* archives. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, (3), 29-51.
- Fraser, J. (2000). An interview with Sherman Alexie. *The Iowa Review*, (3), 59-70.
- Grassian, D. (2012). *Indian killer*. In L. Lewis (Ed.), *Critical insights: Sherman Alexie* (pp. 297-317). Toronto: Salem Press.
- Helstern, L. L. (2008). Shifting the ground: Theories of Survivance in *from sand creek* and *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu* 57. In G. Vizenor (Ed.), *Survivance: Narratives of native presence* (pp. 163-190). Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Highway, T. (1997). Spokane words: Thomson highway raps with Sherman Alexie. *Aboriginal Voices*, (1), 36-40.
- Hu, J. S. (2013). Indian gambling regulatory act and its impact on the status of Indian tribes. *World History*, (3), 37-47.
- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Kroeber, K. (2008). Why it's a good thing: Gerald Vizenor is not an Indian. In G. Vizenor (Ed.), *Survivance: Narratives of native presence* (pp. 25-38). Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Krupat, A. (1996). *The turn to the native: Studies in criticism and culture*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Laminack, Z. S. (2017). Inhabiting Indianness: Sherman Alexie's *Indian killer* and the phenomenology of white sincerity. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, (4), 29-57.
- Li, D. K. (1997). American politics in the 1990s. *The Chinese Journal of American Studies*, (4), 7-31.
- Li, X. G. (1992). The relocation program and the urbanization of American Indians. *World History*, (4), 2-10.
- Liu, K. D. (2011). *Toward syncretism: A study of Sherman Alexie's novels*. Beijing: Guangming Daily Press.
- Morris, R. J. (1992). *Sheridan: The life and wars of general Phil Sheridan*. New York: Crown Publishing.
- Van Styvendale, N. (2008). The trans/historicity of trauma in Jeannette Armstrong's *slash* and Sherman Alexie's *Indian killer*. *Studies in the Novel*, (1), 203-223.
- Vizenor, G. (1999). *Manifest manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- - -, (Ed.) (2008). *Survivance: Narratives of native presence*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Vizenor, G., & Lee, A. R. (1999). *Postindian conversations*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Zhang, Q., & Zheng, J. (2020). The thorns of the racial integration: The elite group in *Indian killer*. *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, (3), 26-34.
- Zhao, W. S., & Kang, W. K. (2017). American Indians at the crossroads: Reading the survival and development theme in Sherman Alexie's *reservation blues*. *Foreign Literature Studies*, (1), 20-30.
- Zheng, J. (2016). *A study on "place" in contemporary American Indian fiction*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Shanghai International Studies University, China.