

Love and Pride: From Alienation to Self-identification in Sherman Alexie's "Assimilation"

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American Indians became minorities when overseas immigrants seized their lands in search of freedom or wealth. Fighting colonial ideologies in which the Indigenous had to suffer oppression and extinction never stopped. Racism, land loss, and the diminution of the ethnic self are some of the recurrent themes articulating their effort for survivance and are still the main points raised by (post)colonial contemporary American Indian authors.¹ The American Indian standpoint in their existential crises due to the complexities of placing reason/individual needs over traditions and/or fighting illusionary stereotyped identifications can be regarded as unique in the United States. They have their tribal and ethnic identifications in addition to other colonial labels. In contemporary American Indian literature, characters are drifted towards finding their own identifications by personal experiences. Self-inquiry of obligations and duties are the main concerns of mobile individuals who feel they were ambushed by mainstream colonialism showing them what they must be. This paper explores American Indian responses to alienation and skepticism deriving from losing touch with the tribal ontological premise and the desire for a healthy transformation to an unprecedented formation of self-identification.

The research examines Mary Lynn's character in Sherman Alexie's short story "Assimilation," and her struggle induced by alienation from her husband's affection to a transparent self-identification allowing her to have a stable multiracial marital life unaffected by matters related to ethnicity, racism, or class in a hybrid community. The inability to enjoy sex with her husband inspires Mary Lynn to experience sharing bed with an American Indian. The few hours she spends in the cheap dirty hotel with the strange Indigenous man makes her think anew about what she has to be. Infidelity introduces anxiety and the fear of losing Jeremiah, the husband, whom she loves. Mary Lynn, at a moment of weakness or surrender to old ideas, believes that her sexual problem is linked to her association with her different ethnicity than her husband. Yet the experience restores her confidence in her life, which she chose on free will to circumvent reservation life.

¹ Survivance can be defined as a strategy adopted by American Indians to assert their existence, which "creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry" (Vizenor 1).

In *The Location of Culture*, postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha recognizes cultural engagements as performative productions or enunciation. For him, “the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in the moment of historical transformation” (2). Consequently, cultures should be examined within this “third-space” which “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read a new” (Bhabha, *Location* 37). It is in my view, the “split-space” (Bhabha, *Location* 38) where American Indians and mainstream Americans live together in an institutionalized environment. The state of complete stability and a rich communication in this area is absent, encouraging American Indians to set off and impose the required balance in their third-space discourse. The factors that help in the acquisition of this comprehensive stability deepen the concept of fluid identity.

In *Ethnocriticism*, Arnold Krupat acclaimed William Bevis’s idea of homing in in American Indian novels:

The typical pattern of Native American fiction is . . . “homing in” rather than —the pattern typical of Euro-American fiction—moving out, breaking away, searching, seeking, transcending, and so forth. Indians, that is to say, travel a good deal, but they don’t “go places.” The sense of rootedness seems extraordinarily persistent in Native American peoples today, so there’s really no place to go, no matter where one travels for one purpose or another. (78)

Often, upon encountering life outside the home reservation, moments of estrangement/alienation arise and push the affected person to take steps that enhance his/her self-confidence to promote who they are within the variables available at the given time. These steps are often linked to going *home* where there is no estrangement. In the reservation setting, the victim of alienation seeks self-identification and categorizes the responsibilities s/he holds basically as a representative of an American Indian tribe. The authentication of self-identification is a personal decision. The investigators themselves can say that their realization of their *self* is active. The sought identification might be social: the role of the self in society; cultural: the individual’s tribal obligations and history; and/or emotional: feelings toward someone/something. It is a progress towards the knowledge of the futility of polarizing the forced colonial culture, or, polarizing

a person's inherited culture, which tolerates an intercultural dialogue with the colonizer. It is a state of stability that includes a specific and promising goal of survivance for the individual to work on or for. "Homing in" is not necessarily an actual physical trip home, it is a return of multiple other forms: memorial or virtual reunions with the tribe are but some options.

Detecting alienation is not intended to exclude interactions between cultures or accuse them of any adrift experience ending by self-denial. Rather, it gives rise to the cultural re-inscriptions of the American Indian ethnic identity within a space that the character herself feels to be *home* at. "Homing" (Bevis 585) or acting "incentric" (Bevis 582) for Bevis means to be located where the majority of the ethnic group lives. It embodies the action that Mary Lynn takes when she steps out of her "in-between" multicultural identity, that is marriage, and attempts to find her real self in the extramarital relationship; an act simply described elsewhere in Alexie's works as "an Indian thing" (Alexie, *The Business of Fancydancing*). The phrase can be heard in any community, as small as a family, or as great as a nation. It is an expression intended to categorize something only the members of the community can and do inherently understand, but they cannot, or as an in-grouping strategy, do not care to explain it to others. It parallels Bevis' "homing in" notion.

Bhabha offers yet another vision of *home*. In "The World and the Home," he argues that through "displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (Bhabha 141). In this respect, by adopting the human awareness of responsibilities and duty, Mary Lynn may show preference for her marital home over her tribal home. Jeremiah and the children are an intersectional extension for the abstract idea of *home*. Bevis, on the other hand, argues that American Indian identity "is not a matter of finding 'one's self,' but of finding a 'self' that is transpersonal and includes a society, a past, and a place" (585), the three of which he sees only within the American Indian context. I partially agree with Bevis's idea; society and the place of identification of the self can be *anywhere*, while the pre-contact past, mostly reflected in storytelling, can be related to the tribal history.

"Contact zone" is used by Mary Louise Pratt to "refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (34). Pratt explains the types of arts that are produced by the subordinated people from the intermingling of civilizations and identifies them as heterogenous, transcultural, autoethnographical, revisionist accounts. With an emphasis on hybridity, mimicry, and uncanniness, *The Location of Culture* states that: "It is precisely such a vicissitude of the idea of culture in its

colonial enunciation, culture articulated at the point of its erasure, that makes a non-sense of the disciplinary meanings of culture itself” (Bhabha 132). Cultural diversity and differences through human interaction and accumulation may make it look new to the previous generation.

For Pratt ethnocultural complexities are produced by a long history of oppression of minorities. Thereby, the “contact-zone” impact on a (post)colonial American Indian discourse unveils an “autoethnographical” text. It is “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with reorientations others have made of them” (Pratt 35). The critical part of Mary Lynn’s infidelity is her description of the affair with an American Indian as “indigenous sex” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 250); her words assert that sex with an American Indian will never be like sex with a Euro-American; even the possible baby will be “more Indian” (251). The affair after a lost interest in sex with the husband can be seen as “an Indian thing,” as Mary Lynn selects her hotel partner carefully; however, her statement of experiencing “indigenous sex” is important as an “autoethnographical” act.

If survivance, for Gerald Vizenor, is a way through which American Indians declare their presence, self-identification has the same role. Both are clearly present in narratives of resistance. “The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry” (Vizenor 1). Similarly, self-identification is a personal investigation, an epistemological process to revive the feeling of the American Indian ethnic existence as a people in the United States. Though sex and infidelity can hardly be seen as a communal act, the protagonist’s affair is declared by Mary Lynn to be “a political act! Rebellion, resistance, revolution!” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 247). The narrative of the story demonstrates how “dangerous” to the community Mary Lynn could be in her behavior while chasing survivance.

Drawing on Kenneth Lincoln’s classification of American Indian renaissances as those aiming at “tracing the connective threads between the cultural past and its expression in the present” (2), Alexie offers an outstanding model of such past versus present representation. His characters go through a reformation of their cultural and ethnic identities, and their conclusions are the very essence and practice of survivance. In “Assimilation,” Alexie introduces the character of an American Indian woman who stands for many alike overwhelmed by the aftermath of colonialism; she leads her life according to what she considers appropriate in a (post)colonial era. Like others, she acts as a member of an ethnic group in their “third space” of cultural encounter: “in the car, or rather with one foot still in the car and one foot placed on the pavement outside of the car, Mary Lynn wept. . . . She loved [Jeremiah], sometimes because he was white and often despite his whiteness” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 258). While feeling satisfied with personal decisions to leave the reservation and marry a Euro-American, alienation symptoms start to

show and pull Mary Lynn to the third space negotiations where she seeks new self-identification.

Geoff Hamilton remarks “how Native people might command respect as they are integrated, on their own terms, into the Euro-American *nomos*” (44). He continues to assert the importance of retrospection in Indigenous narratives as an opportunity to connect “past and present not only to fostering an understanding of the ongoing ramification of historical injustices but to establishing the conditions of a communal identity” (54). The narrator in “Assimilation” offers retrospections of Mary Lynn’s previous life on the reservation and then her life with Jeremiah to justify her divergence toward some, maybe falsely, perceived American Indian insurrection. Before turning ten, Mary Lynn “attended the funerals of seventeen good women—the best of the Coeur d’Alenes—and had read about the deaths of eighteen more good women since she’d left the rez. But what about the Coeur d’Alene men—those liars, cheats, and thieves—who’d survived, even thrived? Mary Lynn wanted nothing to do with them, then or now” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 248). However, leaving the reservation and then having to look for peculiar means to be able to reach a self-identification stage she is comfortable with may not equal “death”. Aiming at survivance, she dated and married an American with whom she

discussed race as a concept, as a foreign country they occasionally visited, or as an enemy that existed outside their house, as a destructive force they could fight against as a couple, as a family. *But* race was also a constant presence, a houseguest and permanent tenant who crept around all the rooms in their shared lives, opening drawers, stealing utensils and small articles of clothing, changing the temperature. (255; emphasis added)

Thus, in her sex act, Mary Lynn looks for her Native American roots, not exclusively the tribal ones. She thinks that she might have missed something to learn about the ethnic self as an American Indian and wants to make it up now. Since Coeur d’ Alene men are not representatives of all American Indians, Mary Lynn picks a Lummi and decides to practice “affirmative action” in a “carnal” (247) way. The future decision, although it favors the Euro-American husband, will help Mary Lynn to overcome her suffering with alienation and make her impose her *own* kind of integration on assimilation rhetoric.

Alienation is to feel detached from something you believed you belonged to; self-identification is the quest for perceiving something you have as an articulation in your interaction with others. Feeling far off and alienated, Mary Lynn decides to cheat on her husband “because he was white” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 246); she does so with an Indian “only because he was Indian” (245). It is an ethnic binary

conflict. Remarkably, the rhetorical question whether Mary Lynn is an adulteress or not stimulates the reader to sustain the judgment. “[Her adultery] felt staged, forced, as if she were an actress in a three-in-the-morning cable-television movie. But she was acting, wasn’t she? She was not an adulteress, was she?” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 247). The experience in the cheap hotel room is justified when the “sample” man is characterized as a reaffirmation of tribal features. Mary Lynn wants to figure out whether feeling sensual or dissatisfied has anything to do with her own ethnicity. Within this line of narration, Alexie discusses an important struggle of American Indians living on their turtle island that had been reshaped, divided, named, controlled, and turned into an internal colony by settlers claiming to be the chosen to own the land as their “manifest destiny” declares. It is the struggle for self-identification following the theory of “homing in” and motivated by the feeling of alienation.

Mary Lynn is a representation of American Indians living with difficulties to balance their multicultural life and achieve a domestic and social harmony with their non-indigenous spouses. The dialogue in Mary Lynn’s home, which can be characterized as a “third space,” though located in the dominant sphere, lost its sentimental value and the couple get alienated even in bed. The family has four children, two of them look Euro-Americans and two look American Indians. “When Mary Lynn’s parents called from the reservation, they always asked after the boys, always invited the boys out for the weekend, the holidays, and the summer, and always sent the boys more elaborate gifts than they sent the two girls” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 253). In this sense, the ethnical argument derived from the children’s countenance is more important for the mother who senses the difference in various contexts as a threat. In her attempt to find out a reason for her unexpected moods towards her husband, Mary Lynn fears hearing racist blames; she “wished that she could be called Coeur d’Alene as a description, rather than as an excuse, reason, prescription, placebo, prediction, or diminutive. She only wanted to be understood as eccentric and complicated!” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 246). She lives in the middle of a multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial *family*, and family is supposed to mean *unity*. Thus, she wants to justify her ethnic pride as merely eccentric or complicated, though it does not sound like that to anyone.

“Assimilation” is a story of struggles: race-love, race-duty, race-race, and finally race-cosmopolitanism as its plot presents. Mary Lynn’s relationship with Jeremiah aims at survivance while considering the Jews’ ways to survive the Nazi camps. Sex is her “contact zone” with the world of opportunities and dreams counter to reservation reality. The feeling of nostalgia that the protagonist might have experienced after leaving the reservation does not seem as important as being a wife of a handsome chemical engineer. Being alienated from home is better than

being dead in a home cemetery. Nevertheless, she ends up being in bed with an anonymous American Indian, not to act against her ideal marriage, but to figure out the missing joy in her pre-contact-zone life.

Similarly, the husband, Jeremiah, prefers to be with an intelligent American Indian woman rather than waiting for “a white woman from a mythical high school, . . . a prom queen named *If Only* or a homecoming princess named *My Life Could Have Been Different*” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 251). He wanted to cheat on his *Native* wife but his inability to do so is explained to be family love. “He didn’t admit love for his spouse, partner, wife. No, he confessed his love for marriage, for the blessed union, for the legal document, for the shared mortgage payments, and for their four children” (251). The third space seems to function better for the dominant culture even in the familial context. Jeremiah does not believe that marrying an American Indian will make him American Indian, neither does his wife want to feel American by being his wife. “Long ago, they’d both decided to respond to any questions of why, how, what, who, or when by simply stating: Love is Love” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 255). Mary Lynn argues about ethnic matters as she herself wants to be ethnocentric. Geronimo is the name she calls her husband to refute his claim of being a Euro-American.

Consequently, in a pride-driven effort seeking self-identification, Mary Lynn expresses her wish to have another baby whose features will identify the family; it is a thought of indigenizing her family as giving birth to more American *Indian*-like children. Meanwhile, the grandparents try to maintain their cultural integrity by their preference for the American Indian looking offsprings. Subconsciously, Mary Lynn likes her sons more, too, and feels alienated from the life of her two daughters. The narrator describes the girls’ lives with references to their father’s attitude rather than their mom’s.

Alexie fictionalizes how an integrated mixed-race family might look and tries to anticipate their way out of the fixed self-identification dilemma. The bridge accident serves to offer the resolution of the conflict. A traffic jam is caused by a woman’s suicide attempt because of separation. Jeremiah leaves his wife to investigate the death decision while Mary Lynn thinks of confessing her infidelity with one foot in the car and another outside it. Each one of the couple grasps an answer for his/her alienation dilemma while the critical question of self-validity remains active between different ethnicities. The husband does not want to lose his wife as he decides to stay with her. As an American Indian, the wife is the concrete application of a third space formation of an identity. She does not want to lose him either. Now, the location for the “homing in” theory is her house with Jeremiah.

What indicates Alexie’s possible intentions is the motif of the opening line of the story: “Regarding love, marriage, and sex, both Shakespeare and Sitting Bull knew

the only truth: treaties get broken” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 245). Mary Lynn learns something that was ambiguous to Sitting Bull: Some white men can be trusted. This final observation gives a contemporary definition of sovereignty. Furthermore, Jeremiah has an important point to raise against the colonizer racism. For him, Mary Lynn is “constant” and Shakespeare overrated gravity. Mary Lynn is as decent as any other Anglo-American woman. Social and cultural alienation are not supposed to jeopardize love and family. The latter should be valued over the other to achieve survivance. The struggle, even for the husband, is not personal; it is a collective struggle over a total ethnic destruction within the blending of traditions/bloods. Tribal/collective and self/individual issues overlap, and a new kind of self-awareness comes out of colonization; it is a trans-self into a new world. “The individual Native self is, finally, no individual at all, but rather a compound, fluid entity whose proper rule is interwoven with that of other presences in a natural (divine) order” (Hamilton 7). In this mode, the story embodies the covert significance of its title. American Indians should preserve their traditional culture and extend it into new, recreative visions of Indigenous rules for integration. Assimilation as a process of oppression is not quite an option for the American Indians as Mary Lynn embodies in her revolutionary acts.

As Jelena Šesnić indicated in *From Shadow to Presence*, and as the final scene of the story represents, “the most successful exercise of hybrid identity firmly situated in the spatial temporal grid of the contact zone, border space, frontier, is the one which successfully engages both the provisionality and givenness of this condition” (139). “Assimilation” from its title to enclosure offers a placement for the “third space of enunciation” (Bhabha, *Location* 38) as a narrative to articulate the invisible boundaries to secure against total assimilation, though none of the colonizer or colonized can have the pride to be identified as an “organic ethnic communit[y]” (Bhabha, *Location* 5). Anthropological features do not control the personal desire to be more hooked on a specific ethnic group, like Native Americans, than being somewhere in the “in-betweenness” of cultures. People create new homes and cultures to which they adjust themselves to fit in. Mary Lynn’s quest for self-identification to abolish her feeling of alienation is a way in which she re-personalizes the American Indian identity in a (post)colonial era. Her children, however, might have other ways of self-identification, and other ways of defining love or ethnic pride. Mary Lynn’s daughter identifies herself as an American Indian “mostly because nobody asked” (Alexie, “Assimilation” 253). Unluckily or maybe luckily, she is a manifestation that the third space enunciation of a (post)colonial culture is working to breed an American cosmopolitan culture.

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ⁱ Bevis's work was published in the late 1970s, since then new trends have emerged, for example urban settings gained more ground in Native American literature.

ⁱⁱ Arnold in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a good example.

ⁱⁱⁱ Narrative is a representation of all American Indian writing genres used in Hamilton's book.

^{iv} Gravity is one of the words invented by William Shakespeare and its semantic meanings differ from today's use. Based on the Shakespeare's Words website, some of its meanings which fit into the context here are: respectability, authority, dignified position, wisdom, and sage advice.