



Folk and Literary Reflections on the Culture of Northwest Coast Indians of the Puget Sound Area of North America

MARTA BOTIKOVÁ

Department of Ethnology and Museum Studies,
Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovak Republic
marta.botikova@uniba.sk

ABSTRACT

Vi Hilbert, collector, performer and activist who worked with the folklore material of the north-western region, has found somebody to follow in her footsteps in the promotion of the local culture and literature. This somebody is Sherman Alexie, a writer, publicist, poet and script-writer who has published around 30 books to date. Like Vi Hilbert, Sherman Alexie, who is three generations younger, proclaims his Native American heritage. He represents it and helps other readers and interested people understand, or join the path towards building this identity. His texts are characterised by a humorous distance as well as an excellent gift of observation. Alexie is one of the most significant figures of the literature of the indigenous Americans and is a textbook example of a new type of narration, which has deep roots in this region and is nurtured. His early works were a great surprise at the time of their publication, both for readers from the Native American community and other Americans. From an ethnological point of view, they are not only a factual source of knowledge, but also provide a perspective for evaluating the culture emically.

KEY WORDS: folk and literary tradition, storytelling, storytelling opportunities, trickster

In the following discussion, I will be dealing with the issue of folk tradition and the appropriation or continuation of some of its principles in literature. I have chosen an example

ESSAY

from the area of the north-western cultural and geographical area, or part of it, on the territory of the present-day state of Washington in the north-western US.¹ The borders of this region, as in the case of other regions, have been defined in anthropological texts based on a combination of geographical criteria and the characteristics of the culture of its original inhabitants (SUTTLES – STURTEVANNT 1990:1-52). There are several examples of anthropologists, writers and storytellers who dedicated their life and work to preserve and further develop the oral literature treasures by either fixing them in text collections or considering them as an inspiration for their own literary work. They are examples mostly of the continuity and change within the tradition. The area of the Northwest coast² is hundreds of miles long and wide cultural area populated by several Native American tribes. An overview of the historical and current attempts could be of great use to understand the processes in the general overview. For this article, I have chosen the examples of the Puget Sound area people. Vi Hilbert and Sherman Alexie are the two authors whose works and activities I will discuss. I had an opportunity to meet both of them in person, studied their works more deeply than the other authors whose names and works are just as important if not better known within the thematically defined discourse³.

The north western region is very fragmented and varied also from a linguistic point of view. Linguists have identified over forty languages which belong to over ten linguistic families. For the most part, they are polysynthetic languages, creating words out of many elements and including in them concepts such as subject, object, tense, aspect and mood. These circumstances make it clear how difficult folk or linguistic research there was. Understanding texts was also made more complicated by the fact that these tribal languages have a relatively well-established system of consonants, but the system of vowels is relatively poor. It was practically impossible to record the acoustic side of the talks using the letters of the Latin

¹ The whole area is composed of a coastal region which spreads along the Pacific coast from the Gulf of Alaska to the Oregon-California boundary (BOTIKOVÁ 2000:15).

² It covered a long narrow arc of the Pacific coast and offshore islands from the Yakutat Bay, in the north eastern Gulf of Alaska, south to Cape Mendocino, in present-day California. Its eastern limits were the crest of the Coast Ranges from the north down to the Puget Sound, the Cascades south to the Columbia River, and the coastal hills of what is now Oregon and north western California (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Northwest-Coast-Indian>, accessed 26.5.2019).

³ E.g. Richard Dauenhauer (1942-2014), an American poet, linguist, and translator, an expert on the Tlingit nation of southeastern Alaska, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Dauenhauer, accessed 26.5.2019.

ESSAY

alphabet. As a result, the oldest folk texts were recorded in English, based on retelling and translations by the people accompanying anthropologists in their field research.

In the 1950s, technology started to help collectors. Recordings were made in the field. It took a long time for them to be transcribed as there were no bilingual assistants and writing down the texts was, as we have already mentioned, made more difficult by the lack of symbols for phonetic transcription.

One of the folklorists was Leon Metcalf⁴ who in the 1950s, on his own initiative and at his own expense, collected Native American stories/tales in eastern Washington. His collection of folk texts is a valuable part of the documentation in the Burke Museum, University of Seattle. Leon Metcalf was a musician and music teacher at the University of Washington in Seattle. He had only a passive knowledge of the language of the local Native American tribes, but thanks to his feel for music, he was well qualified for understanding, for example, the many nuances in the texts which the narrators expressed using the melody of their voice. Translations and further research on his collection only took place at the end of the 1960s, thereby gradually making the texts accessible to the wider non-Native American and Native American public. It was an inspirational work for other anthropologists such as Thomas Melville Hess⁵, the author of a dictionary and grammar of the Lushootseed language and the basics of his phonetical transcription, as well as for the anthropologist Melville Jacobs⁶, who brought Vi Hilbert to the transcription and translation of folk texts by ancient storytellers, based on what was in fact an accidental meeting. I have already written about this exceptional woman from the Lushootseed tribe in a separate study, which also includes a list of her publications (BOTIKOVÁ 1999). Here I would just like to mention her not only as a respected self-made woman, but also for her patient and professional work on the transcription and translation of old recordings which she then used to prepare many collections of folk texts. I believe that the merits of Vi Hilbert (1918-2008) do not lie solely

⁴ On Leon Metcalf (1899-1993) see https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Metcalf, accessed 5.3.2019.

⁵ Thomas Melville Hess († 2010) worked at that time at the University of Victoria. In the 1970s, he initiated an independent master's degree in Native American languages (Native Indian Language Diploma Program) (<https://www.uvic.ca/news/topics/2011+in-memoriam-dr-thom-hess+ring> accessed 5.3.2019).

⁶ Melville Jacobs (1902-1971) was an American anthropologist known for his extensive fieldwork on cultures of the Pacific Northwest. He was born in New York City. After studying with Franz Boas he became a member of the faculty of the University of Washington in 1928 and remained there until his death in 1971 (https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/jacobs_melville_1902_1971_/#.XIVdk6DJ_IU, accessed 10.3.2019).

ESSAY

in the scientific field. Her work was rewarded by several national prizes. Alongside all her merit in preserving a cultural heritage and her academic work, the basis of many of Vi Hilbert's activities lay in resurrecting the language and the tradition of storytelling⁷.

She strove to achieve this not only through evening classes, language classes at the university and in private, but mainly through her lectures and organising storytelling meetings. I experienced several of her lectures which explained the contexts of folk texts, the life stories of the narrators as well as the research circumstances of when and how the texts were recorded. She had much information and knowledge on these contexts thanks to the archive documentary work and meetings with researchers and their memories from the field. The culmination of the experience of each lecture and of the meeting with Vi Hilbert was listening to her own reciting of the folk text. She always recited first a short excerpt in Lushootseed and then the whole story in its English translation. Like the original narrators, she used her voice to add character to the main figures: greedy Crow, clever Mink or the wistful sisters staring into the night sky to choose their Star husbands from among the stars. Her further activity consisted in participating in events for the nearby Native American tribes for whom she organised a storytelling festival. She was able to bring together interested parties in various public spaces and provide an overview of contemporary Native American storytellers, their performances and their repertoire. Perhaps this type of activism did not meet with a large response in terms of the numbers of participants and spectators. After all, in the case of traditional folk texts this is a particular type of intimate and fundamentally slow expression which does not have to address a large number of people. However, the publications, performances and the storytelling festival certainly contributed to the building up of a specific, in this case *north-western*, identity among many individuals and groups of offspring of the original inhabitants of this region.

Pow-wow dance celebrations, annual gatherings for the Sun Dance or wearing regalia at these celebrations help to cultivate a Native American identity, often in some sort of pan-American form, which is of great importance in the cultivation of its specificity, self-respect, self-

⁷ *Haboo* is an expression used by those listening to the stories to ask for another story – something like “what happened next?” or “tell us more!” This term was used by the editor and translator as the title of one of her collections of stories, the introduction of which was written by Thomas Hess and which was illustrated by Ron Hilbert. This collection was published in 1985. More on the life of Vi Hilbert https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vi_Hilbert, accessed 14.3.2019.

ESSAY

discovery and cultural chronicity⁸. But these quiet and “slow” folk events also belong here: publishing folk texts, bringing the language to life and telling stories.

Through his literary work, Sherman Alexie, a master of storytelling, a Native American from the Spokane reservation in the eastern part of Washington State has become another offspring of original Americans.

Perhaps it is symbolic that when I had the opportunity to meet and experience Sherman Alexie and Vi Hilbert, they were sitting next to each other in the grandstand. It was a ceremony for the opening of the Longhouse, the centre for Native American Studies at Evergreen State College in Olympia, WA⁹. Of course, there were other notable guests there, from the rector of the college to the state governor. To this whole gathering, a discreet petite woman, Vi Hilbert, told a story of how her ancestors lifted up the sky by joining forces, when they thought it was too low. After her, a pleasant young man read an excerpt of his story. He did not tell a folk text, but he told a story. With humorous distance, he sketched his fellow tribe members who on the one hand preserve and on the other, consciously or unconsciously, destroy their traditions by their very way of living, traditions which in an ordinary, everyday life lose their sacredness and gravity and which can perhaps be the source of laughter in a literary work.

Sherman Alexie, full name Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr. (*1966), was then in September 1995 a fresh graduate and budding author and recipient of his first writing prizes, now according to his encyclopaedia entry a writer, author of short stories, poet and film-maker who has published 25 books. He was born on a Native American reservation in Wellpinit, WA. His childhood was marked by illness and a subsequent complicated head surgery. Not only did he survive the surgery, but he also became an exceptional reader and pupil. He attended primary school on his native reservation, but he longed to leave. He eventually left to attend secondary school in the town of Reardan in Washington State, 20 miles away. There he was a star basketball player and an excellent student. He then studied for a short time at the Jesuit University in Spokane, from where he transferred to Washington State University with the intention of studying medicine in the future. After an unsuccessful attempt to pass the basic

⁸ Pow-wow ceremonies and Sun Dance meeting are the subject of many literary and visual works, but are not the subject of our interest here.

⁹ This ceremony took place on Saturday, September 9th 1995 on the campus of The Evergreen State College in Olympia, WA.

ESSAY

examination in anatomy, he changed his main subject to American studies, specialising in literature. Shortly afterwards, he won awards and grants in the field of literary creation.

As a student, he had problems with alcoholism. However, he faced the addiction and has been tee-total since the age of 23. Today he lives in Seattle with his wife and two sons.

His literary and film work is wide-ranging and award-winning. His first collection of short stories, "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven" (1993) won the PEN / Hemingway prize for the best first work. He continued with his first novel, "Reservation Blues" (1995) and second, "Indian Killer" (1996), both receiving prizes¹⁰. In 2010 Alexie won the PEN / Faulkner prize. Alexie, whose work is mainly based on his experience as a Native American on the reservation and outside it, is praised by critics for his developed storytelling technique, and his lyrical yet humorous stories¹¹. From 1997 Alexie began to cooperate with Chris Eyre, a Native American Cheyenne/Arapaho director. Together they rewrote one of Alexie's short stories "This is what it means to say Phoenix, Arizona" into a script. The resulting film, "Smoke Signals", premiered at the Sundance film festival in 1998 and won several awards. Alexie continues to write and direct films (*Business of Fancydancing* in 2002, *49?* in 2003, *The Exiles* in 2008 and cooperated on *Sonicsgate* in 2009).¹²

Alongside all these important literary awards, it is important also to mention the fact that Alexie's stories/narration served as a basis for several textbooks and theoretical works on narratology¹³, or teaching manuals for working with text (BRUCE – BALDWIN –

¹⁰ Excerpts of these texts have been translated into Slovak and published in HOLÁ-TERENOVÁ 1996.

¹¹ Verlyn Klinkenborg, writing for the *Los Angeles Times* noted: "Alexie has been called a lyrical writer, but to call him that is to miss how deadpan he really is, how much his humor depends on saying what hurts in a matter-of-fact voice. Klinkenborg, Verlyn (18 June 1995). "America at the Crossroads : Life on the Spokane Reservation: RESERVATION BLUES, By Sherman Alexie". *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved 19 March 2018 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reservation_Blues, accessed 14.3.2019).

The New York Times wrote, "It's difficult not to make *Indian Killer* sound unrelievedly grim. It is leavened repeatedly, however, by flashes of sardonic wit, the humor that Indians use to assuage pain. By Nicholls, Richard E. (November 24, 1996). "Skin Games". *The New York Times* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Killer, accessed 14.3.2019).

¹² By Mark Flanagan, Updated September 27, 2017. (<https://www.thoughtco.com/profile-of-sherman-alexie-851449> accessed 31.1.2019).

¹³ „It also explains how narratology can be didactic, and how information and knowledge can be presented as a narrative.... Alexie is a writer who explores his life experience as a Native American and who has taken on a similar role of a storyteller and trickster employed in his fiction as a means to survive reservation life through exaggeration and humor, mirroring the Native American

ESSAY

UMPHREY 2008).

Alexie is considered one of the key creators of autochthonous – and “nationalist” in the literary meaning – literature partially because he used traditions as his sources.¹⁴ However, let us break down this statement by the literary and film critic Mark Flanagan into *small* parts. Without any doubt, the “I” figure of the visible narrator is rooted in tradition. He leads the whole story, the action into which characteristic figures enter, sometimes expectedly, sometimes bizarrely. Thus the story in which a black man finds himself in a Native American reservation and at an encounter with the first Native American he is surprised as he’s never seen a live Native American before. But the narrator can also be a third person, who presents the heroes to us. In Alexie’s first short stories, the action is set in motion by Thomas Make the Fire. Small, dark-skinned, with tidy plaits, a stocky figure, even with a slight paunch. He was not ugly, just marked by loneliness...says the author. He was sometimes a link to the world of mythology; the reader (spectator) might think he is talking nonsense: about the great fire which he flew out of (Viktor’s father saved him), about the fried bread with which Viktor’s mother filled the stomachs of the whole settlement. At other times, Thomas is a joking fool who manages despite all this to capture the attention of a ballet dancer in a plane/bus, or of a nurse who last saw Viktor’s father. He “shoves himself” into Viktor’s life, he is pushy, but also helpful. He finances their journey together to collect his father’s remains; when the news of his father’s death arrives, he admits his meetings with Viktor’s father, which he had kept hidden, sorts of secret messages which did not find their way even to his biological son...Thomas is a soothsayer and storyteller. This is an important figure in folklore from all around the world, *a trickster, a liar, the friendly one and sometimes also a rascal*...¹⁵ On the contrary, Viktor, who appears to possess many autobiographical traits, is pensive, sometimes angry at the world and about his origins and identity and is also a hero looking for a boyish certainty, a rebel who needs Thomas as a helper on his journey. You can make fun of him, swear at him, but you can also listen to him, even obey him. This ambivalent relationship between the two boys, later men, from the Spokane reservation, where there is nothing to do, even when the local radio broadcasts the weather forecast and girls living on

storytelling tradition.... My goal is to offer a narratological approach to his work which connects narratives with reality through a coherent line called didactic” (DROMNES 1993:8).

¹⁴ “Alexie has been a key contributor to Indigenous Nationalism literature, drawing on his experiences with ancestry from several tribes.” Mark Flanagan, c.d.

¹⁵ For more about the trickster, see HYDE 1998, also KOMOROVSKÝ 1986, who says that the crow as liar and the rascal has survived in myths much longer than the crow as demiurge and bringer of civilisation (KOMOROVSKÝ 1986:32).

ESSAY

benefits drive their cars backwards to make something happen....this is the author's discovery of tradition and the current status of the Native American and his identity, which doesn't always have to mean long hair... Family relationships ripped apart, repeated excesses with alcohol, basketball in the local gym and all the deadlocked emptiness of the reservation's banality do not fall upon us without qualification. Thanks to Thomas, even the rebellious Viktor can cope with it. Sometimes we can even laugh, and I do not have to offend anyone by enjoying the life of contemporary Native Americans whom we have never met.

However, why am I mentioning Vi Hilbert and Sherman Alexie, these two literary figures, cultural activists in the same breath, so to speak? What links them and what are they following on from? They both discovered for themselves the power of unwritten literature, from mythical tales to stories from life. And their many prizes and awards show that they have found understanding, found their audience, not only among their own people, but rather in the wide spectrum of the non-Native American public. Their work, each on a separate front, has contributed to the knowledge of the disappeared, disappearing and surviving culture of the Native American north-west.

Ethnic, tribal, personal identity is based on self-knowledge and self-respect. Both Vi Hilbert and Sherman Alexie, three generations apart, have brought different types of material in their work, but in both cases we are witnesses to the construction of a cultural self-image and identity through folklore or literary material.

Acknowledgments

The paper is an outcome of the project VEGA 1/0421/17: *Symbolic Representations of Risk*.

Bibliography

ALEXIE, Sherman (1993): *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

ALEXIE, Sherman (1995): *Reservation Blues*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

ALEXIE, Sherman (1996): *Indian Killer*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

BOTIKOVÁ, Marta (1999): "Je to len iný druh kanoe-" : (ženy rozprávačky a zberateľky). ["It's Just Another Type of Canoe-" : Female Storytellers and Collectors] (Suppl. ad Acta

ESSAY

Musei Moraviae Vol. 84). In *Folia ethnographica* 33, pp. 39-61.

BOTIKOVÁ, Marta (2000): *Tradície kultúry Indiánov severozápadného pobrežia Severnej Ameriky*. [Traditions of the Culture of the Native Americans of the North-West Coast of North America] Bratislava: Stimul.

BRUCE, Heather E. – BALDWIN, Anna – UMPHREY, Christabel (2008): Sherman Alexie in the Classroom: This Is Not a Silent Movie, Our Voices Will Save Lives (The Ncte High School Literature Series). Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.

DROMNES, Tanja (1993): *Storytelling – In Our Minds and In the Classroom: A Narratological and Didactic Analysis of Sherman Alexie's The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Master thesis, Tromsø: University of Tromsø.

HOLÁ-TERENOVÁ, Danica (1996): Sherman Alexie. Blues z rezervácie [Reservation Blues]. In *Revue svetovej literatúry* 4, pp.150-161.

HYDE, Lewis (1998): *Trickster Makes This World*. Mischief, Myth and Art. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

KOMOROVSKÝ, Ján (1986): *Únoscovia ohňa: mýty a legendy o kultúrnych hrdinoch a zrode civilizácie*. [Kidnappers of the Fire: Myths and Legends about Cultural Heroes and the Birth of Civilisation] Bratislava: Tatran.

SUTTLES, Wayne – STURTEVANNT, William (eds.) (1990): *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 7: Northwest Coast*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press.

Electronic sources (According to non-accessibility of the primary sources, this essay uses biographical footnotes from Wikipedia):

Richard Dauenhauer: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Dauenhauer, accessed 26.5.2019.

Melville Jacobs:

https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/jacobs_melville_1902_1971_/#.XIVdk6DJ_IU, accessed 10.3.2019.

Leon Metcalf: https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Metcalf, accessed 5.3.2019.

Thomas Mellwil Hess: <https://www.uvic.ca/news/topics/2011+in-memori-iam-dr-thom-hess+ring> accessed 5.3.2019.

Mark Flanagan, Updated September 27, 2017: <https://www.thoughtco.com/profile-of-sherman-alexie-851449> accessed 31.1.2019.

ESSAY

Indian Killer: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Killer, accessed 14.3.2019

Northwest Coast Indian: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Northwest-Coast-Indian>, accessed 26.5.2019.

Reservation Blues: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reservation_Blues, accessed 14.3.2019

Vi Hilbert: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vi_Hilbert, accessed 14.3.2019.