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Renaissance Man: The Tribal “Schizophrenic” in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*

STUART CHRISTIE

We’ve been stuck in place since House Made of Dawn.

—Sherman Alexie¹

As Louis Owens suggests, the term *American Indian Renaissance* conveys both short-sightedness and an overstatement of the obvious.² If American Indian writers and scholars feel their hackles rising at the moniker, it is because the notion of an American Indian Renaissance “denigrates both the incredible richness of American Indian oral traditions and the contributions long made by American Indian writers to American letters.”³ Overstatement of the American Indian literary renaissance is likewise misplaced, if nevertheless accurate to some degree: “It is *impossible* to argue that a renaissance in the American Indian novel has *not* occurred since the publication of N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* in 1968.”⁴ The use of the double negative represents as indisputable fact the prolific output of American Indian writers since Abel’s celebrated journey home, while at the same time seeking to distance this phenomenon from the scholarly reflex to canonize. Owens is himself a leading figure among those American Indian artists producing fiction in terms only uneasily labeled “rebirth” from a *quattrocento* and Anglo-European point of view.

This caveat aside, Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* (1996) aggressively disputes the Native American Renaissance through the juxtaposition of Indian subjectivity and mental illness. In particular, the psychotic experiences of the protagonist in Alexie’s novel, John Smith, constitute a categorical denunciation of American Indian canon formation based upon

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modernist precedents. Specifically, Smith's mental illness represents, for Alexie at least, what being "stuck in place since *House Made of Dawn*" has meant: the despair and hopelessness engendered by cross-cultural American Indian identities. At one point in Alexie's narrative, John Smith's father, Daniel, works the Seattle streets querying street-people, Indian and white, as to the whereabouts of his son. Daniel Smith does not find his son, but the street-dwellers do report having seen Jim Loney (Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney*), Tayo (Silko's *Ceremony*), and Abel (Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*) and "a dozen homeless [mixed-blood] Indian men" who, along with John, remain lost on the streets of Seattle.⁵

Whether invoked merely as an ironic aside, or the "Indian trapdoor"⁶ through which falls the knowing American Indian reader, these mixed-blood heroes of the American Indian Renaissance appear subversively in Alexie's text. They are still wandering, still the potential victims and perpetrators of rage produced by the white alienation they have come to internalize. Alexie's representation of the mixed-bloods Jim Loney, Tayo, and Abel as homeless, possibly mentally ill, and urban also highlights the divide that remains not only between Anglo-European canon-builders and American Indian writers and scholars, but also among the mixed and full-blood Indian communities that endow such a canon with meaning.

In this article, I argue that Alexie's representation of mental illness in *Indian Killer* obscures several underlying issues. First, the text's laudable attempt to critique a sugar-coated American Indian Renaissance is undercut by the narrative's insistence on an essentialist identity politics to counter the threat of mixed-blood miscegenation. Second, the text's essentialism is obscured by a distinct but parallel trend in the American Indian academy to appropriate mental illness or schizophrenia as a metaphor (the schizophrenic text) that emblemizes in narrative form the predicament of American Indian cultures, histories, and alterity at the present time.

In *Indian Killer*, schizophrenia (or its loose figuration as schizophrenic text) is used to several different purposes: to criticize the legacy of Anglo-European modernism within American Indian letters; to pathologize discourses of mixed-blood identity using a specifically postmodern figure (what I call the tribal schizophrenic); and to participate within a broader movement in American Indian writing and criticism that aestheticizes the clinical experience of mental illness as the postmodern effect of indisputably destructive and violent dislocations in the lives and cultures of contemporary American Indians. These uses and abuses of the tribal schizophrenic and the schizophrenic text in *Indian Killer* succeed in deconstructing the legacy of Anglo-European modernism and the rhetoric of renaissance, but only at a significant cost: Alexie's novel solidifies racial purity as the guarantor of authentic American Indian experience.

In particular, *Indian Killer* updates the figure of the tribal schizophrenic by including John Smith among the ranks of homeless mixed-bloods (alongside Jim Loney, Abel, and Tayo) and other urban nomads

within the American Indian canon. By linking Smith's postmodern predicament to these precursor texts, *Indian Killer* pathologizes another discourse of considerable contemporary currency: that of American Indian mixed-blood identities. This elision of mixed-blood identity with a broadly categorical schizophrenia effectively reduces the former to a racist caricature of impurity, if not outright dissolution, and reduces the latter to an undifferentiated madness, as if American Indian identity were an essence violated, in principle, through mere contact with Anglo-European cultures. I cannot (and would not) dispute the historical facts of genocide at the hands of Anglo-Europeans in the Americas since 1492, but I do question the tactic used in *Indian Killer* of blaming its mixed-blood victims—and representing them, ultimately, only as victims—who, after all, comprise the great majority of contemporary American Indians writing and reading novels such as *Indian Killer*.

I use the word *tactic* because *Indian Killer* also participates in a broader movement (on the part of American Indian writers and scholars alike) that conveniently subordinates an embodied experience, schizophrenia, to the instrumentality of metaphor. This signifying move from body to metaphor is a commonplace of writing; one cannot write a novel (or anything else) without it. But in the case of schizophrenia, which defies smooth categorization in medical terms and lends itself readily to artistic and critical appropriation, ethical problems arise about how metadiscursive practices (postmodernism) risk silencing the discourses they would otherwise liberate. In Alexie's *Indian Killer*, the tribal schizophrenic is the new, mixed-blood Renaissance man. A caricature of narrative futility, John Smith comes dangerously close to signifying the fate of not only mixed-bloods, but also schizophrenics, whose postmodernity invites not discourse but destruction. Accordingly, John Smith's eventual suicide signifies the ultimate postmodern signifier of mixed-blood madness: the nothing of nothing.

Some brief clarification of terms is in order. When referring to Native American texts as modernist I do not intend to conflate the terms *Native American* and *modernism* as such; I do presume links in style and influence between Native American narratives after 1968 and precedents in the Anglo-European modernist canon. Such links are rightly considered unstable rather than determinative, and are considered in full light of subsequent contestations of Anglo-European modernist styles, usages, and techniques by Indian authors.⁷ *Indian Killer* should be read in this iconoclastic context. By using schizophrenia to frame (as well as to deconstruct) the impact of the Anglo-European modernist canon on American Indian letters, Alexie's text delivers a nightmare of profound psychosocial proportions to the very doorstep of Renaissance theorists, including those who would assimilate American Indian texts unproblematically into the canon of received notables and greats simply for "emulat[ing] and imitat[ing] the discourse of the cultural center."⁸

Additionally, a responsible differentiation between schizophrenia as a lived experience and its literary or metaphorical appropriation by writers

and critics as a narrative device is warranted. The very appellation *schizophrenic*, used for literary or any other purposes, is itself suspect and reductive, in terms of a widely varying construction of the actual disease.⁹ For the purposes of this essay, I consider Anne M. Lovell's definition of narrative schizophrenia as axiomatic: "the reception or construction of the 'schizophrenic text' . . . is rendered impossible by the devices its discourse appropriates."¹⁰ An exhaustive treatment of literary appropriations of schizophrenia in the broader modernist context, from James Joyce to James Welch, lies beyond the scope of this essay. However, the progenitors of the critical practice deserve brief mention. Clara Claiborne Park cites Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, which, in freeing up discourse as a instrument of power and knowledge formation also radically distances concerns of the body from those individuals who enunciate and express its behaviors.¹¹ Any process of re-embodying postmodern discourse—I focus on the figure of the tribal schizophrenic here—also must critique Frederic Jameson's allegory of schizophrenia as in any sense a measurable affect of a contradictory late-capitalism.¹² From the perspective of French poststructuralism and Marxism, respectively, both thinkers may reasonably be considered to have sacrificed the subjectivity of the mentally ill in the interest of a broader discursive formation, theorizations of literary (post)modernity. In my view, this troubling practice has been unnecessarily adopted by critics and writers of American Indian letters.

Homeless tribal schizophrenics deserve better. As either an artifact of literary criticism or the reference to widely varying material conditions defining the individual experience of the disease, any representation of schizophrenia ought to demarcate carefully the metaphorical slippage of the term. Using both registers, Alexie's novel might have achieved a more than postmodern success, particularly by problematizing how social constructions of tribal identities in wider Anglo-European culture can provoke despair to the point of seeming pathology, if not the physiological referent of schizophrenia as such.

* * *

As Anne Lovell's work suggests, the problem schizophrenia presents for narrative is complex, artistically titulating, and ultimately dangerously misleading. She suggests that a basic presupposition of the schizophrenic text—that "alienation, estrangement, and incomprehensibility [of] schizophrenia come to stand for ways of being in the world"—caters to the worst variety of postmodern opportunism.¹³ The success of works by Foucault, Jameson, and Lyotard has established postmodern theory as a means of both representing and diluting notions of distinct difference—such as mental illness—and has encouraged the refashioning of illness as a metaphor of wider applicability by an entire generation of critics.¹⁴ Illnesses, mental and physical, have been appropriated in order to make pronouncements of wider cultural relevance:

While philosophy and literary criticism offer a toolbox for analyzing illness narratives, their particular metaphorical treatment of schizophrenia problematizes the application of narrative tools to the anthropology of . . . "psychotic experience."¹⁵

Strictly speaking, Lovell suggests that what postmodern scholars call the schizophrenic text is based on a tautology. Such a narrative "is rendered impossible by the devices its discourse appropriates: unpredictability, ungrounded identity, inherent unknowability. . . . Hence the person who narrates and the schizophrenic narration itself are without listener or interlocutor."¹⁶ Caught in this closed text of schizophrenia are delusional acts that are regarded as either meaningless or so radically devoid of context or form to be effectively meaningless for the fictional narratives essential to "normal" identity formation.

Moreover, the fact that we can read Welch's *Jim Loney* or Alexie's *Indian Killer* at all flies in the face of any scholar who would call them schizophrenic texts. John Smith's mental illness, purportedly the stylistic expression of his radical disjunction from Anglo-European and tribal cultures alike, is central to the narrative's critique of mixed cultural heritage. Smith is ostensibly cut off from his tribal story, and it follows that his schizophrenia would therefore preclude him from mapping his own story in narrative terms as Lovell suggests.¹⁷ Yet the narrative structure of *Indian Killer*, unlike its primary character, is designed to profit from the aesthetic imparted by the schizophrenic text. The novel presumably would explore such artistic possibilities by removing the stable *I* (subject position) or *eye* (horizon-line perspective based on Renaissance models) of the Westernized reader. Yet by attempting to approximate a schizophrenic (or discontinuous) mode of narrative discourse, the novel imparts mixed metaphors of madness that contrast sharply with the clean essentialism of Alexie's identity politics as revealed at the text's conclusion.

For the great majority of schizophrenics, lived experiences (including disturbances of temporality, wandering and homelessness, and the obliteration of Western constructions of the self) are radically and individually stylized. The appropriation of these individualized states to a novelistic aesthetic called the "postmodern experience" is gratuitous. Clearly, material changes in the international economy that David Harvey, among a host of others, has identified as characteristic of schizophrenic post-Fordist capitalism determine, rather than define, late twentieth-century narrative practices.¹⁸ Alexie's work, on one hand, might be read as registering the impact of such determinations upon American Indian experience in fugue mode, with Gerald Vizenor's presumably more celebratory articulations of the postmodern trickster also presenting material complications for local American Indian identities on the other.¹⁹ Yet however carefully one tries to approximate the degree to which the schizophrenic text presumes stock or literary notions only loosely associated with the homeless mentally ill, Alexie's reading of schizophrenia as a metaphor of

cross-cultural disease for American Indians seems cultural cart before the genetic horse. Of course, this reservation about the epistemological nature and nurture of tribal homelessness (culminating ambiguously in a physiological disorder) need not necessarily fall to the lot of tribal novelists, in particular, to resolve.

Interestingly, however, the use of the signifier “schizophrenia” to describe the psychosocial predicament of mixed- and full-blood American Indians appears across a broad spectrum of projects within contemporary American Indian fiction. Vizenor inaugurated the practice with his reporting of the Thomas White Hawk case in 1968.²⁰ More recently, Owens bases his comprehensive reading of mixed-blood identities in *Other Destinies* upon the move away from the schizophrenic breakdown of tribal signifying systems toward an integrated and ecologically centered worldview.²¹ And it is perhaps surprising to discover that, at least with respect to the schizophrenic text, both of these mixed-blood writer-critics find themselves in the company of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who suggests that schizophrenia accounts for the improbable and infantile projections of white desire onto American Indian communities.²² From cogent mixed-blood critique to criticism of the wanna-be Indian, the signifier schizophrenia seems a useful catch-all term which, at least in part, appears to have informed the latest round of the essence-alterity debate existing between mixed-blood and full-blood American Indian scholars.²³

Initially, Alexie’s postmodern novel appears to engage this identity debate obliquely, primarily because the voice and tonality of his schizophrenic text seeks to de-center what Owens calls the “Trojan horse” logic operating within contemporary American Indian narrative as the “unmistakably modernist . . . novel in the mainstream tradition that . . . contain[s] within its shell of modernist sophistication a thoroughly ‘Indian’ story and discourse.”²⁴ Attempting to steer clear of such “sophistication,” the representation of the tribal schizophrenic in *Indian Killer* is programmatically elided with the predicament of the broader homeless community, thereby furthering the novel’s recuperation of homelessness as an issue for all its readers. In these terms, however, Alexie’s novel betrays its own Trojan-horse logic—its ostensible postmodern narrative project (the attack on Native American Renaissance modernism) does not mask an underlying liberal reformist impulse that effectively backdates the representation of homelessness in the novel to that of a darker and brooding realism.

* * *

John Smith, adopted by white parents and raised in an affluent Seattle suburb, lacks any meaningful connection to his tribal past except that “his mother was fourteen years old” and that he was “a brown baby” (112). The opening chapter of *Indian Killer*, “Mythology,” details John’s fantastic construction of a myth of origins. In this fantasy, John is violently ripped from his mother’s womb and transported by helicopter, with guns blazing, to

Bellevue, Washington, in advance of a Polaroid camera's flash. Using an aggressive present tense, Alexie describes the scene:

John cries as the jumpsuit man hands him to the white woman, Olivia Smith. She unbuttons the top of her dress, opens her bra, and offers John her large, pale breasts with pink nipples. . . . and as John takes the white woman's right nipple into his mouth and pulls at her breast, he discovers it is empty. . . . Olivia and Daniel Smith look at the jumpsuit man, who is holding a camera. Flash, flash. Click of the shutter. Whirr of advancing film. All of them wait for a photograph to form, for light to emerge from shadow, for an image to burn itself into paper. (17–8)

The calculus of oppositions frozen in the photograph—between white and brown, white light and dark shadow—is striking. Smith's fantasy embeds a polarized logic of race and identity into his remembered past, even as he desperately tries to reconcile the perceived schism between notions of Indian authenticity and his parents' Anglo-European culture. As he grows older, the young Smith is increasingly aware that he possesses a story that his suburban upbringing has not trained him to recognize. The society around him, including education and upbringing in the Catholic Church, has not taught him the skills with which to transform the stark binaries of the imagined photograph into a *chiaroscuro* (mixed-blood) rendering: his history as meaningfully white and tribal.²⁵

This advent of photographic realism within an ostensibly schizophrenic text initially comes as something of a surprise, even if its aims appear salutary. In its more sympathetic moments, *Indian Killer* uses Smith's illness to represent the plight of America's homeless schizophrenic subjects and to foreground specific symptoms such as paranoia and hallucination (174, 94, 200, 249–250) as well as the pitfalls of existing standards of medical treatment (175). In realist mode, *Indian Killer* thus invites some consideration of the actual facts and common assumptions about tribal homelessness and mental illness, facts and assumptions typically rendered true or actual in statistical terms that, in turn, govern the scientific guesswork structuring all narratives (fictional and nonfictional) about mental illness.²⁶

Ultimately, however, John Smith remains a schizophrenic without treatment and a tribal subject without exposure to a sustaining discourse of identity. He struggles with his own gut instincts that tell him he is a false construct and merely the projection of his white parents' misplaced desires. It is commonplace that parents' ills are often visited upon their children. Alexie compounds this truism negatively, by using stereotypes of mental illness to pathologize the race politics of mixed-race adoption practices. The reality of mixed-race adoptions are not necessarily so stark.²⁷

Orphaned two times over, the schizophrenic subject in *Indian Killer* is represented peculiarly as his own narrative negation: his disease is at once

cause (schizophrenic illness) and consequence (schizophrenic effect) of profound and devastating cultural loss. This circular logic causes the Trojan-horse realism of *Indian Killer* to draw attention to itself: the problem of homeless schizophrenia is presented only to be subsequently evacuated in favor of stock treatments (such as Smith's aural and visual hallucinations) that serve, alternatively, to muddy subsequent plot twists in the novel. Smith's mental illness emerges ambiguously as a hard truth and, at times, the harder (and seemingly inevitable) consequence for urban Indians in white supremacist America. This transitive leap from literary metaphor of American Indian predicament to material referent (a disease and its symptoms) is nowhere directly acknowledged in the text. Timely hallucinations also serve conveniently to isolate cross-cultural Indian men from recuperative discourses—such as mixed-blood identity—which could enable them to fashion a productive response to such a punishing reality. As a metaphor for Alexie's criticism of mixed-blood representations, the schizophrenic text deteriorates, only to affirm suicide as a somehow understandable, if not desirable, consequence of Indian mixed-blood perplexity.

* * *

Beyond its admittedly catchy moniker, the concept inhabiting the schizophrenic text proves to be inconclusive, precisely because there is no existing consensus about the form and conventionality of mental illness narratives. There is no particular narrative model (subgenre) among such texts considered normative, and none available that claims to represent the variable complex of mental diseases we call schizophrenia, tribal or otherwise. In fact, whatever symptoms may be considered characteristic of the disease schizophrenia, the most salient among them is the very struggle around narrative possibility itself, on behalf of persons who cannot necessarily be represented within the bounds of narratology as generally conceived. Thus any notion of the schizophrenic subject (the term verges on oxymoron) disputes finite temporal sequences in relation (plot), rejects patterned behaviors provoking causality (motive), and typically transgresses generic bounds (such as the novel). Already resistant to narrative modes of representation, schizophrenia is in *Indian Killer* further imposed on American Indian epistemologies that historically have not privileged written over oral culture, a fact that further erodes the narrative credentials of the schizophrenic text.

Because schizophrenics experience reality in synchronous rather than linear terms—without a beginning, middle, and end—their quest for meaning never ends. The schizophrenic's experience posits “an existential struggle between annihilation and survival to reclaim a sense of self. . . . Were the plot to reach a climax, were [the schizophrenic] to find [the object of his quest], his travels would terminate. His homelessness would become banalized, stigmatized, his voyage meaningless.”²⁸ The specter of John Smith's death wish, “telegraphed” to the reader from the very begin-

ning of the novel,²⁹ raises just as many questions about narratology as do its victims, whose voices remain appropriated by a disciplined literary formation that attempts, implausibly, to plot narrative in "schizophrenic" terms.

The particular case is Father Duncan, the Smith family priest at John's baptism, as well as the boy's mentor, friend, and schizoid exemplar. A hybrid figure of Spokane ancestry and Jesuit training, Duncan is "strange" (I 13). The affection and intimacy John Smith and his spiritual mentor share are based on the identification of their peculiar "secret," their pathology compared with those around them:

The Jesuit held the baby John in his arms, sang traditional Spokane songs and Catholic hymns, and rocked him to sleep. As John grew older, Father Duncan would tell him secrets and make him promise never to reveal them. John kept his promises. (I 13)

On the surface, Father Duncan represents Alexie's desire to ironize white liberal assumptions about innate American Indian authenticity and holiness. "An irony, an Indian in black robes," Duncan takes "a special interest in John and, with Olivia and Daniel's heartfelt approval, often visited him" (I 13). An "irony," Duncan embodies what, for the adult John, will amount to irresolvable contradictions between "split" Indian and white selves, as well as the pitfalls associated with oppositional cross-cultural inheritances. At one point in the text, Duncan takes the six-year-old John to see the Chapel of the North American Martyrs in downtown Seattle. The stained-glass windows of the chapel depict in graphic detail the martyrdom of Catholic missionaries at the hands of Indians. The exchange between Duncan and John is significant:

"Did those priests die like Jesus?" asked John. . . .

"Did they die like Jesus?" John asked again.

Duncan was afraid to answer the question. As a Jesuit, he knew those priests were martyred just like Jesus. As a Spokane Indian, he knew those Jesuits deserved to die for their crimes against Indians.

"John," Duncan said after a long silence. "You see these windows? You see all of this? It's what is happening inside me right now." (I 15)

In this passage, Father Duncan's hybridity is eerily conflated with death and sacrifice, conveyed by yet another of John's fantasies about the priest's disappearance as a final vision quest that only "real" Indians can perform (I 16). Inspired by his own particular demons, Duncan disappears from Alexie's text, monumentalizing John's societally induced taste for paradox and abandonment. Lacking the healing power of what Owens calls "a new valuation in life, of going on" that Spider Woman, Yellow Calf, or Coyote impart to other American Indian Renaissance texts,³⁰ Duncan's agency is deeply conflicted, imparting an ambiguous symbolic inheritance to John who, in important plot essentials, emulates his mentor precisely. Accordingly, Duncan's disembodied voice, sounds and feel of the all-consuming desert,

and footsteps inspire John at his most symptomatic, most schizophrenic, moments (I 16–17).

Clearly, the beliefs, contradictions, and ultimate fate of Father Duncan model John's own spiritual journey, including darker encounters with the violence perpetrated by white society upon American Indians and the equally grave consequences of the internalized rage and oppression that kills. Like Tayo, John must face his own demons, but he does so without Duncan, without Betonie, at his side. An ineffectual white father and a white mother whose love cannot fully comprehend the overarching spiritual scope of apparently isolated acts and events in the story, leave John alone to face the "strange music" (I 23) of his mental illness. Cacophonous, and to a beat that renders the racist signifiers "white" and "Indian" in seemingly eternal opposition, this music is John's madness, burning belly, and a "sharp pain in the lower back," "written especially for him" (I 23). John ultimately follows this uncanny music, and Father Duncan, into the desolate land of statistics, leaping to his death off the "last skyscraper in Seattle" (I 24).

* * *

Indian Killer's embedded realism and irony, bolstered by essentialist cultural politics, engulfs any nascent cross-cultural sympathy deriving from the novel's assertion of the rights of the disenfranchised homeless. Smith and Father Duncan's elegy, like that of Junior Polatkin in *Reservation Blues*, affirms the realist drift of American Indian subjectivities as reflected in the stat sheet: troubled Indian men have a statistically verifiable tendency to disappear, shoot themselves, or jump off buildings. Thus the brand of literary schizophrenia utilized in *Indian Killer* parleys in actual flesh without owning the responsibilities it incurs thereby. Similarly, tribal identities are overburdened by the impacts statistics all too often import as representations, culminating in the text with suicide as *fait accompli*, an all-too-predictable conclusion to the multifarious tribal experience of mental illness.

Yet John Smith's personal plight, intended to foreground the virtuous flights of the postmodern narrative, is placed against a broader, realist platform of heroic, homeless resistance. Comprising some 49 percent of American Indians, "urban Indians" (defined as tribal persons dwelling off-reservation in major metropolitan areas) do not consist entirely of the so-called "success stories" of 1950s-era termination policies. Homeless American Indians within this group, comprising somewhere between 3 and 5 percent of the total American homeless, are the most urban of urban Indians, without the safety net of traditional tribal ties to land and community. At a remove from the dementia of the tribal schizophrenic, yet sharing important elements of his predicament, this homeless constituency fights back in Alexie's novel, even as the terms of their struggle appear at times comical and romanticized.

On the verge of the celebratory, the merry band of stick-wielding dumpster divers succeed in fighting off blue-eyed vigilantes in search of

the *Indian Killer*, shouting "They ran like Custer, cousins, they ran like Custer" (I 375). The narrator continues:

They were a ragtag bunch of homeless warriors in soiled clothes and useless shoes. . . . they kicked, scratched, and slapped with a collective rage. . . . [John] did not understand their courage, how they could keep fighting when all he wanted to do was close his eyes and fade into the pavement. (I 374–375)

Such instances of homeless resistance suggest traces of the novel's more sympathetic project—its positive (albeit ironic) representations of homeless counterculture. Even so, the terms of engagement are palpably sweeping and impressionistic; the narrator disavows any clear basis for counterhegemony from within and beyond the "ragtag" community of homeless warriors:

The Seattle streets were filled with the mostly crazy, half-crazy, nearly crazy, and soon-to-be crazy. Indian, white, Chicano, Asian, men, womert, children. The social workers did not have anywhere near enough money, training, or time to help them. The city government hated the crazies because they were a threat to the public image of the urban core. Private citizens ignored them at all times of the year except for the few charitable days leading up to and following Christmas. In the end, the police had to do most of the work. (I 362–363)

Similarly, Marie Polatkin's heroic and philanthropic efforts as "the Sandwich lady" (I 144) underscore the bathos that surrounds the dearth of institutional support available for homeless relief in urban settings. Such programs, where they exist, appear as little more than a foil for Marie's personal integrity and backdrop for a residual but hard-to-pinpoint spiritual cure: "Despite all their pain and suffering, these Indians held together, held onto one another" (I 377). Even so, after the homeless band rescues John from possible death at the hands of white vigilantes, he feels for the first time bidden to speak:

John looked into the eyes of those Indians. He looked into the eyes of Boo, the white man who had been forever damaged in a war. Boo and the Indians all had the same stare, as if they spent most of their day anticipating the sudden arrival of the bullet that was meant for them. John saw the bruises and blood. And wanted to talk, to finally speak. (I 377)

John cannot speak, however, "because there was no language in which he could express himself" (I 377). The tribal schizophrenic's inalienable difference from his own ostensible community—the Indian homeless and, beyond them, the sustaining tribe—is, of course, his purported mental illness, his schizophrenia. While anywhere between 20 to 50 percent of all homeless persons are mentally ill, in *Indian Killer* Smith encounters few

like himself among the homeless ranks. Accordingly, he represents the interesting figure of a functional yet episodic tribal schizophrenic in caricature. With both job and a domicile, John Smith is not well represented in the statistics; by some standards, he would not be considered homeless at all.³¹ Belying a statistical profile, Smith both eludes and invites narrative definition. Both more and less than metaphor, John the tribal schizophrenic, like so many of his real-life contemporaries on the streets, is about to fall through the cracks of the text or, rather, the cracks of the metaphor.

* * *

John Smith's homelessness in narrative, like his schizophrenia, motivates a recognizable, but countervailing, trajectory in American Indian fiction. In the far-less-terminal context of Momaday's and Silko's works, Owens calls the conclusion of the mixed-blood narrative journey "a spiritual tradition escap[ing] historical fixation, that places humanity within a carefully, cyclically ordered cosmos and gives humankind irreducible responsibility for the maintenance of that delicate equilibrium."³² Darrell Peters affirms that most American Indian narratives involve some version of "centering" in the context of coming home.³³ In contrast to such readings, narrative schizophrenia in *Indian Killer* enjoins Smith's doom, as we have seen, alongside other perpetual wanderers within the American Indian canon—fallen, mixed-blood heroes, by definition homeless and forgotten. We perceive that Smith is redeemable neither as a schizophrenic nor as a living Indian. He remains, in this sense, the canonical excess of *Indian Killer*—a figural sacrifice to Alexie's criticism of American Indian Renaissance and, in particular, its mixed-blood elements.

The linkage of Smith's illness, schizophrenia, to the satisfaction of a desire fostered (and shared) by white majority culture—the somehow pathological need to identify as an "authentic" American (e.g., an American Indian)—breeds terror, violence, and, ultimately, self-destruction in the novel. Contemporary Seattle is the scene of ritual serial killings believed to have been committed by an "Indian Killer" who shares John's rage. Yet we are also told that schizophrenics like John "rarely hurt anybody except themselves," and that they, too, are victimized by other various and raging madmen who likewise stalk the text (*I* 363). In *Indian Killer*, the actions of white vigilantes and equally vengeful mixed-blood Indians (*I* 338) raise questions about the bloodstained grounds of culture and race normalcy, alongside Alexie's own sometimes-provocative viewpoints.³⁴

I've suggested that the scholarly practice of selling schizophrenia as literary metaphor compromises the subjectivity of those persons, tribal or otherwise, whose radical experience of temporality is not readily assimilable to narrative. *Indian Killer* presents this problem honestly when Smith reflects upon the ordering of reality through language:

The paragraph was a fence that held words. All the words inside a paragraph had a reason for being together. They shared a common history. John began to see the entire world in paragraphs. He knew the United States was a paragraph within the world. He knew his reservation was a paragraph within the United States. His house was a paragraph distinct from the houses to the west and north. Inside the house, his mother was a paragraph, completely separate from the paragraph of John. But he also knew that he shared genetics and common experiences with his [tribal] mother, that they were paragraphs that belonged next to each other. John saw his tribe as a series of paragraphs that all had the same theme. (I291)

This passage strikes the heart of "the problem the temporal experience of schizophrenia poses to the narrative genre."³⁵ Smith, his tribe, and his tribal mother are all "fenced in" by an alien language, by the holocaust of representation engendered by centuries of white supremacy. Here Smith appropriates this alien discourse to group certain "paragraphs" together, each with the same theme. Nietzsche's dictum is tribalized in *Indian Killer* and apparently rendered postmodern through John's escape beyond the "fence" via mental illness, beyond the prison house of language.

Importantly, however, *Indian Killer* is not simply problematizing a universalist statement about language: the supposition that all races and peoples are trapped by Anglo-European sign and signifier. Alexie also historicizes the field of signification to remind readers that language, too, is imposed by winners upon losers, as well as the users and abusers of history in a (neo)colonial context. The difficulty of Alexie's Nietzschean reading arises, however, with the novel's conclusion, which suggests that by escaping the tyranny of white regimes of representation, by escaping language, John has become a "real" Indian at last:

He was still watching the shadow in the fortieth-floor window when he hit the pavement. . . . Pushing himself up he felt a tearing inside. . . . John looked down at himself and saw he was naked. Brown skin. Muscles tensed in anticipation of the long walk ahead of him. He studied the other body as it sank deeper into the pavement. John stood, stepped over that body, and strode into the desert. Dark now, the desert was a different place. Colder and safer. An Indian father was out there beyond the horizon. And maybe an Indian mother with a scar on her belly from a Cesarean birth. (I 412-413)

In death, John Smith's skin becomes legitimately "brown." Nameless and tribeless, maybe, Smith's identity achieves authenticity at the expense of his displaced cross-cultural and mixed-blood legacy, a narrative dénouement that has a chilling, rather than simply metaphorical, resonance.

Statistics on the suicide rates of American Indian men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four are grim. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for American Indian men in this age group after acciden-

tal deaths and, at 23.5 deaths per 100,000, the death-by-suicide rate for this group exceeds that of men of all races in the United States by greater than two to one.³⁶ Among reported figures, a weighted average of mentally ill American Indians lies near 3 percent.³⁷ No statistical composite grouping together the three constituencies in *Indian Killer* and combined in John Smith—the mentally ill, urban Indians, suicide victims—is currently available. Typically homeless, these American Indians tend not to tell their stories, or to stay around long enough to be counted. What the available numbers do suggest is that the tale of John Smith is statistically anomalous yet also broadly representative of larger structures of social and cultural disenfranchisement of the tribal mentally ill.

It is in this context that the terminal creed of Smith's schizophrenic self-revelation (or lack thereof) seems so profoundly disturbing. Never having had a tribal identity, he kills himself, readers infer, as the ultimate expression of a purportedly schizophrenic alienation from that absent identity. It seems that the protagonist of *Indian Killer*—it should be noted that Smith's alienation is produced by his sense of not being a culturally constituted full-blood—has not come very far since Jim Loney staged his own execution twenty years ago. And if the "postmodern insistence upon the fragmented sense of self finds its reflection in the radically deracinated mixed-blood of much Indian fiction,"³⁸ we have come worse than full-circle. In *Indian Killer*, the deracinated full-blood cannot even come into contact with either Anglo-European or Indian cultures without toxic consequences. The novel thus renders paradigmatic what was the merely provisional (if equally despairing) mandate of Welch's text. Nor is it entirely clear how *Indian Killer* productively shifts (in schizophrenic terms) American Indian texts any further from the "stuck" modernism invoked by Alexie in the epigram to this article: John Smith appears little more than a quintessential postmodern victim, on the same shelf with modernist and, earlier, realist treatments of American Indian tragedy and epic.³⁹ Put differently, the killer Indian in *Indian Killer*, whoever he is, seems little more than Jim Loney with a more current and homicidal attitude, jibing with the more sensationalist, broad-based readership of the smart horror detective stories recently popularized by James Ellroy, Samuel R. Delany, and Walter Mosley among many others.

The sensational interest surrounding the *Indian Killer* in the narrative has been matched by scholarly imputations of the novel's notoriety beyond the page. *Indian Killer* associates mixed-blood identity and hybridity with alienation and betrayal, as if the metaphor of mixing is an essential problem for all contemporary American identity politics, rather than simply an epistemological think-through for American Indian cultures. If the unmasking of Jack Wilson's fraudulent claim to tribal identities appears straightforward, the mystery surrounding Reggie Polatkin's rage is revealed to be little more than a flat diatribe about mixed-blood pathology:

Only white people got to be individuals. They could be anybody they wanted to be. White people, especially those with the most minute

amount of tribal blood, thought they became Indian just by saying they were Indian. A number of these pretend Indians called themselves mixed-bloods and wrote books about the pain of living in both the Indian and white worlds. Those mixed-blood writers never admitted their pale skin was a luxury. (I 232)

The marker of tribal deviance in the novel, blue eyes signify American Indian rage and vindictiveness, in addition to the rather-too-tight genetic association with the white race. Reggie Polatkin, a mixed-blood Spokane with an abusive, blue-collar father named Bird, has his white father's blue eyes. Reggie's eyes glint with pleasure and rage as he assaults a well-heeled, white squatter (with an "Eddie Bauer backpack") in retaliation for white attacks on homeless Indians in the wake of the Indian Killer murders (I 258–259). Another too-easy candidate for the Indian Killer, Reggie beats the white man, records his cries in mock rehearsal of the historical anthropological exercise (including associations with notorious "autobiographies" of Mourning Dove, Ishi, and Black Elk), and finally forces his thumbs into the white man's eyes, "searching for whatever existed behind them" (I 259). Like his cousin Marie, Reggie pushes present discourses of white racism into violent encounters with past narratives of American Indian valor.

Specifically, Marie levels the charge of hypocrisy at the American Indian culture industry in abeyance of the grim reality facing homeless and impoverished Indians:

If Wovoka came back to life, he'd be so pissed off. If the real Pocahontas came back you think she'd be happy about being a cartoon? If Crazy Horse, or Geronimo, or Sitting Bull came back, they'd see what you white people have done to Indians, and they would start a war. They'd see the homeless Indians staggering around downtown. They'd see the fetal-alcohol-syndrome babies. They'd see the sorry-ass reservations. They'd learn about Indian suicide and infant-mortality rates. They'd listen to some dumb-shit Disney song and feel like hurting somebody. (I 313–314)

In this context, Reggie Polatkin's act of senseless violence is nothing more or less than an eye for an eye. Reggie celebrates the spirit of the Indian Killer and, like his cousin Marie, conceives of the killer as the spirit of tribal vengeance possessing individuals—probably wanna-be-Indian whites—as instruments of their own destruction. Marie puts it succinctly: "Maybe this is how the Ghost Dance works" (I 313).

The genuinely bogus "mixed-blood" writer Jack Wilson is himself unable to write the tale of the Indian Killer. Tied to a "dying typewriter," Wilson has "to find the ending . . . to write the book that was more true than any of the other Indian Killer books he knew would be published" (I 337). Specifically, the detective narrative Wilson would create around the Indian Killer tale, like the mock design of Alexie's project, falters under-

neath its own reliance on linearity, right and wrong, true and false. As a nightmare, the *Indian Killer* sensation seemingly represents the antithesis of the contemporary American Indian Renaissance, yet succeeds in projecting the darker aspects of disappointed Renaissance desires. Afraid to write, yet compelled to present his false vision to the world about the Indian Killer crimes, “Wilson knew that he was writing more than a novel. He would write the book that would finally reveal to the world what it truly meant to be Indian” (I 338).

The novel concludes with the symbolic sacrifice of the tribal schizophrenic, John Smith, in an act that attempts to reveal the implicit violence lurking within white, liberal pathos. The schizophrenic text disciplines its schizophrenic subject at last, thereby revealing its epistemological investment in conventional narrative form, with beginning, middle, and end and undercutting any claim of narrative novelty. Smith abducts Wilson, retreats to his aerie atop the last skyscraper in Seattle and, with a flashing finality, slashes the length of the writer’s face deep to the bone. “You’re not innocent,” John declares before he jumps, having deplored Wilson and the false tribe he represents to let American Indians have their own pain (I 411). Wilson does not heed Smith’s indictment; he publishes an “interesting portrait” of Smith in realist mode that, analogous to the Moynihan Report that stereotyped African-American family models based on inconclusive data, suggests simply “that Indian children shouldn’t be adopted by white parents” (I 415). In an eerie parody of segregationist social engineering, John’s life and death have, at last, found a narrative form highlighting the homelessness of the mixed-blood tribal subject.

* * *

The bodies of the mentally ill are more than Jamesian figures in the carpet, more than literary metaphor. As *Indian Killer* asserts, the relation between American Indians and homelessness, literal and figural, is not only art but chilling historical fact. Dispossessed of material livelihood, deprived of material and linguistic resources through different paradigms of narrative conquest, there is a compelling argument to be made that metaphorical operations like those Alexie undertakes in *Indian Killer* may be the only viable “Renaissance” left to American Indian artists in a white supremacist society. Otherwise, novelists like Jack Wilson will write such novels on a tribe’s behalf and get it all wrong.

However, John Smith’s suicide and its association in *Indian Killer* with the lasting achievement of racial purity are troubling. This claim of purity effectively silences the operation of metaphor (difference) on the field of significations we call race, substituting for a play of signification the hardened statistics of realist discourse. Postmodern metaphors such as “schizophrenia” may never be entirely sufficient in describing the material conditions that currently constrain tribal identities—Alexie’s own pointed critique of Gerald Vizenor’s “word masturbation” comes most immediately to mind⁴⁰—but they are certainly preferable to the ultimate alterity of

death *Indian Killer* seems to endorse. The implication of John Smith's suicide is that it achieves peace, cures madness, and resolves the old cliché of split or warring selves. Yet the fact remains that in *Indian Killer*, pure products do not go crazy—only the culturally and racially impure ones do. Far from being perceived as a wrong-headed and self-destructive act, John Smith's suicide is seen as his best, most prophetic, most mixed-blood undertaking.

John Smith's suicide is meant to pass judgement on a mixed cultural inheritance, just as the metaphor of schizophrenia is intended to aestheticize the outer limits of mixed-blood identity as both pathological and subversive. The representation of John's mania, moreover, simply revisits the by-now tired theme of alienated mixed-bloods forced to wander forever between tribal and white cultures. More peculiar still, John Smith's literary schizophrenia imparts a backhanded symbolic agency, allowing him to embody (like Father Duncan) essential truths, even ostensibly false ones. Sustaining bouts of lucidity between hallucinatory episodes, John Smith embraces the very absence *Indian Killer* asserts but cannot prove, the purported lack of a viable cross-cultural model for American Indians.

As something other than an empty postmodern signifier, John Smith might have had a chance to survive. His narrative fate risks the abandonment of history and the embrace of suicide as a false apotheosis. Both narrative events are dangerous and emerge at precisely the moment when a portrayal of Smith's cross-cultural legacy could have better served as a challenge to address the persisting question of homeless tribal identities on and off the streets, on and off the literary reservation we call the American Indian Renaissance.

NOTES

1. Sherman Alexie, "Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," interview by John Purdy, *SAIL: Studies in American Indian Literatures* 9 (Winter 1997): 9.

2. Louis Owens, "The Jailing of Cecelia Capture," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 8 (June 1984): 56–58. Critics have noted the wide diffusion of Anglo-European, "modernist" styles and techniques toward comparatively "authentic" American Indian narratives, and vice-versa, in the last generation, a development Kenneth Lincoln calls "Renaissance." See his *Native American Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 3–5.

3. Owens, "Jailing," 56.

4. Owens, "Jailing," 56 (emphasis added).

5. Sherman Alexie, *Indian Killer* (New York: Warner, 1996), 220. Future citations will appear in the text as *I*.

6. Purdy, "Conversation," 15.

7. Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 91–92.

8. Owens, *Other Destinies*, 90.

9. Rob Barrett, *The Psychiatric Team and the Social Definition of Schizophrenia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–13, 141–142.

10. Anne M. Lovell, "'The City is My Mother': Narratives of Schizophrenia and Homelessness," *American Anthropologist* 99, number 2 (1997): 355–356.

11. Clara Claiborne Park, *Rejoining the Common Reader: Essays, 1962–1990* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 74.

12. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 6.

13. Lovell, "Narratives," 355.

14. Many writers and scholars (including Gerald Vizenor, Louis Owens, N. Katherine Hayles, and Lawrence Buell to cite several particularly notable examples) are at present helping to construct debates addressing the metaphorical and material bases of bioethical and environmental discourses. One can trace this discursive lineage back to Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), Norman Cousins' *Anatomy of an Illness* (1979) and, as mentioned, to Foucault's discourse archaeology in *Madness and Civilization* (1965). That Alexie's work may be plotted alongside these latter scholars, albeit with a compelling tribal focus, comes initially as no small surprise. The novel criticizes a naive liberal vision (represented by the blind, faithful love of John's mother, Olivia Smith) that would universalize metaphors of mental illness and homelessness across cultures, prejudices, and worldviews even as it shares these works' appropriation of illness as metaphor.

15. Lovell, "Narratives," 355.

16. Lovell, "Narratives," 356.

17. Strictly speaking, the schizophrenic text cannot exist, because its subject does not plot time chronologically, and hence his story lacks any conventional basis in narrative. John Smith merely inhabits the interstices of the symbolic framework of parents, school, religion, and tribe in place around him. He is homeless within a spatial (rather than linear) narrative and walks off the girders of his construction job into dreams conjoining past and future (*I* 76). That John believes he must die once the "last skyscraper in Seattle" is constructed seems both logical and unduly fatalistic; there is no other place for him to go (*I* 103). In death, however, John Smith's mental illness moves beyond mixed-blood metaphor and the very domain of linguistic difference the schizophrenic representation of his mental illness claims to have provided.

18. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 156.

19. See Stuart Christie, "Trickster Gone Golfing: The Chelh-ten-em Development Controversy and Vizenor's *Heirs of Columbus*," *AIQ: American Indian Quarterly* 21 (Summer 1997): 359–383.

20. Gerald Vizenor, *Shadow Distance: A Gerald Vizenor Reader* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 168–169.

21. Owens, *Other Destinies*, 8, 19–20, 98–99, 150.

22. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 32.

23. For Cook-Lynn's dismissal of the work of Owens, Vizenor, and other writers she terms "urban mixed-bloods," see "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story," *AIQ: American Indian Quarterly* 20 (Winter 1996): 57–60. For Owens' response, see *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 151–157.

24. Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 69–70; id., *Other Destinies*, 90–94.

25. The remarkably static, polarized image "freezes" this defining moment of Smith's first contact with Anglo-European culture as one of alienation. Thomas King's *Medicine River* (1989) critiques the technique of photographic realism used by Alexie here. Rather, King's text uses photographic technology to reconceive, not dichotomize, existing relationships between tribal and Anglo-European signifying systems. See Stuart Christie, "Time Out: (Slam)Dunking Photographic Realism in Thomas King's *Medicine River*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 11 (Summer 1999): 51–65.

26. Given constitutive differences between indigenous concepts of identity and psychiatric therapies and approaches, medical-scientific discourses struggle to define mental health conditions in American Indian communities. Scott H. Nelson et al., "Mental Health and Mental Disorders," *American Indian Health: Innovations in Health Care, Promotion, and Policy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 311–312.

27. In instances where white babies are neither readily available for adoption nor explicitly desired (as opposed to children of other races) white mothers adopt white children only 4.8 percent of the time, a statistic that casts doubt upon generalizations about the lesser desirability of cross-race adoptions (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*; US Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration; Bureau of the Census, 117th ed., 1996).

28. Lovell, "Narratives," 360.

29. Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, 77.

30. Owens, "Jailing," 58.

31. James Spradley, *You Owe Yourself a Drunk: An Ethnography of Urban Nomads* (New York: Waveland, 1999), 97–108.

32. Owens, *Other Destinies*, 20.

33. Darrell J. Peters, "Diving Home: Centering in Louis Owens's *Wolfsong*," *AIQ: American Indian Quarterly* 21 (Summer 1997): 471.

34. The baiting and punishment of white liberals are among Alexie's favored pastimes (see Timothy Egan, "An Indian Without Reservations," *The New York Times Magazine* [18 January 1998], 19). Violence against whites, however, is merely one manifestation of a collective cultural madness operating in *Indian Killer*, and the narrator's early declaration that "John needed to kill a white man" (*I* 25) serves, sensationally, as a false lead for another of the text's salient projects: the tribal deconstruction of the detective story. Of varying loci and differing intensity, violent desires animate the entire novel's plot. If we presume that the Indian Killer in the text represents the historical force of tribal rage and justice (regardless of whoever did the actual killing) then this killer counts coup at all points in the tale. The animus of rage, the Indian Killer and his methods are horrific, and paranoia is heightened with the abduction of a white, suburban Everykid named Mark Jones (*I* 153).

35. Lovell, "Narratives," 356.

36. Nelson et al., "Mental Health," 315; see also Lawrence S. Wissow, "Suicide Among American Indians and Alaska Natives," *American Indian Health: Innovations in Health Care, Promotion, and Policy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 260–280.

37. Marlita A. Reddy, ed., *Statistical Record of Native North Americans* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1993).

38. Owens, *Other Destinies*, 19.

39. Owens, *Other Destinies*, 23.

40. Purdy, "Conversation," 7.