

A Hard Kick between His Blue Blue Eyes: The Decolonizing Potential of Indigenous  
Rage in Sherman Alexie's "The Business of Fancysdancing" and "Indian Killer"

A thesis presented to  
the faculty of  
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts

Jessica A. Weatherford

August 2009

© 2009 Jessica A. Weatherford. All Rights Reserved.

This thesis titled  
A Hard Kick between His Blue Blue Eyes: The Decolonizing Potential of Indigenous  
Rage in Sherman Alexie's "The Business of Fancysdancing" and "Indian Killer"

by  
JESSICA A. WEATHERFORD

has been approved for  
the Department of English  
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

---

George E. Hartley  
Associate Professor of English

---

Katarzyna J. Marciniak  
Associate Professor of English

---

Benjamin M. Ogles  
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

## ABSTRACT

WEATHERFORD, JESSICA A., M.A., August 2009, English

A Hard Kick between His Blue Blue Eyes: The Decolonizing Potential of Indigenous Rage in Sherman Alexie's "The Business of Fancydancing" and "Indian Killer" (99 pp.)

Directors of Thesis: George E. Hartley and Katarzyna J. Marciniak

Although strategically disregarded, the U.S. was founded through the extermination and removal of the indigenous people of the land mass now referred to as The United States of America. In this project, I examine aspects of federal Indian law to present an understanding of the U.S./Indian relationship as one of persistent and domestic colonialism. Using the work of scholars in American Indian Studies, postcolonial theory, and transnational studies, I investigate how the work of Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) portrays the consequences of colonialism and neocolonialism. The two primary texts that I use are Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* and his film *The Business of Fancydancing*. One of the major themes throughout this project is American Indian rage, and I explore the strategies and potentials for this rage in Alexie's texts.

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

George E. Hartley

Associate Professor of English

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Katarzyna J. Marciniak

Associate Professor of English

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my directors, George Hartley and Katarzyna Marciniak. I am very lucky to have had the opportunity to work with two such brilliant and gracious people. I thank you both for your time, energy, wisdom, and endless words of encouragement. I would also like to thank my reader, Janis Butler Holm, for her keen eye and vast knowledge. I would like to thank the wonderful folks at Ohio University—my fellow graduate students, the faculty, and the staff. And, finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their love and support.

*For Mom, Dad, and my sisters*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	3
Acknowledgments.....	4
Introduction .....	7
Chapter 1: Leaving the Rez: Decolonization and Rage in the Films of Sherman Alexie.	26
Part I: The U.S./Indian Relationship: Complexities, Contradictions, and Conquest....	26
Part II: Raging to Survive .....	38
Conclusion .....	57
Chapter 2: “The Killer Gazes Skyward and Screeches:” The Intersections of Rage and	
Myth in Sherman Alexie’s <i>Indian Killer</i> .....	63
Introduction.....	63
Part I: Longing for a Brown Mother.....	67
Part II: Creating a Myth.....	82
Conclusion .....	90
Conclusion .....	94
Works Cited .....	96

## INTRODUCTION

The attitude that I encounter daily from my students as a composition instructor at a public university in Ohio is the belief that the times we are living in are characterized by progress and civility. They wholeheartedly swallow and regurgitate the myth that we, the privileged citizens of the United States, live in a true democracy where everyone is now equal. Yes, there were some flaws in our past, but everything is much better now. And why should they not believe this? They are fed this myth every day and have grown up in a post-feminist, post-civil rights U.S. The most damning effect of the neocolonial era is the relative invisibility of atrocity for the privileged and the consequential apathy of those who do not feel the brunt of those neocolonial forces (or do but are not aware of the networks of oppression that are causing their personal hardships). Despite the trend of globalism in the economic sphere, poverty, war, and other social hardships tend always to be somewhere else in the U.S. imagination. The U.S. government has learned from Vietnam; they now know how to be actively involved and responsible for an unpopular and unnecessary war but have little backlash from the masses. The draft has been replaced with an involuntarily voluntary draft; by that I mean that most of the men I know who have been sent to Iraq or Afghanistan do not believe in the war and are not fighting for patriotic reasons. They are “fighting” so that they have a chance to pull themselves out of the lower class and the blue-collar, hard manual labor jobs that have caused their mothers and fathers to hurt constantly and drink heavily. They have joined the Armed Forces for a chance at a college education and the American Dream. And the masses can remain apathetic because many of these men were the guys in school that

were never supposed to amount to anything anyway. And these invisible soldiers can be sent over two, three, four times; they cannot refuse without breaking the law.

I begin with this tangential thought to highlight the very real consequences of neocolonial tactics—the same old ugliness hidden behind facades of progress and choice and freedom, words that have lost their meaning from overuse, misuse, and abuse. In *Postcolonial America*, Richard King outlines the move from colonialism to neocolonialism as “the interpenetration of a decaying (European) imperialism aimed at territorial colonization and the exploitation of natural and human resources and an ascendant (American) imperialism primarily concerned with political control without colonization and the circulation of cultural commodities” (2). King highlights an insightful argument by Jenny Sharpe: “[She] usefully reinterprets postcoloniality with reference to the United States . . . [and] seeks ‘to define the ‘after’ to colonialism as the neocolonial relations the United States entered into with decolonized nations” (6). In both of these discussions, neocolonialism is very much associated with the U.S. In their article “Native North America: The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism,” Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke discuss a specific kind of neocolonialism perpetrated by energy corporations (invested in mining, uranium production, etc.) that exploit the poverty of Native nations through unbalanced contracts that allow the corporations access to the natural resources that they want: “All uranium-producing American Indian nations, and the individuals who comprise them, are . . . economic hostages of the new colonialism” (258). An understanding of neocolonialism (and the different forms of colonialisms that have led to this contemporary version) is necessary



for this project because I am analyzing two texts by a contemporary American Indian writer and director, Sherman Alexie. Like many Native artists, his work deals with the past and present atrocities committed against indigenous peoples in the U.S. and across the globe.

Alexie,<sup>1</sup> a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, was born in Wellpinit, Washington, on the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1966. "As a teenager, after finding his mother's name written in a textbook assigned to him at the Wellpinit school, Alexie made a conscious decision to attend high school off the reservation . . . where he knew he would get a better education. At Reardan High he was the only Indian, except for the school mascot. There he excelled academically and became a star player on the basketball team" (ShermanAlexie.com). He attended college in Spokane at Gonzaga University, where he started drinking rather heavily, and then transferred to the University of Washington, where he earned a BA in American Studies. His first published works were books of poetry, one of which is titled *The Business of Fancydancing* (1991). After this success, he got sober at the age of twenty-three. He then published a book of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, in 1993. His first novel, *Reservation Blues*, was published in 1995, followed by his second, *Indian Killer*, 1996. In 1998 he expanded one of his short stories from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and wrote the screenplay for *Smoke Signals*, a successful film that broke new ground as the first film written by, directed by, and starring American Indians. In 2003, he wrote and directed his first film, *The Business of Fancydancing*. Alexie does not live on the reservation, though

---

<sup>1</sup> Most of the bibliographical and biographical information in this paragraph was retrieved from Alexie's website, *ShermanAlexie.com*.

much of his family still does. He is married with two sons and lives in Seattle; he continues to publish poetry, short stories, and novels. Alexie's work is often darkly comedic, and he is always willing to explore the destructive consequences of colonialism and neocolonialism on American Indians. All of Alexie's work, to one degree or another, is influenced by his experience as an American Indian living in a white world. I use this term "white world" throughout this project. Sometimes it merely functions as a shorthand for the world outside of the reservation, which, of course, is quite diverse and not filled with only white people. More explicitly, I use this term to emphasize the legacy of European colonialism and white supremacy (*500 Years Later*). I also use the term because it refers back to the era of contact and the white and Indian encounter.

In an article for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1998, "I Hated Tonto (Still Do)," Alexie discusses the effect that popular culture and cinema's portrayal of stereotypical Indians had on him as a child and as an adult. He explains that he learned to hate savages and identify with the white protagonist. If a movie did have an Indian protagonist, that Indian was a half-breed and was always played by a white man with a nice tan. But, as Alexie says, "Indians had learned to be happy with less . . . [because any portrayal is] better than nothing." The possibilities that Alexie presents in his discussion of portrayals of Indians in cinema and pop culture are grim – either misrepresentation and the same old stereotypes or invisibility. One of the most devastating forms of violence against Native peoples is their relative invisibility. On television today, one may, without much effort, find shows featuring unique characters who are Black, Chicano, Asian, etc. But I cannot think of one show with a native American character, not one. In fact, the only "Indians"

(and I am using this term loosely to describe the representations that I will name) that one can find on television on any given day may be a History Channel special on the colonial period in the U.S. or the Chief Wahoo mascot parading around at a Cleveland Indians game. A parody of a race of human beings is still acceptable as mascots for sports teams but *only* if that race is American Indian. As Ward Churchill argues in his article “Crimes against Humanity,” dominant society would never let this sort of degradation happen to any other race. He highlights the unequal treatment of American Indians by making up hypothetical sports mascots and team names using other races and their respective stereotypes. It is inconceivable that a team called the “Sambos” with a sambo mascot would be allowed to persist. So how can Chief Wahoo, the Washington Redskins, and the Colorado Lama Savages still exist? As Churchill asserts, “a concerted, sustained, and in some ways accelerating effort has gone into making Indians unreal” (491). The monolithic construct of “Indian,” in the colonial imagination, functions as an anachronism that is a reminder to the U.S. that this “great nation” is built on stolen land and a genocidal legacy. Their “unrealness” makes their circumstances more forgettable.

As a substitute teacher in Indiana several years ago, I encountered a very painfully insightful question from a third-grade student. We were reading a chapter from a history book on the “colonial period,” a history that was unsurprisingly watered down and scattered with euphemisms and lies such as “relocated” and “friendly with each other” and “great population loss because of foreign disease.” A genuinely confused student raised her hand and asked, “Are Indians extinct?”; she was noticeably proud of her usage of the word that she had learned from a recent science lesson. I was caught off guard,

never having heard this word used in the context of human beings. But as a young child living in Indiana, she had probably never encountered a “real, live” Indian (despite the namesake of her home state). So I proceeded to give a lesson on the U.S. Holocaust for the first time. Because, unlike the Jews, American Indians have no Holocaust Museum to honor the millions of lives lost because of genocide. The U.S. Holocaust is not standard information that any grade-school student should know. One of the texts that I use in this project is Ali Behdad’s *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States*, which argues that historical amnesia is necessary for the creation and persistence of the myth of a democratic America; thus, “the means of brutality through which national unity is achieved . . . must be elided in the official history to legitimize the nation’s founding” (5-6).

Particularly troublesome to the nation’s successful forgetting of the past and present forms of colonial exploitation, injustice, and violence against American Indians is the reservation system, a constant and very real reminder of “relocation” to concentration camps which “evolved” into forced spaces of existence for the remaining indigenous populations. These reservation spaces are open, festering wounds<sup>2</sup> from the height of the colonial era, and still function as a colonized space, in many ways mirroring the Third World conditions of colonized spaces outside of the boundaries of the U.S.:

---

<sup>2</sup> This statement is inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa’s discussion of the border between the U.S. and Mexico as “es una herida abierta,” an open wound, “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (25). Although the borders around Indian reservations in the U.S. have this same quality of a wound that has never healed, there are very important differences, which is why I do not cite Anzaldúa in the body of the essay on this point. According to George Hartley: “Certainly the notion of a wound applies to native peoples, but [Anzaldúa] is specifically talking about the border as the wound, a gash slashed into the earth/body/people/psyche. While there are borders for Indians (reservation boundaries) they are not policed in quite the same ways as the US Mexico border. And the Indians are fenced in, the Mexicans fenced out.”

By the government's own data in the mid-1980's, Indians received the lowest annual and lifetime per capita incomes of any aggregate population group in the United States. Concomitantly, we suffer the highest rate of infant mortality, death by exposure and malnutrition, disease, and the like. Under such circumstances, alcoholism and other escapist forms of substance abuse are endemic in the Indian community, a situation which leads both to a general physical debilitation of the population and a catastrophic accident rate. Teen suicide among Indians is several times the national average. The average life expectancy of a reservation-based Native American man is barely 45 years; women can expect to live less than three years longer. Such itemizations could be continued at great length, including matters like the radioactive contamination of large portions of contemporary Indian Country, the forced relocation of traditional Navajos, and so on. But the point should be made: Genocide, as defined in international law, is a continuing fact of day-to-day life (and death) for North America's native peoples. Yet there has been—and is—only the barest flicker of public concern about, or even consciousness of, this reality. Absent any serious expression of public outrage, no one is punished and the process continues. (Churchill 490-91)

Unfortunately, the new millennium has brought about nothing but the same for American Indians. The colonial tactics of a decapitation by sword or smallpox-infested blankets have been replaced by toxins purposefully deposited in the land and bodies of Native

peoples, the stealing and disposal of Native women's generative organs, and the strenuously maintained ignorance of the dominant culture.

One of the goals of this project is to explore the manifestations of rage in the work of Sherman Alexie in order to investigate the potential for rage as a strategy of not only resistance but also survival. According to Alexie himself, "The United States *is* a colony . . . and I'm always going to write like one who is colonized, and that's with a lot of anger" (qtd. in Van Styvendale 212). A primary way that I am exploring Alexie's rage is precisely in the context of this comment, through the idea of anger as a decolonizing tool that jeopardizes the structures of oppression. It demands a lot of energy to resist oppression, especially when that oppression is so unquestioned and pervasive that it is nearly invisible to many people. But rage is a motivator; it is a passionate form of energy that can be channeled into fights for justice. I think of my own anger as a woman. I see the different forms of patriarchy trying to manipulate my mind and body and the minds and bodies of women throughout the world. The more conscious I become of patriarchal domination, the more wrathful I become. But this rage motivates me to fight for myself and others; it motivates me to write and speak out and refuse to submit, even in the face of defeat.

Crucial to my discussion of rage is the work of bell hooks. In *Killing Rage*, she discusses, at length, the rejuvenating potential of militant anger. At one point in the text, she analyzes Pecola, "The dehumanized colonized little black girl" in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and quotes Pecola's telling the audience that "anger is better, there is presence in anger." Hooks explains: "Perhaps then it is that 'presence,' the assertion of

subjectivity colonizers do not want to see, that surfaces when the colonized express rage” (12). And here hooks brings up a very important point—rage demands attention, rage will not be ignored, and rage has the capability to carve out discursive spaces previously cemented shut. Hooks discusses two different kinds of rage: Narcissistic rage occurs when a person plays by all of the rules and buys into the system but still gets treated unfairly because of race, gender, class, nationality, sexuality, and counterhegemonic behaviors and values. This sort of rage is on an individual level and is not concerned with women or Black people or Indians as a whole. The other kind of rage, which is concerned with one’s fellow colonized people, hooks refers to as militant rage, and it is the most frightening to the oppressive forces in our society because it has no investment in maintaining the present systems of domination.

Of course, however, militant rage is felt on an individual level and has radical potential for the transformation of an individual. Militant rage at systemic injustice felt on an individual level has the ability to push a person beyond his or her comfort zone, beyond the borders of social etiquette and the dread of causing those socially awkward moments. Expressions of militant rage on an individual level force awareness and culpability on those involved and spectating; they force moments of critical engagement with acts that signify systems of larger social oppression. And when these militantly rageful people unite, the effects are amplified. But, of course, there is the power of silence. This is negative power, power given to the oppressor and taken away from the oppressed. Silence allows the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” to use hooks’s term, to speak for the oppressed. It allows the structures of domination and systemic

injustice to persist. Silence<sup>3</sup> is one of the most important tools of the neocolonial system, and it is one that is very difficult to overcome on an individual and communal level. Silence toward injustice is a result of colonized minds. These silences help an individual “make it” in the white supremacist patriarchal system and/or they are the result of internalized shame. Because I am entering this topic with a background in feminist theory and a personal commitment to end violence against women, I think of the power of silence when it comes to the crime of rape. Rape is one of the most underreported crimes in the U.S. (despite the media’s tendency to focus on cases of a woman “crying wolf”). According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network), after factoring in unreported rapes and after jumping through all of the hoops of our rapist-friendly judicial system, fifteen out of sixteen rapists will walk free. And, of course, those unlucky few who are convicted and spend time in prison are usually on the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. And Native women are more likely to be the victim of a rape or attempted rape than any other race of women, with the statistic at 34.1 percent<sup>4</sup> (RAINN).

There are significant contributions by black men like Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X to discussions of the decolonizing potential for rage expressed by colonized people.

Frantz Fanon not only theorizes the experience of the colonized man but justifies the use

---

<sup>3</sup> The kind of silence that I am discussing is an oppressive, institutionally imposed and maintained silence. It is a silence resulting from domination, shame, and internalized colonialism—a hopeless silence. There are, of course, other kinds of silences. I think of the positive power of silence for the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), also known simply as the Zapatistas. The Zapatistas use silence as a weapon against government forces that oppose them and as a means to protect their activities and lifestyles. In María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo’s article “Reading a Silence: The ‘Indian’ in the Era of Zapatismo,” she describes the strategic silence of the Zapatistas as “a silence filled with planning, communication, movement, tactics, coercion, frustration, ties, networks, suffering, satisfaction—a silence so filled with activity that it ruptures from within” (301).

<sup>4</sup> This staggering statistic is even more disturbing when compared to the other statistics: All women – 17.6%, white women – 17.7%, black women – 18.8%, Asian Pacific Islander women – 6.8%, and mixed race women – 24.4% (RAINN).



of violence as the only language that colonialism recognizes: “[C]olonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence” (23). Similarly, Malcolm X equates redemptive violence with “intelligence”:

I think there are plenty of good people in America, but there are also plenty of bad people in America and the bad ones are the ones who seem to have all the power and be in these positions to block things that you and I need. Because this is the situation, you and I have to preserve the right to do what is necessary to bring an end to that situation, and it doesn't mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense, I call it intelligence.<sup>5</sup>

The work of Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X is necessary to any discussion of the justifiable anger of colonized people. However, as bell hooks and other feminist critics have pointed out, both men (along with others) are still invested in patriarchy. Hooks discusses at length the false belief that the renewal of manhood for the benevolent Black patriarch will liberate the race as a whole. The voices of women of color are necessary because they are often more aware of the systems of oppression at work in our society. They feel the force of patriarchy and white supremacy and (those who are conscious of the systemic nature of this oppression) understand that these two structures of domination are invested in each other.

---

<sup>5</sup> Quote from Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*. Retrieved from WikiQuote.

It is through the work of American Indian feminists such as Andrea Smith and Paula Gunn Allen that I investigate the interconnected oppression of patriarchy and white supremacy. Smith's *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* is absolutely crucial to this project. In this text, Smith explains that in order to subjugate indigenous peoples in North America who had systems of social order that were relatively nonhierarchical, colonizers had to naturalize hierarchy. They did this through forcefully encouraging Natives to assimilate to the patriarchal nuclear family model that acted as the foundation for European structures of hierarchy. Gunn Allen and others vigorously document the widespread absence of patriarchy in pre-Conquest indigenous societies in North America. In fact, many of these societies were matrilineal and matrifocal and were also significantly more peaceful than their European counterparts. Gunn Allen discusses how pre-Contact indigenous societies should play an important role in present-day feminism because they offer historical evidence of non-patriarchal societies, something that is quite difficult to find in European histories. This is discussed more in chapter 2.

American Indian rage, as a whole, is absent in much of dominant society because American Indians are absent. First, Natives are combating a problem of logistics: According to the 2000 census, American Indian Alaska Natives make up less than two percent of the total population. Second, American Indians have a unique relationship with their race and with the U.S. federal government. Native nations, according to federal Indian law, are "domestic dependent nations" (Cheyfitz 408), and these tribal nations act through Indian reservations. Thus, many American Indians have an immediate

community through the reservation that they were born on. However, the reservation system also works to “fence in” American Indians, as is suggested through the oft-used phrase in American Indian writing, living behind the “buckskin curtain” (qtd. in Weaver 37). And this brings me to another theme of this project—inside versus outside. What does it mean to be an insider or an outsider of any community? What privileges are gained or denied due to one’s status in relation to the community? These questions are complicated even more in the context of American Indian identity because of the complexities in the relationships between Native individuals and their tribes, Native nations and the U.S. government, and reservation Indian cultures and mainstream culture. In an interview with University of California San Diego’s *Guestbook*, the interviewer asks Alexie how his childhood on the Spokane Reservation influences his art. Alexie’s response highlights his role as outsider and a critic to both the white and Indian worlds:

Well, I think what it prepared me for was to always be the outsider on American culture. In some sense, I was an outsider on my reservation because I was immediately interested in all sorts of things people around me weren’t. You know, I was reading very young, you know, reading literature very young – Steinbeck and Shakespeare and poetry and Pound and Eliot and Keats and Yeats and sort of was looking that way from a very early age . . . . But because I didn’t fit in there (his reservation) and because I didn’t fit in in the white world either, and I was always observing it . . . . So, it (the Spokane Reservation) was a monoculture, and so I was always looking at the outside world, not part of it, looking,

looking, looking. And so in some sense it prepared me to always be a witness to the various felonies and misdemeanors of American life.

The themes of insider and outsider, observer and observed, and those embraced by a community and those rejected are explored in this project because they are important inspirations for Alexie's work. Moreover, these subjects are even more complicated for American Indians, especially those on reservations, because of their unique, complex, and persistent colonial relationship with the United States government.

In chapter one of this project, I analyze Alexie's film *The Business of Fancydancing*.<sup>6</sup> *Smoke Signals* was the first film that he wrote the screenplay for, and it was based on his short story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," but it was directed by Chris Eyre, a Cheyenne/Arapaho. Alexie wrote and directed *Fancydancing*, a much darker and less mainstream audience-friendly film. Seymour Polatkin, the main character, is a Spokane from the Spokane Reservation who succeeds in his academic pursuits and becomes a successful Indian poet. However, his success is received rather ambivalently on the Spokane Reservation and is often read as a betrayal. This betrayal, in some sense, has to do with the role of the artist. Alexie discusses this in his interview with *UCSD Guestbook*, as well. He explains that in a traditional Indian tribe, the role of the artist was probably no different from the role of any other member of the community. The artist observes the tribe but is also a part of the tribe. He contrasts this with the Western idea of the artist as someone "separate." Thus, for an Indian artist in the contemporary United States, she or he is "working in two very mutually exclusive roles." Alexie goes on to explain, "In some sense, artists always betray their tribes [whatever

---

<sup>6</sup> Herein referred to as *Fancydancing*

those tribes may be]. So, an Indian artist's betrayal is exponentially worse." And why is it worse? That is one of the questions I explore in chapter 1.

The first part of chapter one analyzes the U.S. Indian relationship through the reading of Federal Indian law. This reading engages the work of Eric Cheyfitz, particularly his piece "The (Post)Colonial Predicament of Native American Studies." Through this text, I outline the persistent colonial relationship between the United States and Indian nations, a colonial relationship that is imbedded in Federal Indian law. I especially focus on the Marshall Trilogy, three very significant Supreme Court cases that occurred during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that outlined the status of indigenous people in the United States. The decisions from these cases are the basis for the U.S./Indian relationship. To this day, American Indians are considered wards of the state and Indian nations are domestic dependent nations. From here, I discuss this colonial (and neocolonial) situation as a product of modernization. Using Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, I explore American Indians as a waste product of U.S. imperialism and its obsession with "progress," a term that I complicate and reverse.

In the second part of the chapter, I analyze the severe consequences of modernity for those who are deemed insignificant or disposable by the colonial powers and the rage that results from being colonized. Using Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*, I investigate the volatile confrontations that can occur when colonized and colonizer meet. I execute this analysis by reading scenes in Alexie's film *The Business of Fancydancing*. Through this lens of the rage of the colonized, I discuss

the three main characters – Seymour, Aristotle, and Mouse – and the different manifestations of their rage. Aristotle expresses his rage externally in violent outbursts. Mouse internalizes his rage with self-destructive behaviors. Seymour uses his art to work through his rage. However, the question is whether he is doing this at the expense of the rest of his tribe. He exploits their stories, their life experiences, for his art. And his art is celebrated by dominant society and allows him to live a very comfortable, bourgeois, charmed life off the reservation.

Chapter two of this project analyzes Alexie's second novel, *Indian Killer*. The main character in this text is an American Indian man, John Smith, who is taken from his Indian mother at birth and adopted by a middle-class white couple living in Seattle, Olivia and Daniel. I start the first part of this chapter with a discussion of the legal reality of this fictionalized situation. Indian children were, historically, abducted from their Indian parents and taken to boarding schools far from their homes in order to be assimilated. Along with the colonial tactic of boarding schools are the related neocolonial tactics of deeming Indian homes unfit and sending Indian children to foster homes or adoptive parents. The goal is the same: assimilation. Using Behdad's *A Forgetful Nation*, I discuss how these neocolonial tactics can be performed with little or no backlash from dominant society because of historical amnesia. Behdad explains how perpetual acts of historical amnesia are necessary for the existence of the myth of a democratic and benevolent America, the myth that this nation was founded on.

The second part of chapter two engages two critical works on Alexie's *Indian Killer*, Nancy Van Styvendale's insightful article "The Trans/Historicity of Trauma in

Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash* and Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*" and Stuart Christie's "Renaissance Man: The tribal 'Schizophrenic' in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*." Both pieces analyze very important aspects of *Indian Killer*, and my reading of the text, to some degree, relies on insights explored through these articles. However, both articles are grappling with the same issue – the achronological elements of the story. Van Styvendale advocates an expanded and revised view of trauma theory to apply specifically to the transhistorical traumas experienced by American Indians and discusses the achronological elements of Alexie's text as an intrusion of traumatic memories. She discusses these traumas as transcending and reverberating throughout time and place. Christie reads the achronological elements of the text as a result of John Smith's schizophrenia and understands Smith's mental illness as a metaphor for the experience of American Indians, as a group, in the dominant white world. I, however, attempt to complicate these readings by understanding the achronological elements of the text in the context of American Indian literature and traditional indigenous epistemologies. I rely on Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* for this endeavor.

In the third part of the second chapter, I explore the rage of John Smith, particularly his rage at misogyny. To do this, I discuss at length the historical evidence that suggests that indigenous societies in North America were predominantly not patriarchal and, in fact, were matrilineal and matrifocal. Using Gunn Allen and Smith, I discuss the interrelated nature of patriarchy, racism, and colonization. John is angry because he is an Indian without a tribe, and he is an Indian without a tribe because his

brown mother was replaced by a white mother. But his white mother is not directly responsible for this because she is merely a pawn for the white supremacist patriarchal system in the U.S. Thus, using this logic, John decides that he needs to kill a white man because his situation is the result of the power of white men.

Ultimately, I hope that this project increases scholarly engagement with the concept of American Indian rage. This rage is a natural response to the genocide and colonization that this country was and is founded on. And, as I argued before, oppression and silence can act as catalysts for realizations and manifestations of rage; rage often grows out of the compulsory silence of subjugated peoples. Because the U.S. has a lot of demons in its closet and, like all power-hungry governments, demands submissive behavior from its citizens, expressions of rage are discouraged on many levels. But fear is a motivator, and our government is afraid of rage. Fear plays a complex role in the expression of rage from the colonized. Hooks discusses “white terror” in *Killing Rage*, the very real fear that she felt and still feels to this day in the many situations where she is drastically outnumbered by white people. Because U.S. society wants us to equate white with benevolence and brown and black with violence and depravity, discussions about the terror of whiteness<sup>7</sup> in mainstream culture are few. However, when looking, even superficially, at the history of the U.S. (and many other places outside of the U.S.), it is

---

<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are different types of whiteness, but, again, this term highlights the legacy of colonialism and white supremacy. Different people of the white race have certainly been discriminated against in the U.S. socially and institutionally (immigration laws). However, the use of rape as a tool of war in Bosnia garners a much more public reaction than its similar use in Sierra Leone, although both are equally horrifying. Jews are told to never forget the Holocaust, while Africans and indigenous groups throughout the world are encouraged to forget (*500 Years Later*). Those in power throughout the world, many of whom have inherited their power through white supremacy, privilege the suffering of other whites (even if they are different whites) over the suffering of people of color.



completely rational to see whiteness as a terrorizing force. This understandable fear of whiteness by colonized people can obviously work to inhibit expressions of rage. But it is also this internalized and perpetual fear of attack, degradation, and extinction (to use the word of my third-grade student that applies to American Indians) that can incite the expression of reactive but also planned and militant rage on the part of the colonized.

## CHAPTER 1: LEAVING THE REZ: DECOLONIZATION AND RAGE IN THE FILMS OF SHERMAN ALEXIE

### Part I: The U.S./Indian Relationship: Complexities, Contradictions, and Conquest

*Federal Indian law works in the same way as Freud describes the unconscious – as a system of contradictions which is incapable of reading itself as such. – Eric Cheyfitz*<sup>8</sup>

The United States' government has a long, complicated, bloody, and shameful history of dealings with the indigenous people of this continent. The present situation of American Indians in the U.S. is the direct result of colonialism, past and present forms. How does a scholar talk about Natives in the U.S.? This is a very complicated subject as the position of American Indians in the U.S. is difficult to define using reductive terms. One will not find a large body of scholarly work on American Indians within the area of postcolonial studies, although many of the ideas in these fields are completely applicable to American Indians. (Part of the problem is that American Indians are in a colonial situation, not a postcolonial one.) The same is true for transnational studies. Robert Warrior, an American Indian scholar, explains: "I attribute this relative absence [of American Indian presence in transnational theory] to the uneasy, yet ultimately productive, relation most Native scholars have to the leading theoretical approaches in contemporary literary studies" (Lugo-Ortiz 807). However, there is a large body of work within American Indian Studies that engages with and promotes Native nationalism. I respect the methodologies used by American Indian scholars and have no intention of ignoring established theories or of ignorantly employing purposefully disregarded tactics. Instead, I would like to engage an intersectional approach using insights from

---

<sup>8</sup> From "The (Post)Colonial Predicament of Native American Studies"

postcolonial studies, transnational studies, and Native nationalism to read the films of Sherman Alexie. As Warrior explains:

Native emphasis on nationalism, in fact, is an apt reminder of the ways in which the national and transnational remain linked and agrees with what Wai Chee Dimock argues: ‘Transnationality . . . points not to the emergence of a new collective unit . . . but to the persistence of an old logic, the logic of capitalism. Market born and market driven, it is infinite in its geographical extension but all too finite in its aspirations. It offers no alternative politics, poses no threat to the sovereignty of the state’ . . . That sort of critical view of the transnational, one that seeks to describe a constellation of material realities in the lived world, seems eminently helpful and useful. (Lugo-Ortiz 808)

The above-mentioned intersectional approach is useful in discussing the depictions of the convoluted effects of colonialism and neocolonialism, including American Indian rage, in Alexie’s films, *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002).

Transnationality is a term that scholars in the humanities and social sciences use to describe transactions or transmissions that link or incorporate several nations or nationalities, implicitly evoking border-crossings. American Indians<sup>9</sup> are transnational subjects, in the most obvious way, because they are American citizens and citizens of their Indian nations simultaneously. Historically speaking, American Indians were dealt

---

<sup>9</sup> I do not wish to oversimplify the diverse circumstances and lifestyles of Indians or, more specifically, reservation Indians in the U.S. by creating and discussing a monolithic “American Indian.” I will keep my generalizations to a minimum and try to deal with the specific representations of American Indians in the work of Sherman Alexie.

with like foreigners by the colonizers, and Indian nations were treated as foreign, sovereign, and inferior nations within the boundaries of the United States. It was not until 1924 that Native Americans, as an entire race, were even considered by law to be citizens of the United States, which many American Indians saw as a dubious “privilege.” So where is home when one is a U.S. citizen but also a victim of American imperialism and genocide? For many American Indians, home is a reservation. The reservation, in a technical sense, does often operate as a nation within a nation. Reservations are on federal land, but tribal law and partial sovereignty are upheld. In the U.S. today, many Indians inhabit a borderland between a nation that has tried to eradicate them from the very beginning and an indigenous culture that has been irrevocably changed by colonization and modernization. The very transnationality of reservation Indians is a result of U.S. imperialism. Thus, the transnationality forced upon Natives causes very real pain and loss. This is a stark contrast to the popular bourgeois understanding of transnationality as synonymous with “hip” and “cosmopolitan.”

Transnationality, however, cannot unproblematically apply to the position of American Indians in the U.S. One must, first, firmly establish Native nations as nations within the United States, which is not an easy task. The terms themselves—nation, sovereignty, tribe, Indian (a pan-tribal designation)—are the products of colonialism; they are European concepts and creations that were and are applied to the indigenous peoples in the land that is now the United States (Cheyfitz 407, 410). However, as Warrior explains, using an excerpt from the work of N. Scott Momaday, “They [American Indians] have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held

on to their own, secret souls” (qtd. in Lugo-Ortiz 807). Native nationalism uses Western terms but advocates an allegiance to the traditional, although there are disagreements between the nationalists and traditionalists because of the use of European terminology.<sup>10</sup> This loyalty to the traditional is important for at least two reasons: One, Native nations are not truly seen as foreign, sovereign nations by the federal government. And two, staying faithful to the traditional aspects of Native culture strengthens the community and attempts to protect it from further colonialism. Forms of colonialism ingrained in the federal Indian policy are dangerous present-day extensions of colonial tactics such as the Dawes Act of 1887, a piece of legislation that not only helped the U.S. government steal Indian land but also, through the translation of “Indian communal land into *property* and Indians into *individual* property holders,” attempted to “displace Indian communalism with western individualism” (Cheyfitz 412). Native nationalism is an important and necessary way to protect American Indian communities from neocolonialist methods. Of course, “nationalism” is a problematic term.<sup>11</sup> There is much work criticizing nationalism because of the insane lengths people will go to in the name of promoting or defending a nation. However, Native nationalism is different from Western concepts of nationalism in many significant ways. Native nationalism has adopted European terminology, but it is a form of tribalism. It recognizes tribal specificity, highlighting to EuroAmericans that the New World was not inhabited by a homogenous Other, an indistinguishable group of

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, concepts like “sovereignty” itself, according to scholars like Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, an advocate of traditionalism, are a form of neocolonialism that attempts to supplant Euro-American versions of the “transference of power or authority from the individual to an abstraction of the collective called ‘government’” for indigenous versions (qtd. in Weaver 44). This is an important debate within American Indian Studies, but one that I am not going to analyze in-depth in this essay. For further information on this debate, see Alfred’s *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*.

<sup>11</sup> For a further discussion of this substantial scholarly field, see Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman’s *Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*.

savages. Instead, the indigenous populations of North America had diverse and complex societies. Native nationalism is not about domination; it is about survival. It harkens back to the values of pre-Contact North America. As Paula Gunn Allen, M. Annette Jaimes, Theresa Halsey, and other American Indian scholars argue, pre-Contact civilizations were generally more peaceful, more holistic, and more egalitarian than their European counterparts. In fact, many tribes were matrilineal and matrilineal (Jaimes 318). Thus, Native nationalism also, in many ways, elevates the importance of women in their cultures.

Even though Native nationalism employs European terms of governance, in part, because of the use of these terms by the United States when referring to Indian peoples, the federal government itself does not truly apply the European versions of these terms to the Indian “nations.” In the Supreme Court case *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* in 1831, the Cherokees requested that the Court recognize them as a foreign nation so that they could sue the state of Georgia for violating numerous treaties. “The Court refused to recognize the Cherokees as a foreign nation. . . . Chief Justice Marshall argued in his opinion that the Cherokees, far from being a fully sovereign, or foreign, nation were in their relation to the US analogous to ‘a ward to his guardian’ and should properly be defined as ‘domestic dependent nations’” (Cheyfitz 408). That definition of the relationship between Indian “nations” and the U.S. government persists. Add to this the effect of *Johnson v. M’Intosh* (1823) and *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock* (1903), which gives the federal government “plenary power” to use Indian land as it wishes because of the “doctrine of discovery” (Cheyfitz 410), and one begins to see how the Indian nations, from the beginning of their

forced relationship with the United States to this very day, are in a perpetual position as colonials to the U.S. government.

To me, this understanding of Indian nations and Indian peoples as colonial subjects within the United States<sup>12</sup> is necessary to discuss any sort of issue affecting American Indians. They were and are the “Indian problem” to the federal government because they were and are legally at the discretion of and the responsibility of the United States government. Most important to my discussion of reservations, through Alexie’s work, is the way that the reservation system is not only the product of past colonialism but a necessary tool of present-day colonialism:

At best the Indian Citizenship Act was and is a double-edge sword, at once an assimilationist attack on tribal existence and a leverage for empowerment in the larger nation. *But*, and this is crucial, the Act empowered one only as an *individual*, operating beyond the reservation, the home community. If an Indian remains on the reservation, which, with all its economic hardships due to colonial underdevelopment, is still the place of identity – the nurturing nexus of kin and land – then she or he is constituted to live under the colonial regime of federal Indian law without the constitutional guarantees of his or her US citizenship . . . presenting us with the legal paradox of sovereign citizens who are at the same time colonial subjects if they choose to reside in ‘domestic dependent nations’ that comprise ‘Indian country.’ (Cheyfitz 413-14)

---

<sup>12</sup> For an in-depth explanation of this concept, see further Eric Cheyfitz’s article “The (Post)Colonial Predicament of Native American Studies”.

Therefore, the distinction and antagonism between the reservation and the “outside world” is complicated by the colonial situation that legally exists in Indian country. Leaving home, for a reservation Indian, is a very complex kind of leaving, one that implies a sacrifice of home and of the people of the home nation to the colonial situation.

Sherman Alexie, a Native author originally from the Spokane Indian Reservation, examines the intersections of the “Indian world” and the “white world” in much of his work. In an interview at the University of California, San Diego, Alexie said: “My reservation, unlike a lot of reservations especially here in Southern California, is very much a monoculture. About 97 percent of the people who live on the Spokane Indian Reservation are Indian and about 70 percent of those Indians are Spokane Indians” (*UCSD Guestbook*). Alexie, growing up in this Spokane monoculture, now interacts with and operates within mainstream American culture. His transnational Indian position allows him insight into both cultures from an outside perspective. In his work, one finds very strong tensions between inside and outside the reservation and the complications for a reservation Indian leaving home.

In *Smoke Signals* (directed by Chris Eyre, screenplay by Sherman Alexie), Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, two young Coeur d’Alene men, are leaving the reservation for the first time to retrieve Victor’s father, Arnold’s, ashes and possessions from Arnold’s home in Phoenix. Victor and Thomas catch a ride to the bus station with two young Coeur d’Alene women, Velma and Lucy. As the young men get out at the bus station, an exchange occurs that highlights the alienation of many reservation Indians with the “outside world”:



VELMA. You two guys got your passports?

THOMAS. Passports?

VELMA. Yeah. You're leavin' the rez and goin' into a whole different country, cousin.

THOMAS. But it's the United States.

LUCY. Damn right, it is. That's as foreign as it gets. Hope you two got your vaccinations. [Laughter from all]

This is a telling and humorous exchange highlighting the extreme otherness of reservation Indians in mainstream American culture. In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*, Sara Ahmed explains the significance of the designation of alien: "To be an alien in a particular nation, is to hesitate at a different border: the alien here is the one who does not belong in a nation space, and who is already defined as such by the Law. The alien is hence only a category within a given community of citizens or subjects: as the outsider inside, the alien takes on a spatial function, establishing relations of proximity and distance within the home(land)" (3). Although "alien" is a very specific legal term used to label certain people within the United States without citizenship, the larger connotations and Ahmed's theorization of the word certainly apply to reservation Indians because they are outsiders within. This can be seen by picking up any map of the United States and looking at states in the west; one will see clearly marked borders around reservation lands. If the difference is not marked physically on a reservation Indian's body, then the mark will be a cultural difference or some other recognizable colonial difference. However, American Indians have used this "alien" status to their

advantage. Harold Cardinal's term "buckskin curtain" describes the division of American Indians from outside, mainstream U.S. culture and society (Weaver 37). Natives have recognized and re-possessed the buckskin curtain as a way to protect themselves from the homogenizing force of dominant culture. It is an integral tool in the preservation of Native traditionalism.

Lucy's remark about vaccinations is also very intriguing. First of all, her observation insinuates a reference to the massive number of deaths caused among Native populations because of contact with European diseases. However, Lucy's comment also highlights First World anxieties about encountering Third World nations. Before U.S. and other First World citizens travel to Third World countries, they are highly encouraged to receive a series of vaccinations to protect themselves from the strange water and the foreign diseases lurking in the Third World. Lucy is reversing the trajectory warning the citizens of the Third World (albeit the Third World within) to protect themselves from the diseases carried by the outside and the foreign "America."

In *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Walter D. Mignolo analyzes the invasion of indigenous lands, knowledges, and lifestyles by the colonizing force of modernity. He argues: "The extended moment of conflict between people whose brain and skin have been formed by different memories, sensibilities, and belief between 1492 and today is the crucial historical intersection where the coloniality of power in the Americas can be located and unraveled" (17). This "moment of conflict" has been somewhat preserved by the reservations in the U.S., especially those reservations that remain relatively isolated. With the presence of

modern-day reservations, the memory of colonization and assimilation is undeniably apparent. The fact that these reservation lands exist at all emphasizes the inhumanity of Manifest Destiny and the dangerous determination of the vision of a civilized, westernized, and modernized United States. American Indians are one of the waste products of U.S. imperialism. In *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Zygmunt Bauman discusses how modernity, by its very nature and by its obsession with progress, “order-building,” and designing, is an eternal producer of waste:

The production of ‘human waste,’ or more correctly wasted humans (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant’, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* (each order casts some parts of the extant population as ‘out of place’, ‘unfit’ or ‘undesirable’) and of *economic progress* (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of ‘making a living’ and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood). (5)

Indigenous people in the Americas have been “undesirable” since 1492. Their lifestyle and mode of “making a living” were incommensurable with the vision of civilization and modernity. Therefore, colonizing and modernizing forces attempted (and continue to attempt) to eradicate indigenous people and their lifestyles. Survivors were herded onto specified lands and encouraged either to stay away from the white settlers or to assimilate

into the dominant culture. This “First Contact” was the primary version of order-building in the soon-to-be Americas. The consequences of modernization are felt profoundly on reservation lands. Not only are reservations full of wasted humans but also the material waste of massive production and consumption. “Plenary power” of the federal government makes it perfectly legal for the U.S. to pollute and degrade Indian land with uranium and radiation wastes, to name a few.

Alexie depicts the consequences of colonization in his work and specifically confronts the disposability of Indians in the U.S. In Alexie’s directorial debut, *The Business of Fancydancing*, the opening scene shows three grinning graduates from Wellpinit High School – Seymour Polatkin, Aristotle Joseph, and Mouse. Seymour and Aristotle are wearing matching “Valedictorian” sashes and are being filmed by Mouse as they outline their plans to go to college in Seattle, live together, and be “buddies forever.” Mouse turns the camera on himself and jokingly shares his future plans: “I got my G.E.D. I’m gonna work in the uranium mines.” This comment is a bit of Alexie’s characteristic dark humor that reveals painful realities. Native lands, allocated by the government, were usually seen as innately inferior; simply put, most reservation land is land that the United States government saw as unexploitable. After the Dawes Act in 1887, an act that was passed, according to Senator Henry M. Teller, in order to “get at the [remaining] Indian lands and open them to settlement” (qtd. in Trafzer 330), Indians were sometimes allowed to select their allotments from the already existing Native lands. “Often Indians selected allotments on lands that had held villages or had spiritual meaning to them, not necessarily the most productive farm lands” (Trafzer 330). Most Native land was and is

seen as disposable land to America's colonizing and capitalist goals. And if it was not innately disposable, it was rendered disposable by the federal practice of polluting the land. As Andrea Smith argues in *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*:

Marginalized communities suffer the primary brunt of environmental destruction so that other communities can remain in denial about the effects of environmental degradation. . . . It is not an accident that virtually all uranium production takes place on or near Indian land. Nor is it a coincidence that to date, more than 50 reservations have been targeted for waste dumps. Military and nuclear testing also takes place almost exclusively on Native lands. (57-8)

Disposable human beings are living on dumping grounds. The United States literally throws its trash in Native lands and tries to forget that there are consequences to modernization and "progress." It is then the wasted humans' jobs to manage this waste. As Bauman articulates: "The stage is set for the meeting of human rejects and the rejects of consumer feasts" (59).

## Part II: Raging to Survive

*And I think of the 6th Avenue jail, of mostly Native  
and Black men, where Henry told about being shot at  
eight times outside a liquor store in L.A., but when  
the car sped away he was surprised he was alive,  
no bullet holes, man, and eight cartridges strewn  
on the sidewalk  
all around him.*

*Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,  
but also the truth. Because who would believe  
the fantastic and terrible story of all our survival  
those who were never meant  
to survive?*

– Joy Harjo, “Anchorage”

What happens when an entire race of human beings is actively destroyed for nearly 500 years? What happens when this race of people actually survives despite every effort to the contrary – all of the genocide, assimilation, other destructive colonialist tactics, racism, and exploitation? The survivors harbor tremendous pain and loss...and tremendous and righteous rage. Alexie explores the manifestations of rage in his characters, especially in *The Business of Fancydancing*. It is interesting to remark here that *Smoke Signals*, a film of lesser quality in my opinion, is a much more popular mainstream film than *The Business of Fancydancing*. *Smoke Signals* was advertised as

“A new film from the heart of Native America.” The tagline itself hints at the film’s patience with non-Native audiences, at its willingness to educate the larger and ignorant public of the reality of reservation life. The film is much more light-hearted than the conglomeration of short stories it is adapted from. In a sense, it primed American audiences for films about Indians by Indians. The anger is muted and the retaliations for racism are non-violent and end in somewhat playful protests. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue: “The Eurocentrism of audiences can also inflect cinematic production. Here the dominant audience, whose ideological assumptions must be respected if a film is to be successful, or even made at all, exerts a kind of indirect hegemony” (186). They go on to argue that “[t]he taboo in Hollywood was . . . on images of racial anger, revolt, and empowerment” (203). Perhaps the “indirect hegemony” of the mainstream American audience affected the tone of *Smoke Signals*. *The Business of Fancydancing*, however, is much grittier. The mise-en-scene creates a much rawer and darker portrayal of reservation life. Alexie more aggressively confronts the harsher realities of “the heart of Native America.” The rage is palpable in this film, and, of course, rage makes people uncomfortable. Perhaps this is a reason why this much finer film is relatively unknown compared to its predecessor.

It is also interesting to note that in both films, the movement revolves around death. In *Smoke Signals* Victor and Thomas are leaving the reservation for the first time because of Arnold’s death. In *The Business of Fancydancing*, Seymour must return to the reservation after a decade-long absence in order to attend his old friend Mouse’s funeral. Seymour was born and raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation but has ambivalent

feelings about going “home.” His new home is a trendy apartment in Seattle with his white boyfriend. In these films, death is a motivating force. Death forces Victor and Thomas to temporarily survive in and confront the world outside of the reservation, and death forces Seymour to temporarily return to his first home, the reservation. In this act, Seymour is also forced to confront his past and the people that he has hurt on his path away from the reservation and toward a successful career as a poet. Aristotle left Seattle after two years of college and returned to the reservation. Seymour refused to go home with him, and they have not spoken since. Agnes, Seymour’s college girlfriend, made the reservation home for the first time after college and after she learned that Seymour was gay. She also made the reservation home because she is part Spokane and because she wanted to “get away from white people.”<sup>13</sup> By returning to the reservation, Seymour must also confront the animosity of most of his tribe because many feel as if he is exploiting their culture for his own gain and that he is co-opting stories that do not belong to him in order to sell them to the white world. In the article “Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony,” Paula Gunn Allen discusses the “protectiveness of native people . . . toward their traditions” (379). She uses an example from Ray Young Bear’s *Survival This Way*. Young Bear was attempting to collect traditional stories from American Indians to publish in an anthology on Indian folklore. “He wrote the publishers saying ‘there were a whole lot of Native American spiritual leaders throughout the United States who were becoming increasingly aware of people who were making profits out of Indian culture’” (qtd in Gunn Allen 380). Gunn Allen discusses matters of propriety within Native communities, saying that “[o]ne did not inquire about or tell about matters

---

<sup>13</sup> This comment is not found in the film; it is in a deleted scene titled “Agnes in the In-Between.”



that were not hers or his to know or discuss” (380). Thus, Seymour violates traditional cultural values in his art by exposing very personal and upsetting stories, many of which are not his stories to tell.

As Seymour crosses the border into the reservation, he pulls the car over to get a better look at the simple home-made sign reading: “Welcome to the Spokane Indian Reservation.” In smaller print it reads: “Home of Seymour Polatkin” and scrawled underneath this are the words: “Not Anymore.” This is a concrete and visual reminder to Seymour and to the viewer that Seymour does not belong on the reservation anymore. Seymour is both an insider and an outsider. He can return to the reservation; it is his home, but he chooses the outside. He has sacrificed the people of his tribe for his own success in the white world. Seymour, unlike many of his other Spokane kin, can function in the outside world. In fact, he thrives and the outside becomes a necessity to him. He needs the outside world and his predominantly white audience in order to succeed. But the outside is dangerous because it is homogenizing; his difference is celebrated as it is erased.<sup>14</sup> He is the Indian poet who becomes less Indian everyday. The entrance sign at the Spokane Reservation signals the precarious category of “home” for him. At home, there is a celebration and disavowal of him; he is greeted with a mixture of animosity and envy. To add to this complicated position, Seymour is a gay man. In the outside world, he is marginalized and discriminated against for this, but in his tribe he is considered a two-spirit. Traditionally, a two-spirit served an important role in the tribe as a helper and a healer; thus, a two-spirit was identified by what he or she contributed to the community (Wilson 222-23). Seymour has contributed nothing but a collection of personal and

---

<sup>14</sup> From a conversation with Katarzyna Marciniak.

painful stories from the Spokane for the dominant culture to consume and feel as if they now understand Indians.

Aristotle, Seymour, and Mouse are three of the main characters in the film and have markedly different strategies for exorcising their demons and expressing their rage. One of the most provocative scenes in the film occurs when Aristotle and Mouse are driving rather aimlessly through the back roads of the Pacific Northwest and decide to pull over and help a lost white man because, as Mouse jokingly remarks, “That’s the Indian way. Injuns helping lost white folk.” Aristotle pulls the car over; they exit the car and approach the white man. The white man, visibly unsure and uncomfortable, tries to make small-talk. Mouse is giving the white man a hard time and is being humorous at the white man’s expense, but Aristotle is eyeing the man aggressively and antagonistically. The tone of the scene moves abruptly from humorous and light-hearted to foreboding. Mouse has his hand-held video camera in this scene, which seems to be his trademark as it signals that it is important to him to document his Spokane culture and lifestyle. He wears a jacket that says “Still Alive to Tell the Tale,” and he lets the stories tell themselves through his camera documentation. His version of telling the stories of the Spokane is very different from Seymour’s version. Seymour’s stories are artistic productions that contort the facts for aesthetic affect – he chooses what to tell and how to tell it. Mouse simply records. Importantly, Seymour tells the stories from the comfort of his bourgeois Seattle home, while Mouse is still on Spokane Reservation. Mouse’s stories are from the reservation to the reservation, while Seymour’s stories are about the reservation for mainstream consumption.

The scene progresses by a series of match cuts that alternate between shots filmed through the 35 millimeter camera and shots filmed, ostensibly, through Mouse's hand-held camera. The effect, at first, highlights Mouse's playfulness. However, as the scene becomes more antagonistic through the encounter, the effect is one of fragmentation and confusion. The white man then says, "You guys, uh, you guys are Indian." His tone sounds a bit surprised. Mouse continues to joke around, while Aristotle continues to stare him down. The white man then starts to ask about getting a ride with them to which Mouse responds laughingly, "Hey, Ari, I think this guy thinks we're Sacagawea." Aristotle smiles into Mouse's camera, then turns and begins punching the white man repeatedly. Mouse tries to stop him, but Aristotle continues to punch. Then, Aristotle forces Mouse to participate by kicking the white man. After they stop the assault, Aristotle grabs Mouse's face affectionately. They smile at one another and yell joyously and victoriously into the air.

This scene is an example of what Ahmed calls a "strange encounter." Her analysis of strange encounters gives a context for understanding this violent scene:

Encounters are meetings, then, which are not simply in the present: each encounter reopens past encounters. . . . [T]he particular encounter both informs and is informed by the general: encounters between embodied subjects always hesitate between the domain of the particular – the face to face of this encounter – and the general – the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism. The particular encounter hence always carries *traces* of those broader relationships. Differences, as

markers of power, are not determined in the ‘space’ of the particular *or* the general, but in the very determination of their historical relation. (9)

This violent assault is informed by the historical relationship between whites and Natives in the U.S. There are reminders of the historical context embedded in the scene. While driving in the car before encountering the white man, Mouse says, “Things would be different if we were around when Columbus landed.” Later, while razzing the man, Mouse makes a reference to Sacagawea. These historical figures, only living in history books to the dominant culture, are very alive in the colonial memory of American Indians. Both of these figures were pivotal in the colonization of the U.S., either directly or indirectly, which led to the creation of Natives as waste. The reference to Sacagawea occurs directly before Aristotle begins to punch the white man. Why should Indians help white people? The historical evidence insinuates that by befriending and helping white people, the Natives helped to colonize and enslave their own people.

The strange encounter is also highlighted through the white man’s surprise at realizing that Mouse and Aristotle are Indians. His surprise emphasizes the infuriating reality of colonization that has rendered Natives an “endangered species.”<sup>15</sup> This comment by the white man positions Aristotle and Mouse, as Indians, to be “*stranger than other others*” (Ahmed 6). The encounter is informed by the binary of Self/Other because, as Frantz Fanon says, “The colonial world is a Manichean world” (6). Simone de Beauvoir’s articulation of the self/other binary, as male/female, is applicable to the position and experience of people of color as well: “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous

---

<sup>15</sup> This comment is in a deleted scene titled “Agnes in the In-Between.”

being. . . . He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. . . . the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object” (Beauvoir xxii-xxiii). In much of the world, the legacy of white supremacy encourages people to see the white race as superior, normal, and essential and to see racial minorities as inferior, abnormal, and inessential. In mainstream society, the voice of the white man is the dominant voice of the self, while the voices of racial minorities and women are primarily the voices of the other. The concept of the “other” is necessary for the creation of hierarchies because an other is absolutely crucial in order for a hierarchy to exist. The other has a fundamentally ambivalent nature that the self needs to control and, therefore, oppress. The white man in the scene is unburdened by his race; his race is almost invisible because of its perceived normality. The main reminder of whiteness is the unacknowledged white privilege that is taken for granted as default. People of color are the others to the white man, but Indians are the extreme others, the others that are hardly ever encountered in real-life and are only known through the performance of “Indian-ness” in the racist mainstream culture.

The most captivating element of this scene, however, is Aristotle’s profound and explosive rage at the world. The lost white man in the scene is an average, amiable guy; he has seemingly done nothing to anger Aristotle. But he represents the white world, the colonizer, and the white man’s apathy for the circumstances of modern Natives. Aristotle unleashes his pent-up rage onto this unsuspecting man, but, in doing so, he is also unleashing his rage at the white world in general. His rage is contextualized in a previous

scene<sup>16</sup> where he must defend his “distracting” test-taking apparel (traditional warrior clothing) to a pompous white bureaucrat at the Colonial Aptitude Testing Service after he graduated from high school and was preparing to enter college. Aristotle’s scores are not taken away because he passionately and aggressively defends himself, but as he leaves, the functionary says, “Joseph, you’re one of the bright ones” and winks. Aristotle cannot release any more rage at the white man in the office without jeopardizing his future. He must let the man have the last word, one coated in the vile spew of racism. Aristotle knows that the white world sees him as “just an injun from the reservation” and that he is an outsider that does not belong in college. This knowledge causes him to drop out of college after two years and head back to the reservation. The white man that Aristotle assaults represents everything that he hates about the white world. He has the opportunity to violently unleash his rage on an isolated highway, and he is now willing to jeopardize his future for this opportunity because he does not have much to lose.

As bell hooks argues in *Killing Rage*: “In these times most folks associate black rage with the *underclass*, with desperate and despairing black youth who in their hopelessness feel no need to silence unwanted passions. Those of us black folks who have ‘made it’ have for the most part become skilled at repressing our rage” (12). The repression of minority rage is facilitated from inside the minority communities and outside in dominant culture. As Katarzyna Marciniak explains in “Immigrant Rage: Alienhood, ‘Hygienic’ Identities, and the Second World,” “immigrant rage is an expression consistently silenced because its acknowledgement might be threatening to the

---

<sup>16</sup> The film has constant flashbacks to different times and places. The present of the film is the diegesis of Seymour living in Seattle but returning to the reservation for Mouse’s funeral. The assault scene, then, is a flashback, and the scene at the Colonial Aptitude Testing Service is an even more remote flashback.

one who voices it and to the larger cultural apparatus that insists on aliens feeling grateful that they can reside in the ‘New World’” (34). This explanation of immigrant rage is applicable to minority rage in that minorities are expected to be thankful for their status as U.S. citizens and thankful for the opportunity to partake in the American Dream. I have heard people genuinely argue that African Americans are better off than most Africans and should be glad that they were brought to America, even if they had to survive slavery in order to gain the “privilege.” American Indians, however, were already here. They are the true, native Americans, yet were denied as such from the very beginning of European conquest. Ali Behdad asserts this through his textual analysis of an early European travelogue of North America Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*: “Tocqueville is in part able to cover over this contradiction [the existence of people in the New World yet the land was considered empty] by espousing a Lockean notion of property and arguing that land in the New World was unclaimed before the arrival of Europeans whose ‘labor’ gave them a right to claim it” (55). Also, the logic of U.S. imperialism and the myth of the American Dream would entail an understanding of Aristotle as a person who has all of the same opportunities as any other U.S. citizen; he even likely received government assistance through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). This logic would necessitate Aristotle’s thankfulness for an opportunity to be educated in the U.S. and to become a great practitioner of western medicine. But Aristotle did not “make it” and feels no need to mute his rage. He ignored the white bureaucrat’s racist comment because he had something to lose then. He had plans to become a pediatrician. But those plans vanished years ago, and his dreams were shattered by the white

supremacist culture. He never took the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm, and he harms this man as an act of retaliation and as a way to expel some of his overwhelming rage. His violent act is an act of retribution in his eyes, an act of long-overdue justice that does not nearly settle the score. Aristotle, too, looks the most “Indian” of the three friends from the reservation. He can look rather stoic and intimidating. He represents the minority rage that a white supremacist culture has always been so afraid of and has tried to exterminate at all costs.

Alexie, in the director’s commentary for the film, says that this scene is usually the most misunderstood and controversial incident in the film and that white audiences are usually dumbfounded as to why Aristotle and Mouse would commit such a violent act. His response is: “What does it say about you that you wouldn’t think Indians, after our long history of pain and terror in this country, would somehow still have a little bit of animosity.” The response from white audiences highlights white denial. By his response, Alexie refuses the burden of explaining the rage and places the burden of understanding squarely back onto the shoulders of the audience. As hooks explains: “Close to white folks, I am forced to witness firsthand their willful ignorance about the impact of race and racism. The harsh absolutism of their denial. Their refusal to acknowledge accountability for racist conditions past and present” (17). This denial and willful ignorance are not simply individual choices, they are institutions. The education system in the U.S. teaches children that *their* nation is the greatest, strongest, and most benevolent nation on Earth. It teaches them that our wars are just and that our motives are virtuous. Couched in the façade of democratic equality, the United States creates and perpetuates a benevolent



myth while it performs the reality of modernization and progress at all costs. According to Behdad, contradiction and forgetfulness were necessary to the creation of “America”:

[Tocqueville’s *Democracy* is] a forgetful history of nation building [...that] portrays North America contradictorily as fertile and barren, hospitable and hostile, empty and occupied, contradictions [...] that are discursively necessary because they cater to both the religious idea of America as a providential gift to chosen people and the secular idea of a superior human race transforming a hostile wilderness into an earthly paradise. (53-55)

The logic of imperialism is self-referential—it justifies itself through its own myth.

Mainstream U.S. history about Indians is even more disturbing in that it focuses mostly on traditional Indian cultures—celebrating their art, their oral traditions, their way of life—cultures that have been actively mutilated for 500 years by the very institutions that now celebrate them. Never in public school in Indiana did I learn about the massive genocide of American Indians by the United States government. Never did I learn that when outright mass murder became out-of-vogue, our government resorted to a policy of exterminating their culture through forced assimilation. I did not learn any of these facts until I started college and purposefully educated myself on these topics and sought out classes dealing with Native America. There are few mainstream books or museums honoring those Indians who died as a result of genocide; unlike the genocide of the Jews

by the Nazis, U.S. genocide is concealed.<sup>17</sup> The assault scene is followed directly by a shot of a Native woman singing a beautiful and profoundly sad song, a Native song presumably because the words are not English. This shot links the violence and the rage concretely with intense sorrow, sorrow at the unacknowledged horrors that Native people have been forced to endure.

The internal and external expressions of rage create crucial differences between the characters. Mouse internalizes his rage and, in this way, is feminized because, as Andrea Dworkin argues, “in a patriarchal system, ‘men are distinguished from women by their commitment to do violence rather than to be victimized by it’” (qtd. in Smith 22). Mouse does not willingly assault the man on the side of the road like Aristotle; rather he must be forced to hurt him. Aristotle yells at Mouse, “Hit him or I’m gonna hit you.” Although Mouse must be pressured by Aristotle, he seemingly enjoys the physically and emotionally cathartic expression of his rage. He celebrates happily with Aristotle after the assault ends, his face glowing with laughter. His rage is not gone; it is just repressed to the point of non-articulation. Mouse’s rage is turned in on himself. Aristotle’s violent act and Seymour’s poetry are external expressions of anger and represent the destruction of others. When Aristotle beats up the white man, he is performing a fantasy, one in which he destroys the colonizer. Seymour’s expresses his wrath through his poetry. But his expression is co-opted and celebrated by mainstream culture at the expense of his tribe—their stories become his catharsis and his ticket to a comfortable life in the outside world.

---

<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the holocaust that the U.S. is founded upon and the persistent denial of this genocide, see Ward Churchill’s *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present*.

Mouse, on the other hand, destroys himself instead of destroying others. Much of this internalization of rage can be seen through Mouse's substance abuse problems. Aristotle and Seymour are alcoholics, as well, but one sees them "on the wagon" in the present of the film. Mouse, in the present, is dead. He died of an accidental or purposeful overdose. Hooks asserts: "Addictions of all sorts, cutting across class, enable black folks to forget, take the pain and rage away, replacing it with dangerous apathy and hard-heartedness. Addictions promote passive acceptance of victimization" (17). Mouse, in many ways, is the most likable character in the film. He is a sensitive and intelligent musician with a great sense of humor. But he is also the most submissive character, embodying the "passive acceptance of victimization." He never plans to leave the reservation and internalizes all of the negativity directed towards his race. Mouse is also the most tortured addict in the film.

One scene that illustrates the intensity of Mouse's desperation and pain is preceded by a black-screen shot with the words: "How to make a bathroom cleaner sandwich." The viewer is then faced with a close-up shot of Mouse's face. He looks tortured and miserably inebriated. The lighting is dark, and it looks as if Mouse is in some sort of subterranean dwelling, perhaps a basement. The non-diegetic sound is an eerie, unsettling, almost electronica song. The viewer is put into a small space with Mouse and must face him. The music adds to the claustrophobic feel of the scene. The only way to deny Mouse's uncomfortably intense pain is to look away. Mouse then sprays bathroom cleaner onto a piece of white bread, folds the bread in half, and takes a bite of the concoction. His eyes glaze over; his head falls back, and he coughs several

times as he chokes down the toxic chemicals. One is rendered helpless as one is forced to witness Mouse's extreme desperation. Mouse is performing what the federal government has been doing for years to American Indians—he is putting toxic chemicals into his body and is effectively poisoning himself. Mouse, who in the opening scene only half-jokingly says that he will work in the uranium mines, is actively toxifying himself instead of indirectly absorbing the toxins through the environment around him that is polluted by the government. Mouse, in this act, is performing the complete and literal internalization of racism. He represents the self-destruction that some wasted humans have resorted to after years and years of hopelessness.

Mouse's name is of importance in the analysis of this scene, as well. A mouse is a rather timid and harmless creature and a creature that is conventionally viewed as a pest. Mouse, the character, embodies these characteristics. Native Americans throughout history and today are often viewed as pests by the colonizers. Historically, Natives were considered vermin in the way of a grand and civilized "America," its Manifest Destiny. And pests are often eradicated. In this scene, one sees Mouse doing the work for the colonizer in the destruction of himself. In the scene of the assault of the white man, Aristotle forces Mouse to kick the white man and yells, "Stop being a mouse and be a man!" Aristotle is criticizing Mouse's passivity and encouraging him to reject his namesake and expel his rage. Mouse does expel his rage and enjoys it. But, unfortunately, the effect is only temporary. During the assault scene Mouse is wearing his jacket that says, "Still Alive to Tell the Tale." Sadly, he is not still alive and his story has been silenced by self-destruction. The white man may be bloody and beaten by the Indians, but

the Indian is eating bathroom cleaner and ultimately dies. The long-lasting effects of colonization are still more dangerous and deadly than two angry Indians physically releasing their rage.

The scene then cuts to shots of an urban nightclub full of “urban-looking” people. Strobe lights accentuate the dancers, two of whom are Aristotle and Mouse. Aristotle is dressed in a leather jacket with fringe and Mouse has his violin. The abrupt editing, which links two different spaces, initially discombobulates the viewer, but it eventually serves to stress the fact that Aristotle and Mouse were never really at this club. This is a hallucinatory space. These imagined dance shots highlight Aristotle and Mouse’s distance from Seymour’s urban life and the outside world in general—they can be there only in a hallucination. The isolation is expounded by the connection to the previous shots where Mouse is ingesting bathroom cleaner. Mouse does this in an effort to kill the pain and to become even more incoherent and intoxicated by some substance, any substance that he can get his hands on. Bathroom cleaner is what he finds, which symbolically bespeaks the extreme poverty on the Spokane Reservation and its distance from urban centers. Drugs, under these circumstances, can be hard to come by. On the contrary, in the imagined scene, Aristotle and Mouse are in an urban club presumably in Seattle. In this environment, drugs are much more accessible. Therefore, club frequenters may ingest substances in an effort to get away from the outside world, but their drugs are “cleaner.” They do not need to resort to eating bathroom cleaner. The haves and have-nots of classism certainly apply to drugs, as well.

Seymour's rage manifests in his poetry. At one point in the narrative, he imagines himself screaming painfully at Mouse's funeral, but instead he remains silent and walks out. This is the only time one sees Seymour engaging in any real physical expression of rage. He does seem to be very cynical, a substitute for rage. But, as hooks elaborates: "Those of us black people who have the opportunity to further our economic status willingly surrender our rage. . . . We experience the world as infinitely less hostile . . . This shift happens particularly as we buy into liberal individualism and see our individual fate as black people in no way linked to the collective fate" (16-17). Seymour does not surrender his rage; instead he uses it to his advantage. Seymour is an example of Bauman's idea of a recycled human. His original reservation Spokane Indian identity is turned into his art so that Seymour may be recycled into a usable human being. He is usable because his work is adored by bourgeois liberals who can participate in the trendy multiculturalism by reading a gay native poet, a man doubly oppressed by a white supremacist, heteronormative culture. Therefore, Seymour has turned his marks of difference into his commodity. He has commodified himself and the stories of his former Spokane friends. Perhaps if he used his success and his celebrity to the benefit of his tribe, he would not be rejected by them. But his artistic expression is, ultimately, quite solipsistic.

One very interesting technique used in the film is something that Alexie refers to as the "in-between." The in-between scenes occur in an unidentified time and space. Everything is black, the background, the foreground; it is seemingly an all-black room. There each character must face-off with an aggressive interviewer. (Aristotle, Agnes, and

Seymour, that is. Mouse never has a turn in the in-between.) The in-between scenes are placed throughout the film, and Seymour is there more than once. The in-between operates as a sort of trial for every character, a conscience built into the movie that points out the flaws and hypocrisies of every character. In Seymour's final in-between scene, he starts by saying, in an affected tone, that "the rez is equal parts magic and loss." The interviewer, an assertive black woman, responds: "Well, I've got some magic statistics right here. The average income among reservation Indians is less than 10,000 dollars a year. The average lifespan of a reservation Indian man is 49 years." She continues to list statistics painting a bleak picture of life for the average reservation Indian. Seymour's response is very telling: "And what does this have to do with me?" Here one sees that Seymour has bought into "liberal individualism" and sees his own fate as not linked to the collective fate of reservation Indians (hooks 16-17). He is out for himself and no longer sees himself as connected to his tribe. The interviewer goes on to juxtapose the reservation statistics with the fact that Seymour charges a 10,000 dollar lecture fee. All the while, the camera is circling the two, causing a sense of antagonism but also allowing the viewer to see Seymour's facial expressions along with the interviewers' unaffected expression. The exchange continues:

INTERVIEWER. Let me get your response to this: The Jewish writer, Primo Levi, while writing about the Nazi death camps, he said: "It wasn't the best people who survived. You must remember," he wrote, "it was the liars, cheaters, and thieves who survived."

SEYMOUR. Is there a question in there?

INTERVIEWER. Are you a liar?

SEYMOUR. I already told you I'm a liar.

INTERVIEWER. Are you a cheater?

SEYMOUR. No.

INTERVIEWER. A thief?

SEYMOUR. [smiling] N..No. How about the whores? How did the  
whores do?

INTERVIEWER. Evidently pretty well. How long has it been since you  
left the reservation?

Seymour goes on to tell of his sister's death during his childhood; she was accidentally shot by a teenage Indian boy. The loss profoundly affected Seymour's family, causing great despair. He tells how his mother gave him a dictionary that Christmas and told him that he could get off of the reservation. This comment highlights the idea that an intelligent Spokane, at least in Seymour's family, is expected to leave the reservation. Seymour is visibly upset and barely holding back his grief, but the interviewer still remains unaffected. He goes on to say: "So don't tell me what I can write. And don't tell me what I can remember. And don't tell me how to live. I'll be a hard-ass whore if I wanna be." Seymour is making this proclamation not only to the interviewer but to himself and the Spokane people who have renounced him for his bourgeois lifestyle and his means for achieving that lifestyle.

In this scene, Seymour refers to himself as a whore. As I mentioned earlier, he has commodified himself—Seymour is literally selling himself in order to survive in the



outside world. In fact, the title of the film conveys the idea that he has made a business out of the traditional and tribal parts of his life. He says that he tries to write poems that are not about the reservation, but he never succeeds. He may be able to physically leave, but the reservation is always inside of him. He left his Indian home and can never really return because of his betrayal. But he is not at home in the dominant society, either—he will always be an Indian to the outside world, an exotic stranger who is defined by his ethnicity as different.

### Conclusion

*This is what Columbus / truly discovered: / in the absence / of enemies, / we destroy our beloved.*<sup>18</sup>

The transnational, in today's climate of celebrating globalization and multiculturalism, is often fashioned as cosmopolitan and chic. "[A] 'benevolent' and apolitical form of multiculturalism was adopted by corporations and media conglomerates across borders, continents, and virtual space. This global transcultural artificially softened the otherwise sharp edges of cultural difference, fetishizing them in such a way as to render them desirable" (Gomez-Peña 49). Seymour tries to produce thought-provoking art, and he does. But he is also fetishized by his mostly white audience, and he holds some resentment toward his fans. In an exchange between Seymour and his white boyfriend, Steven, before a poetry reading, they both make fun of the ignorant audience. Steven asks in a mockingly fake tone, "Mr. Indian poet, were your parents literate?" Seymour's ethnic body becomes consumable to mainstream culture.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Written by Sherman Alexie but attributed to Seymour Polatkin in the film.

<sup>19</sup> Insight by Katarzyna Marciniak.

The reality of transnationality is often very confusing and painful for those forced transnational subjects. Natives straddling the border between the traditional Native lifestyle on the reservation and the modernized outside world must learn to operate in two very different cultures. Home becomes a very complicated idea when the old home is no longer a viable option and the new home is a world where one is a “fetishized stranger,” to use one of Ahmed’s terms: “Stranger fetishism is a fetishism of figures” (Ahmed 5); it is a sort of commodification of identity.

Seymour leaves behind his Spokane tribe. Throughout the film, one sees intermittent shots of Seymour and others fancydancing and shawl-dancing. These shots remind the viewer of their traditional Spokane identity. However, at the end of the film, one sees Seymour tearing off his fancydancing clothes; this signifies the end of tribalism for him.<sup>20</sup> Transnationality is an impossibility. He chose the outside world, sacrificing his Spokane kin to their own status as colonials. He has accepted the Western concept of rugged individualism and has forsaken his Spokane tribe. By leaving the reservation, he is able to relinquish his colonial status, but this is at the expense of his Native nation. One must recall that “if an Indian remains on the reservation . . . she or he is constrained to live under the colonial regime of federal Indian law without the constitutional guarantees of his or her US citizenship” (Cheyfitz 413). Indian nations are legally acted upon as a group on reservation land. The federal law had created a situation for American Indians that allows for them to leave home at the expense of their nation on the reservation; the law attempts to require self-interest over communal interest through the act of leaving and staying gone. Seymour, in many ways, embodies this traitor-like leave-taking.

---

<sup>20</sup> Alexie explains this in the director’s commentary.

The character who is presented least critically is Agnes. Agnes presumably grew up in the dominant society with a Jewish mother and Spokane father. She meets Seymour in college and dates him until he admits to her that he is a homosexual. Agnes functions well in the outside world. She completes college and even supports Seymour while he is in school. However, after their break-up and after she finishes school, Agnes goes to the Spokane Reservation to teach at the school and make the reservation her home. She uses her education and her experience in dominant society to help the reservation. She *chooses* the reservation even though she did not grow up there; she chooses the reservation, the colonial situation, the Spokane tribe over the white world. Her trajectory is quite the opposite of Seymour's, and she is represented in a much more positive way. Ultimately, she rejects her inherited transnationality. Her movement from an individual citizen in mainstream society to a citizen of a 'domestic dependent nation' is seen as advantageous for her and the Spokane community.

The reservation is a product of colonialism, imperialism, and cultural and literal genocide. Despite these negative associations, it is still the only real home for many American Indians. As forced colonials, the strangers within, Natives have a complicated and strained relationship with the U.S. but also with each other. Seymour betrays the loyalty and solidarity required by his tribe on the Spokane Indian Reservation, and thus can no longer call it home. His exile and his commodification are the prices that he must pay to live in the mainstream U.S. Instead of fellow Indians supporting Seymour, he is met with vitriolic protests. He is transformed into the enemy because the real enemies are absent. Rage cannot be released upon the predominant white culture when

the white culture is so far away. Seymour is wounded by Native rage turned in on itself. Bell hooks explains how growing up in the apartheid South taught blacks that releasing their rage to white people could be deadly. Instead rage was repressed or “reserved for life at home – for one another” (14). Or as Frantz Fanon says, “The colonized subject will first train this aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people” (15). This seems to be true in Alexie’s representation of reservation Indians, but this is also complicated because of Seymour’s choice of the outside world over his Spokane nation. In other words, perhaps Seymour deserves the rage directed at him<sup>21</sup>.

Rage is not simply an emotion; it is a force, a living entity. American Indians have a multitude of very good reasons to be angry, and all of this anger cannot just vanish into thin air. Political action and artistic expression are positive outlets for rage, and they are cathartic and meaningful in and of themselves. Hooks says: “Progressive black activists must show how we take that rage and move it beyond fruitless scapegoating of any group, linking it instead to a passion for freedom and justice that illuminates, heals, and makes redemptive struggle possible” (20). I agree with hooks but feel that a movement of redemptive struggle incorporating rage must also be aware of the extreme measures that the state will enact in order to protect the status quo—white supremacy, patriarchy, and class elitism—and to suppress the expression of minority rage in any context. Those individuals at the top of our social hierarchy will not change without a fight, and the apathy of a nation cannot be replaced with passion for justice very easily. No illusions can be harbored.

---

<sup>21</sup> Importantly, Alexie plays a small role in the film as a reservation man. He criticizes Seymour with other some of the other Indians who live on the reservation.

Citizens of the United States operating within the dominant culture are trained to disavow rage and not use violence; we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, but there is no Malcolm X Day. The only violence that is acceptable is violence committed by the state. And American Indians, along with other marginalized people, have been the victims of this state violence for hundreds of years. According to Fanon: “decolonization is always a violent event. . . . colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted by greater violence” (1, 23). Thus, the only acts that colonialism recognizes are violent ones. The representations of rage and violence in *The Business of Fancydancing* are so profound for several reasons: Alexie effectively represents how violence becomes an inevitability because of the inherited history of genocide. He also represents how violence expelled outwardly toward a white man is a healing and cathartic event for Aristotle and Mouse. According to Fanon: “At an individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence. . . . The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the militant because it shows him the means and the end” (51, 44). Violence is necessary to combat the violence of colonialism; it is a direct result that cannot be avoided.

The film ends with Seymour leaving the Spokane reservation, presumably for the last time; he has made his choice and cannot come back. He sees Aristotle out of the back window of his car doing a victory dance. And, truly, Aristotle is right in this victory dance. He has the love and support of his Spokane kin. He is on the reservation everyday

trying to make good choices, trying to stay sober, playing with the Spokane kids, with the goal of making life better for his tribe. He tried to help Mouse expel his rage and pain outwardly, to get rid of it somehow before it consumed him. Ultimately, Aristotle and Agnes are taking the more virtuous, less selfish path—they are not doing only for themselves but also for their tribe. They are rejecting their forced transnationality and choosing the reservation. Although Seymour's path may be difficult, he is only concerned with his own survival. And he shows very little remorse for this abandonment because he feels as if he has made it completely on his own. In a heated exchange with Aristotle, Seymour explains: "I deserved a better life than I was born into. But I made it better with nobody's help. Including shit from you. I got no help from any of these goddamn Indians here. I had to do it myself." But Aristotle's reply highlights the narrowness of Seymour's idea of help: "You write about these goddamn Indians! Tellin' me you did it yourself! These Indians that you write about, they're helping you everyday, each and every one of them. Every house, every story, every poem. They're helping you. Telling me you had nobody. We've been helping you since you were born." And Aristotle is right. Seymour's tribe has helped him more than his work has ever helped them. In fact, many members of his tribe feel as if Seymour's work harms them because it exploits their pain and their loss for his monetary gain. Seymour has become an enemy from within, like a crooked BIA official. He is becoming an apple—red on outside (especially in his work), but white on the inside.

CHAPTER 2: “THE KILLER GAZES SKYWARD AND SCREECHES:”<sup>22</sup> THE  
INTERSECTIONS OF RAGE AND MYTH IN SHERMAN ALEXIE’S *INDIAN  
KILLER*

Introduction

Sherman Alexie’s second novel, *Indian Killer*, is part murder-mystery and part cathartic exploration of colonial tactics, complexities of identity, and decolonizing strategies. One of the primary characters, John Smith, is an American Indian who is adopted as a baby by a white couple, Daniel and Olivia Smith. Throughout the novel, one sees John attempting to understand and reclaim his American Indian heritage, but his attempts are futile because he is an Indian without a tribe: “The adoption agency refused to divulge John’s tribal affiliation and sealed all of his birth records, revealing only that John’s birth mother was fourteen years old” (12). According to Alexie, John represents a “‘lost bird,’ a term used to refer to ‘Indians adopted out by non-Indian families’” (qtd. in Van Styvendale 210). Through the bureaucratic agencies acting on Indian reservations, the United States has and continues to act as the colonizer of Indians and Indian resources. As in *The Business of Fancydancing*, *Indian Killer* again portrays the consequences of the colonial situation on American Indians on and off of reservations.

John’s difficult situation is entangled with politics of paternalism and white supremacy, ideals upon which this nation is founded. In *A Forgetful Nation* Ali Behdad explains how perpetual acts of historical amnesia are necessary for the existence of the myth of America, an America of equal opportunity and democracy:

---

<sup>22</sup> Line from *Indian Killer* (420).

This benign myth of democratic founding refuses to acknowledge how the formation of the American polity was achieved through the violent conquest of Native Americans [...] It is not that the official history of the nation denies the occurrence of these violent acts; rather, it denies responsibility for them and ignores their historical implications for how the nation was founded, by considering them aberrations from America's exceptionalist path. Historical disavowal here takes the form of a retreat from truth to omnipotence, in which the nation does not deny the gradual destruction of the indigenous population but refuses to take responsibility for it or feel guilty about it. (8)

John's situation is totally entangled with this sort of historical forgetting. John's adoption is a neocolonial form of the Indian boarding school system. The goal of the boarding school system was to replace extermination with assimilation. The same goal is fulfilled through the adoption of Indian babies to white parents. Andrea Smith explains in *Conquest*:

[T]he abduction of Native children from their homes has continued through the foster care system. In 1978, Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), which allows tribes to determine the placement of children taken from their homes. During the congressional hearings for this act, Congress reported that 25 percent of all Indian children were in either foster care, adopted homes, or boarding schools. (41).



The historical amnesia of the masses is necessary for this sort of neocolonial tactic to persist. The conquest of Indian children has been and still is couched in the façade of paternalistic benevolence. As the adoption agent explains to Olivia and Daniel Smith: “The mother is very young, barely into her teens. She’s making the right decision. . . . The best place for this baby is with a white family. The child will be saved a lot of pain by growing up in a white family” (Alexie 10). As Alexie’s novel clearly shows, John experiences a lot of pain *because* of growing up in a white family.

John’s name itself points to the presence of historical amnesia. Olivia and Daniel are well-meaning, nice, loving, and patient parents – Alexie deliberately presents the reader with an “ideal” adoptive situation. But they are clueless as to how they should raise an American Indian boy. Olivia researches different American Indian tribes and even learns a few words in several Native languages. They try their best, but they are tragically inadequate, and his name signals this inadequacy. Of course, the famous John Smith was an English colonizer who helped established and maintain the first colony of Jamestown. In *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow and Rivers Shall Flow*, Clifford E. Trafzer explains Smith’s role in more detail:

[T]he English repaid the Pamunkeys [for their help during the winter when they saved the English from starvation] and their neighbors for their generosity in 1608 by taking a military stance against the Indians. Captain John Smith, a soldier who had fought ‘infidel’ Turks, advocated a military solution to the so-called Indian problem, not the peaceful solution portrayed in Disney’s *Pocahontas*. Smith’s Indian Policies encouraged

many Pamunkeys and other Indians to keep their distance from Jamestown. (65)

Smith also made the map that the Pilgrims used to sail to Plymouth (Trafzer 70). He was an aggressive colonizer who inspired other English people to come to the New World and aided them in their journey. He was also a traitor to the Indian people who helped save him and the other settlers in Jamestown. Smith was no friend of the Indians. Olivia and Daniel ignorantly name their Indian son John Smith. In one of his many trips to search for his son, Daniel ventures into an area of Seattle where many homeless people congregate. He finds a homeless Indian man, referred to as the wheelchair Indian, and asks him if he has seen his son: “He’s Indian. A big guy. Talks to himself” (218). Daniel provides more information, including how a white man comes to father an Indian son. The wheelchair Indian’s reply is very telling: “You adopted an Indian kid and named him John Smith? No wonder he talks to himself. . . . But I don’t know a John Smith. Ain’t nobody knows any Indian named John Smith. Ain’t no such thing. You must have dreamed him up” (219). The Indian man’s response highlights Daniel and Olivia’s ignorance and brings to light John’s authenticity or lack thereof. How can an Indian man exist who is named John Smith? How can an Indian man be raised by two white parents? He is split between the colonized and the colonizer. His appearance marks him as Indian while his name harkens back to English colonialism. John, in light of the homeless man’s comment, must cease to be Indian or must cease to exist.

### Part I: Longing for a Brown Mother

John is, understandably, very angry, but his anger is muted because he does not know how to express it. Much of John's rage can be traced back to his displacement, his Indian ethnicity and identity forced into a white environment. In this way, John is symbolic of American Indian dislocation. Colonizers usurped Native lands; thus, like John himself, Indians are stuck in a white environment, a country that has as the majority the white race and privileges this race. As part of the colonization of the Americas and creation of white privilege, indigenous values had to be systematically replaced by EuroAmerican values. The concept of gender equality and the importance of women to the functioning of the tribe are a few of the traditional values explored in *Indian Killer*. M. Annette Jaimes and Theresa Halsey's article "American Indian Women: At the Center of Indigenous Resistance in Contemporary North America" and the first chapter of Mary Crow Dog's *Lakota Woman* begin the same way. Both texts use a traditional Cheyenne proverb as their epigraph: "A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is done, no matter how brave its warriors nor how strong their weapons" (Jaimes 311, Crow Dog 3). The centrality of women to the indigenous tribes of this country was quite foreign and quite frightening to the colonizers. Andrea Smith explores the role of the institution of patriarchy in the colonization of indigenous people:

Paula Gunn Allen argues that colonizers realized that in order to subjugate indigenous nations they would have to subjugate the women within these nations. Native peoples had to learn the value of hierarchy, the role of physical abuse in maintaining that hierarchy, and the importance of

women remaining submissive to their men [...] Thus in order to colonize a people whose society was not hierarchical, colonizers must first naturalize hierarchy through instituting patriarchy. Patriarchal gender violence is the process by which colonizers inscribe hierarchy and domination on the bodies of the colonized. (23)

In order to understand the magnitude of this insight, one must understand the significance of Native women in pre-contact societies

Many, if not most, pre-contact societies valued women more than their EuroAmerican colonizers and did not have patriarchal societies. Balance in all things, including gender, was the goal in most traditional Native cultures (Jaimes 319), thus the frequent presence of what one could call egalitarian societies. According to Jaimes and Halsey's reading of Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop*, "traditional native societies were never 'male dominated' and there were likely no 'warrior cultures' worthy of the name before the European invasion" (315). However, when wars did occur, women did fight. Some tribes had female leaders, for example, the Narragansett in the northeast of what is now the U.S. Many tribes had a group of women who were central to any decision-making that occurred (Jaimes 316-17). Jaimes and Halsey go on to explain the economic independence of traditional women, who often owned "all or most property" (318). They also discuss the common presence of female spiritual leaders and the "abundant presence of feminine elements within their [indigenous religions'] cosmologies" (319). However, most importantly to the discussion of *Indian Killer* is the

centrality of the mother, and an overwhelming degree of importance was placed on the mother in many indigenous societies:

While patrilineal/patrilocal cultures did exist, most precontact North American civilizations functioned on the basis of matrilineage and matrilocality. Insofar as family structures centered upon the identities of wives rather than husbands—men joined women’s families, not the other way around—and because men were usually expected to relocate to join the women they married, the context of native social life was radically different from that which prevailed (and prevails) in European and Euro-derived cultures. (Jaimes 318)

Furthermore, according to Bea Medicine, a Hunkpapa Lakota scholar, “[Women] are primary socializers of our children. Culture is transmitted primarily through the mother. The mother teaches languages, attitudes, beliefs, behavior patterns, etc.” (qtd. in Jaimes 319). In traditional Native societies, the mother was primarily responsible for the molding of the children; she was the one shaping the identity of the next generation.

One could say that with European colonization, the brown mother was replaced, metaphorically and literally, by the white father, the U.S. government composed of white men. Metaphorically, the values of Native tribes that centered heavily on the mother were replaced by European values that gave all power to the father. Literally, however, Native children have been and still are abducted from their Indian homes and placed with white families (Smith 41), the defense being that these removals are in the best interest of the child. Thus, the true motives of these acts are hidden behind the façade of paternal

benevolence. Dominant society decides on the standards of “best interest” and, thus, privileges mainstream lifestyles and punishes alternative child-rearing:

Many Indian children are placed in foster homes. This happens even in some cases where parents or grandparents are willing and able to take care of them, but where the social workers say their homes are substandard, or where there are outhouses instead of flush toilets, or where the family is simply ‘too poor.’ A flush toilet to a white social worker is more important than a good grandmother. So the kids are given to wasičun [white] strangers to be ‘acculturated in a sanitary environment.’ We are losing the coming generation that way and do not like it. (Crow Dog 17)

Jaimes and Halsey discuss the prevalence of placing Indian children with white families and how this is a direct assault on the power of Indian women:

Throughout the 20th century, new federal policies have been formulated to target the power of American Indian women specifically, usually within their traditional capacity as familial anchors. One evidence of this has been the systematic and persistent forced transfer of Indian children into non-Indian custody . . . As of 1974, the Association of American Indian Affairs estimated between 25 and 35 percent of all native youth were either adopted by EuroAmericans, placed in non-Indian foster homes, or permanently housed in institutional settings, while another 25 percent were ‘temporarily’ placed in government or church-run boarding schools each year. (326)

The ICWA forced changes in the foster care system and its dealings with Native families. “Nonetheless, ICWA is not consistently enforced since many case workers are unaware of its provisions. . . . As of 2002, 60 percent of the children who are in Alaska foster care are Native, while Natives are only 25 percent of the population” (Smith 42). The politics of adoption are already operating on an unbalanced scale with one party being encouraged by social norms to give away their child and the other party regarded as more qualified, more desirable parents by government agencies. When one intersects this already discriminatory practice with a colonial relationship fraught with outright genocide and pervasive efforts at assimilation, the foster care system’s concern for the best interest of the child seems not only insincere but impossible.

The replacement of the brown mother by the white father is largely enacted by white women, the “ideal” mother in a white supremacist culture. Throughout *Indian Killer* one sees John longing for his Indian mother. In the first chapter, “Mythology,” he imagines his transfer from the “jumpsuit man” flying the helicopter, a symbol for the nameless in-betweens acting on behalf of the government, and his new white mother:

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 breast with pink nipples. John’s birth mother had small, brown breasts and brown nipples, though he never suckled at them. Still, he knows there is a difference, and as John takes the white woman’s right nipple into his mouth and pulls at her breast, he discovers it is empty.

Daniel Smith wraps his left arm around his wife's shoulders. He grimaces briefly and then smiles. (7-8)

In this passage, Olivia's breasts become symbolic of her as a mother. Her breast is the "ideal" white breast, large and pale with pink nipples because Olivia represents the ideal white woman and, thus, the ideal white mother – very beautiful, well-behaved, and accepting of the status quo:

All her life, her decisions had been made for her. She was meant to graduate from high school, get into a good college, find a suitable young man, earn a B.A. in art history, marry, and never work. Somewhere between reading a biography of van Gogh and fixing dinner, she was supposed to have a baby. Except for producing that infant, she had done what was expected of her, had fulfilled the obligations of her social contract. (11)

To a patriarchal, white supremacist society, Olivia is the ideal who must have a baby, even if she cannot biologically, while John's biological mother, a young Indian woman, must not have a baby. The description of Olivia's breast is contrasted with John's biological mother's breast because the two women are quite opposite on the social hierarchy. This hierarchy is so apparent that the government acts upon Olivia to ensure that she has a child and acts upon John's biological mother to ensure that she does not. As is well-documented by this point, removing Indian children from Indian homes was not the only way the federal government acted upon Indian women. Through Indian Health Services (IHS), a bureaucratic extension of U.S. involvement in Indian affairs, the federal



government sterilized many Indian women without their consent and/or without their knowledge. “A resulting [as a result of the discovery of secret documents by AIM members during their occupation of the BIA headquarters] 1974 study by WARN [Women of All Red Nations] concluded that as many as 42 percent of all Indian women of childbearing age had by that point been sterilized without their consent” (Jaimes 326). Smith discusses the importance of Native women’s bodies to the colonization of the U.S.: “Women of color are particularly threatening, as they have the ability to reproduce the next generations of communities of color [...] In particular, Native women, whose ability to reproduce continues to stand in the way of the continuing conquest of Native lands, endangering the success of colonization” (79).

Although dominant society sees Olivia as the embodiment of a female ideal, John does not. He “knows there is a difference” (*IK* 8) between Olivia’s breast and his real mother’s breast. And John wants the mother who is at the bottom of the social hierarchy, his biological brown mother. When he attempts to suckle at Olivia’s breast, “he discovers it is empty” (8). On a literal level, Olivia could not have breast-fed John because she did not give birth to him and was not producing milk. However, Olivia’s breasts symbolize sustenance, or the lack thereof. In traditional Native cultures the mother transmits culture and identity, thus John cannot get what he needs as an Indian child from his white mother. Her breast is empty because she cannot pass down any cultural knowledge to him. One sees Olivia try to educate herself and John on American Indian culture, traditions, and language, but she falls short. No matter how hard she tries, Olivia cannot ever produce the milk that John needs just as she cannot pass on the cultural knowledge

that he needs to form his own identity as an American Indian man. John's birth mother, however, would have effortlessly fed him her milk and sustained him just as she would have effortlessly passed on traditional wisdom. Although Olivia's breasts are the epitome of perfection to the dominant society, they do not and will not ever contain the nourishment of culture and identity that John so desperately needs.

Likewise, Mary Crow Dog discusses boarding schools in *Lakota Woman* and explains the inherent lack in them because of ethnocentricity and ignorance:

Even now, when these schools are much improved, when the buildings are new [...] the teachers well trained and well-intentioned, even trained in child psychology—unfortunately the psychology of white children, which is different from ours—the shock to the child upon arrival is still tremendous [...] Even now, in a good school, there is impersonality instead of close human contact; a sterile, cold atmosphere. (28-29)

Similarly to Alexie's portrayal in *Indian Killer*, Crow Dog is asserting that even in ideal situations, the new government-issued non-Indian guardians fall short. Even "well-intentioned" teachers fall short because they are trained to understand white children, and Crow Dog emphasizes the difference between the psychology of white children and Indian children. The impersonal atmosphere that Crow Dog describes is easy to imagine in a boarding school environment. However, John and Olivia are described as warm and loving parents. Even so, John still experiences shock.

A moment of shock was when John realized that his parents looked quite dissimilar from himself and "understood that the difference in skin color was important"

(305). As a young boy he walked into their bedroom without knocking. His parents were nearly naked because they had just finished showering. Their bare skin forced him to notice their whiteness in contrast to his brownness: “All that pale skin. . . . He did not look like his parents, especially when they were naked. They were even more pale in their nudity. . . . John felt disturbed by all this knowledge. He wanted to look like his parents. He rubbed at his face, wanting to wipe the brown away” (306). John is literally surrounded by white people – at home, at school, in his neighborhood. He never has a community of people who look like himself; therefore, he must imagine a different life, a brown mother, and Indian friends. When John first meets Marie Polatkin, an intelligent, fiery, and politically active Spokane woman who attends the University of Washington, she asks him to dance. John realizes that “[h]e had never been close enough to an Indian woman to dance” (37). The few times growing up when he was around Indians, he felt like a voyeur and an outcast. On one occasion, Daniel and John attended an all-Indian basketball tournament. John was surprised by their laughter and shocked by the real presence of Indian people, which was very different from his perception of Indians: “So much laughter. John wanted to own that laughter, never realizing that their laughter was a ceremony used to drive away personal and collective demons [...] He did not recognize these Indians. They were nothing like the Indians he had read about. John felt betrayed” (22). John does not understand the Indians at this event, does not understand their laughter, because he is an outsider. Tragically, he has no community. John is an outsider in dominant society because of his ethnicity and an outsider to Indians because of his life experiences and his white parents.

When John walked into his parents bedroom and saw them nearly naked, there was another layer to the complex emotions that he felt. Olivia was “surprised and embarrassed” when John walked in because he “was supposed to be napping. She and Daniel had just made love, then showered together. John had no way of knowing this, but Olivia somehow assumed he did” (305). Daniel gently reminds John that he is supposed to knock, while Olivia assures him that it is okay. John must not only deal with the painful realization that he looks different from his parents (and that his parents look like everyone else) but also must feel the embarrassment and shame of his parents. He may not understand their feelings, but he picks up on the embarrassment when he walks into their room. He is not supposed to see his parents without clothes, and he is not supposed to know that they have sex. Alexie writes about this specific difference between white families and Indian families in his short story “Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ at Woodstock.” Victor, the narrator, is a young Indian boy on the Spokane Reservation with an alcoholic father and a recovering-alcoholic mother. His mother and father have a very volatile relationship, but Victor finds solace in their lovemaking: “Some nights I lay awake and listened to my parents’ lovemaking. I know white people keep it quiet, pretend they don’t ever make love. My white friends tell me they can’t even imagine their own parents getting it on. I know exactly what it sounds like when my parents are touching each other. It makes up for knowing exactly what they sound like when they’re fighting” (30-31).

Shame in the body and shame in sex are values brought over by the European colonizers. In the article “Your Skin Is the Map: The Theoretical Challenge of Joy

Harjo's Erotic Poetics," Robert Warrior discusses reclaiming the erotic as a necessary tool of decolonization. Warrior explains that "[Kateri] Akiwenzie-Damm [in her essay 'Erotica, Indigenous Style'] posits robust traditions of eroticism in indigenous ceremonial and story traditions, traditions that the process of colonialism has eroded and erased" (342). The erotic is about the body and human relationships. Thus, the colonial suppression of the erotic distorts the ways in which indigenous people have traditionally related to one another. In the scene where John walks in on his parents directly after sex, John says that "[h]is body rebelled" (306). He feels this rebellion, in part, because of the dissimilarities between his body and his parents' bodies. But his body also signifies a different set of values about sex and the body. Perhaps this moment of realization would not have been so painful for John had his parents not been so embarrassed of their nudity and their recent lovemaking. Instead, John learns to feel shame at a very young age, a shame that is unwittingly transferred to him by his parents.

Throughout the novel, one sees John failing to live up to the dominant standards of manhood. John always declines invitations to have beers after work with his fellow construction workers in part because of their performed masculinity: "But he [John] did not want to deal with the complications, the constant need to reassert his masculinity, the graphic talk about women. John could no longer stand such talk about women" (131). Warrior explains: "Importantly, the erotic for [Audre] Lorde is never merely sex and is never dangerous, brutal, or coercive. . . . Lorde presents the erotic as being self-consciously committed to being a force for human liberation" (342). Thus, the erotic is also a tool against patriarchal violence. John quietly rages against misogyny. He knows

that the vulgar talk about women by his white co-workers and the rich, white men attending his father's parties are "[a]ll poison and anger" (131). John always associates misogyny with white men, and that is part of the reason John decides that he needs to kill a white man. At one point in the novel, two white men start harassing John in downtown Seattle. He labels them in his head:

John knew these white boys. Not these two in particular, but white boys in general. He had been in high school with boys like these [...] They were the boys who forced their hands down the pants of girls who pretended to like it. 'She wanted it, you know? But I let her go, you know? I took pity on her.' John remembered how these boys talked. He had tried to talk that way himself. He had tried to lie as often as possible, understanding that lying was a valuable skill. High school taught white boys the value of lies, and John knew this. He knew these white boys intimately. He knew these two white boys standing on the Fremont Bridge were publicly loved and admired by their classmates and teachers. These were the boys who were secretly hated and envied, too. Their deaths could create a hurricane of grief and confusion. (197)

John understands the disproportionate value placed on the lives of white boys by dominant society. They are the future leaders. They are valued despite, or because of, their harassment of people of color and their aggressive behavior toward women. The death of these white boys, which John would like to cause, would "create a hurricane of grief and confusion." On the opposite end of the spectrum is Jack Wilson's description of

the death of Beautiful Mary, a homeless Indian woman in Seattle: “Beautiful Mary was almost forty years old when she was murdered. Wedged between a Dumpster and the back wall of a parking garage beneath the Viaduct, she had been raped, then stabbed repeatedly with a broken bottle” (159). And her murderer is never found because the police do very little to solve the case. One officer tells Wilson that it is a low priority case, and that an Indian man probably killed her because “[t]hose people are like that. You ask me, it’s pest control” (160). The death of a white man is a tragedy, but the death of a brown woman is pest control. Beautiful Mary, because she is a homeless Indian woman, is completely disposable. Wilson corroborates John’s opinion of white men: “Working homicide, he [Wilson] quickly learned that monsters are real. He also knew that most monsters were white men. . . . While black and brown men were at war with each other, their automatic gunfire filling the urban night, the white men were hunting their own mothers, lovers, and daughters” (161). In Wilson’s description, all of the victims of white men are women.

Andrea Smith explains this process that John and Wilson, two Indian men (John is Indian and Wilson identifies as Indian), are describing—the process of white men being aggressive and violent yet revered. Through examining the captivity narrative, Smith sets up the white man as the “absent referent,” the person committing the violence who is made invisible:

Andrea Dworkin argues that in a patriarchal system, ‘men are distinguished from women by their commitment to do violence rather than to be victimized by it. In adoring violence . . . men seek to adore

themselves.’ June Namias argues that the point of these descriptions [captivity narratives] is to instill the belief in white women that they need white men to protect them from savages. . . . According to Jane McCrea, the white man both symbolically kills the white women through the Indians, which mirrors his desires, and rushes to her rescue. . . .

Meanwhile, Native women are completely absent from this picture, and consequently, their sexual brutalization at the hands of white men escapes notice. The white man *literally* brutalizes her, while *symbolically* brutalizing the white woman through this representational practice. Native men are scapegoated for his actions so white women will see them as the enemy, while white men remain unaccountable. (22-23)

Thus, the person who killed Beautiful Mary, if anyone even cares to ask, must be an Indian man. The white men that John and Wilson describe can continue to commit violence because their violence will be blamed on the brown and black men around them. Although John knows that the white boys in his high school were the one who talked badly about girls and forced their hands down their panties, John was the one who the white girls were not allowed to date (*IK* 18). I also see a connection between John’s rage at white men and his Indian mother. The white men around him do not only symbolically brutalize her through the constant assaults on Native women, but there is a very distinct possibility that John is the product of rape or at least coercive sex because his mother was only fourteen years old when she gave birth to John. Though his father could very well



have been Indian and not white, the institution of patriarchy, which allows such sexual relationships, is something that Native men have assimilated to.

Because John does not conform to the dominant society's idea of masculinity, he is somewhat feminized, despite his intimidating stature. John is also feminized through the expression of his rage. He attempts to disallow his anger and internalizes his rage with much effort: "He didn't want to be angry. He wanted to be a real person. He wanted to control his emotions, so he would often swallow his anger. . . . John would lock himself inside a stall and fight against his anger. He'd bite his tongue, his lips, until sometimes they would bleed" (19). John prefers to hurt himself instead of release his anger, a response that is more common to women than men. He feels his rage acutely in his body because he will not let it out: "John felt a sharp pain in his lower back. His belly burned" (23). John has an immense amount of rage, but he suppresses it at his own expense. In "Women's Rage" Julia Lesage discusses characteristics of female rage: "Women's anger is pervasive, as pervasive as our oppression, but it frequently lurks underground. If we added up all of women's depression—all our compulsive smiling, ego-tending, and sacrifice; all our psychosomatic illness, and our passivity—we could gauge our rage's unarticulated, negative force" (421). The "unarticulated, negative force" of John's rage burns inside of him causing physical pain. The physicality of his rage causes the reader to recognize rage as beyond the abstract, as a tangible power. Thus, the possibilities for John's rage and the rage of other Indians become quite real and concrete.

## Part II: Creating a Myth

Nancy Van Styvendale's article "The Trans/Historicity of Trauma in Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash* and Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*" is quite useful to an in-depth analysis of Alexie's novel. Van Styvendale advocates the use of trauma theory to analyze American Indian literature. She explains that this trauma theory must be transhistorical because the trauma experienced by Native communities cannot be pinpointed to an exact time and place; it is an "intergenerational trauma" (206). She argues that the understanding of trauma must be expanded: "[T]he assumption of trauma as an 'event outside the norm' allows the 'norm' itself to go unrecognized as the site of multiple traumas, an oversight that in relation to the systemic oppression of Native North Americans, justifies the status quo of domestic colonialism" (206). Here Van Styvendale makes an important move that locates trauma in the everyday existence of colonized peoples within the U.S. Empire. By reading trauma as transcending and reverberating throughout time and place, she is highlighting the overwhelming devastation of those in the way of the creation of the U.S. She also emphasizes how the present constantly recalls the past, stressing the continuing colonial situation. But what about indigenous understandings of time? In Van Styvendale's exploration of transhistorical trauma, she locates a clearly defined past and present: "the Indian Killer is a present-tense expression of trans/historic accumulation" (220). As Gunn Allen explains in *The Sacred Hoop*, "The traditional tribal concept of time is of timelessness, as the concept of space is of multidimensionality. In the ceremonial world the tribes inhabit, time and space are mythic" (147). The transhistoricity that Van Styvendale refers to, using Gunn Allen's

description, is a structure that is rooted in tribalism, not a EuroAmerican retroactive diagnosis of Freudian trauma. Gunn Allen sees the chronological understanding of time as “traumatizing [and] disease-causing” (150) in and of itself. And she makes a connection between chronological time and colonization (151). Therefore, it is no surprise that “[a]chronology is the favored structuring device of American Indian novelists since N. Scott Momaday selected it for organizing *House Made of Dawn*” (Gunn Allen 147). Even Alexie, whose work is considered relatively untraditional and modern, prefers the use of achronology. Using Gunn Allen’s articulation of ceremonial time, it is not simply trauma that can transcend a western understanding of time and place but everything—rage, resistance, even people.

In the article “Renaissance Man: The Tribal ‘Schizophrenic’ in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*,” Stuart Christie explores John Smith as a mentally ill schizophrenic subject and as a mixed-blood, urban Indian, an identity that he argues is capable of mimicking schizophrenia in and of itself. Smith’s profound cultural loss compounds the schizophrenic effect of his illness (8). Christie, like Van Styvendale, is dealing very much with the non-narrativisable characteristics of the text:

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 . . . 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. (8)

Unfortunately, Christie gestures to “American Indian epistemologies” but privileges the discussion of Smith as a schizophrenic. John’s mental state is an important part of the novel and his “madness” is understandably a product of his circumstances, bringing to mind, again, the wheelchair Indian’s comment to Daniel Smith: “You adopted an Indian kid and named him John Smith? No wonder he talks to himself” (219). However, I see more to John’s mental state than just madness, and I understand Van Styvendale and Christie’s analyses as partly accurate but also complicated by the tribal and/or mythic aspects of the text—for example, the preference for achronology and the references to myth and ceremony—aspects that I analyze through the use of Gunn Allen. It is important to note that some Native scholars have critiqued Gunn Allen for being essentialist, arguing that there is no way to discuss any monolithic “tribal” belief system. Although I see the value of this perspective and do not wish to simplify or homogenize the diverse societies that thrived in North America prior to conquest, I do believe that Gunn Allen’s work provides a well-researched account of aspects of pre-contact societies and indigenous epistemologies.

A mythic narrative transcends western understandings of time and space. And this is precisely what Alexie is doing in this text, creating a new myth. According to Gunn Allen, “any attitude or idea that does not conform to contemporary western descriptions of reality is termed myth, signifying falsehood. Labeling something a myth merely

discredits the perceptual system and worldview of those who are not in accord with the dominating paradigm” (102). Thus, “myth” in the modern world has become a dismissive, pejorative term. Gunn Allen’s discussion of myth also explains why the two above-mentioned critics have dealt with this novel in terms of neurosis and mental illness. Alexie is purposefully using myth and ceremony as his way of organizing the text. The first section of the novel is entitled “Owl Dancing,” a ceremonial dance associated with the owl, the “messenger of death” for many Indian tribes (Alexie 37). The first chapter is entitled “Mythology.” Here one sees John imagining his birth in a dirty Indian Health Service hospital on “this reservation or that reservation. Any reservation, a particular reservation” (3). The hospital scene is quite bleak with a description of a confused elderly Indian man, an elderly woman in a trance, a family “all coughing blood quietly into handkerchiefs,” and a repetition of “the dirty sheets” where John’s mother is giving birth. After his birth, one sees an overly-dramatic portrayal (including a helicopter) of his forced exit from the reservation for an adoption.

From the very beginning, John is set up as a mythic character, albeit a tragic one. He looks like the “quintessential Indian”: “Black hair, brown skin and eyes, high cheekbones, the prominent nose. Tall and muscular, he looked like some cinematic warrior, and constantly intimidated people with his presence” (32). At another point in the novel, the ex-cop bogus Indian writer Jack Wilson has an altercation with John and actually believes, for a moment, that John is the real-life embodiment of his fictional hero Aristotle Little Hawk. “A myth relies on mystical or metaphysically charged symbols to convey its significance, and the fact of the mystical and the teleological nature of myth is

embodied in its characteristic devices; the supernatural characters, the nonordinary events, the transcendent powers, and the *pourquoi* [explaining why something, usually in nature, is the way that it is] elements” (Gunn Allen 106). John is structured, in some ways, as a supernatural character with his own mythic beginning. He also has visions, especially visions of his mentor Father Duncan, the Spokane Jesuit who walked into the desert one day and was never found. “His body was never found, though a search party followed Duncan’s tracks miles into the desert, until they simply stopped” (*IK* 16).

The first chapter of the novel, “Mythology,” not only tells of John’s imagined beginnings but also explains the inherited legacy of American Indians on reservations throughout the U.S. The first section, “Owl Dance,” associates the novel immediately with ceremony and death. It forces one to remember the appalling number of deaths suffered by native Americans from 1492 to present day. But it is also foreshadowing the death of white men in the text. Like the title of the novel, it has a double meaning that recalls the deaths caused by the (mostly) white male colonizers but also locates a potential for resistance through the reversal of that colonial violence. The final chapter of the novel is titled “A Creation Story.” Here one sees the Indian Killer dancing in “A cemetery on an Indian reservation. On this reservation or that reservation. Any reservation, a particular reservation” (419). With this specific repetition of reservation, one is cyclically brought back to the beginning of the tale, to John’s beginning, and is also reminded of the multidimensionality of place in the narrative. “The killer sings and dances for hours, days. . . . With this mask, with this mystery, the killer can dance forever. The killer plans on dancing forever. The killer never falls. The moon never falls.

The tree grows heavy with owls” (420). Here is a creation story conceived out of death. It is a creation formed out of destruction because creation is a form of destruction. And destruction is a form of creation. It is clearly evoking the Ghost Dance,<sup>23</sup> a ceremonial dance that was an integral part of the Ghost Dance religion and gained popularity during the height of the reservation era. Wovoka, a Paiute prophet, was raised practicing this (at that time) little-known religion; his father, Tavivo, was integral in the creation of the first Ghost Dance (Trafzer 319). Wovoka later had a vision in which the Creator gave him instructions regarding the revival of the Ghost Dance and the resultant apocalypse. Wovoka preached that the dance would bring back the dead Indians, restore the Indian ways of life that existed prior to conquest, and get rid of the white people. Wovoka’s revival was a success, and the Ghost Dance religion was practiced on reservations across the U.S. Reservation agents feared this ceremony and, thus, prohibited it. However, many tribes ignored the ban and continued dancing. Attempts by government agents to enforce this ban caused the death of Sitting Bull and the massacre at Wounded Knee. The Ghost Dance was a form of resistance and continues to be referenced by Indian writers and activists because of its revolutionary potential. It was imparted upon Wovoka in the late nineteenth century because of the destruction happening to American Indians across the U.S.; it was formed out of devastation. In some ways, it is a new creation myth, the story of how the Indians came back, and this recreation involves the destruction of the colonizers.

---

<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that this name, “Ghost Dance,” was given by the colonizers. “Whites called the new ceremony the Ghost Dance because dancers participating in the ceremony for five days appeared ghostlike, dancing and singing until they were exhausted” (Trafzer 319).

The killer in *Indian Killer* has some characteristics that suggest that it<sup>24</sup> may be John Smith. But by the end of the novel, the reader is fairly sure that John is not the Indian Killer. The last chapter calls to mind many elements of the first chapter, of John's imagined birth. The repetition and non-specificity of the reservation is one aspect previously discussed. But also "The killer never falls" implies a relationship to John. In the first chapter as John is being given to his white parents, he imagines himself in the helicopter: "John can feel the distance between the helicopter and the ground. He feels he could fall. He somehow loves this new fear. He wants to fall. He wants the jumpsuit man to release him, let him fall from the helicopter, down through the clouds, past the skyscrapers and the Space Needle" (7). Again, near the end of the novel in the chapter "Flying," John's second confrontation with Wilson ends with John falling: "He was not afraid of falling. John stepped off the last skyscraper in Seattle. John fell. Falling in the dark, John Smith thought, was different from falling in the sunlight. . . . he fell. Falling, fallen, will fall, has fallen, fell. Falling" (412). John's fall is timeless, happening in the past, present, and future. He fell, is falling, and will always fall.

I will agree with other critics and say that the Indian Killer is an amalgamation of many people. It transcends the boundaries of a person. It is multiple people, existing in many places and times. And this amalgamation seems to take the physical form of a bird, probably an owl, the messenger of death. In the final chapter, the killer "gazes skyward and screeches" (420), a very bird-like description. Mark Jones, the young boy kidnapped by the killer and then returned, describes the killer as a bird, "I think it could fly because

---

<sup>24</sup> I use "it" purposefully to refer to the killer. First, Alexie uses this pronoun for the killer in the novel. More importantly, however, the killer is something larger and harder to define than one person. Thus, "it" seems to be the appropriate pronoun here.



it had wings” (324). Again, the Indian Killer is associated with John Smith; the chapter where John steps off the last skyscraper in Seattle is titled “Flying.” According to the wheelchair Indian, this killer is more than just John: “This Indian Killer, you see, he’s got Crazy Horse’s magic. He’s got Chief Joseph’s brains. He’s got Geronimo’s heart. He’s got Wovoka’s vision. He’s all those badass Indians rolled up into one” (219). It’s Father Duncan. It’s the concrete form of 500 years of anger and all of the energy of millions of Indian people spent hating and raging at the enemy. As the wheelchair Indian says as he shows Daniel the news clippings of the killer’s deeds, “I’m keeping track. We all are. Every Indian is keeping score. What? This Killer’s got himself two white guys? And that little white boy, enit? That makes the score about ten million to three, in favor of the white guys, enit? This Killer’s got a long ways to go. Man, he’s the underdog” (220).

The killer also functions as a way to make the nation remember the extreme violence committed against American Indians to create the U.S. At one point in the novel, John is walking in downtown Seattle noticing all of the white people surrounding him: “White people no longer feared Indians. Somehow, near the end of the twentieth century, Indians had become invisible, docile. John wanted to change that. He wanted to see fear in every pair of blue eyes” (30). In *Killing Rage*, bell hooks says that “whiteness in the black imagination is often a representation of terror” (41). The same can be said for American Indians, another race of people tortured under white supremacy. John wants to “see fear in every pair of blue eyes” because he wants to reverse the trajectory of terror and violence. Unlike African Americans who can still incite fear in whites, John feels that Indians have become “invisible” and “docile” in the white imagination. He realizes the

power of rage and violence because both refuse to be ignored. John would rather Indians be feared than ignored and wants to produce this fear through the violent expression of his rage. According to Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the militant because it shows him the means and the end” (44). John understands the liberatory potential in violence because violence forces itself and demands space. Expressions of rage are an assertion of existence or an “assertion of subjectivity,” to use hooks’ phrase (12). John wants white people to not only remember and acknowledge what they and their ancestors have done to American Indians but, more importantly, to fear the consequences of those actions.

### Conclusion

*Ultimately, history is the root of all people, it is what gives them foundation. The individual history of each person is what defines them, what gives them projection, gives them direction. A person without history, without a past, does not exist . . . and has no future. They are in the air, in the ether, unable to define themselves. As well a people without history cannot advance . . . cannot exist as a people. They must grab on to something, a root which holds them to the earth, which is their history, their past. Because in one way or another the past is what makes you construct the present.*

– Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos<sup>25</sup>

In the documentary *500 Years Later*, people around the world with African roots discuss what it means to be of African descent and how to decolonize Africans and those who are victims of the African Diaspora. One of the primary strategies discussed by

---

<sup>25</sup> EZLN spokesperson. Quote retrieved from the film *Zapatista*.

several different contributors is the recognition of a common African heritage and the creation of unity among Africans who have been scattered around the globe, diminishing the distance created by the Diaspora. The concept of a diaspora is very intriguing in the context of the New World conquest. Unlike Africans, American Indians have no homeland to return to because it has been pervasively transformed by EuroAmerican colonization; reservations are all that remain that is theirs, and even this land belongs to the federal government more than it belongs to the tribes themselves. In some ways, the Ghost Dance is a Native expression of the yearning for a homeland. This homeland is seemingly impossible in the modern U.S. and is, thus, located in the afterlife, the “Happy Hunting Ground,” to use Crow Dog’s phrase (which is a common term among several tribes). Slavery and the colonization in Africa caused millions of deaths but also caused the relocation of millions of Africans. The diasporic connection allows Africans around the world to have a sense of community with one another. American Indians survived, were murdered, or were “bred out.” Thus, the concept of diaspora as a connection among lost Indians must be located in the afterlife. In this sense, the Ghost Dance is a reaction to an understanding of an American Indian Diaspora, a scattering that locates some of the people in this world and the others in the afterlife. It is a mythic expression of the longing for that which has been lost: “In the myth, and especially the mythopoeic vision that gives it birth, past, present, and future are one, and the human counterparts of these—ancestors, contemporaries, and descendents—are also one” (Gunn Allen 117). Thus, the Ghost Dance creates a mythic space of unity with all that has vanished.

Alexie's short story "Imagining the Reservation" begins with an epigraph by Lawrence Thornton: "We have to believe in the power of imagination because it's all we have, and ours is stronger than theirs" (149). In the story, Alexie gives an equation for survival: "Survival = Anger  $\times$  Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation" (150). Because of the thoroughness of colonization and the pervasiveness of neocolonialism, imagination is the only sanctuary for American Indians. And an Indian has to have enough anger in order to survive, because sometimes survival may be just a matter of spiting the colonizer, surviving despite all of the attempts to the contrary. The Ghost Dance also functions as a ceremonial expression of rage and imagination. Imagination is central to Native myths: "Myth, then, is an expression of the tendency to make stories of power out of the life we live in imagination" (Gunn Allen 105). Thus, myths give power to imagination. *Indian Killer* has mythic elements embedded throughout its structure, including the Ghost Dance, John, and the killer. Alexie implements his equation for survival in this text that is full of both anger and imagination as a gesture toward decolonization and healing: "[M]yth acts as a lens through which we can discover the reality that exists beyond the limits of simple linear perception . . . the mythic heals, it makes us whole" (Gunn Allen 116-17). However, the healing that I am discussing is very different from the mainstream idea of healing—pop culture healing necessitates the expulsion of anger and incorporates the Christian notion of forgiveness and turning the other cheek. The gesture toward healing in Alexie's work is a vengeful gesture, one that is not willing to turn the other cheek. As the wheelchair Indian says to Daniel: "'See,' said the Indian, 'I'm keeping track. We all are. Every Indian is keeping

score. What? This Killer's got himself two white guys? And that little white boy, enit? That makes the score about ten million to three, in favor of the white guys, enit? This Killer's got a long ways to go. Man, he's the underdog" (220). The healing in *Indian Killer* is approached through rageful retribution. At the same time, there is a recognition of the impossibility of so many things in the world as it is today, the acknowledgement of the immense and overwhelming number of wrongs needing to be righted. Thus, John must jump from the skyscraper, yet he also imagines his afterlife with a brown mother and Father Duncan. And the novel ends not with John's fall but with the killer's Ghost Dance, a dance that is timeless and will endure the temporal conditions of everyday reality. Alexie's incorporation of myth in *Indian Killer* is an attempt to validate the reality that exists beyond the concrete and the rational, the reality that is privileged through traditional Native myth and epistemology. And this move toward the traditional coupled with the force of 500 years of indigenous rage creates an eerily powerful tale of revenge and justice.

## CONCLUSION

*The opposite of love is not hate. It is disinterest, distraction.* — Joy Harjo

Recently, while in the midst of working on this project, I had to visit the doctor. I was sitting in the cold, sterile room waiting when a nurse came in to take some of my blood. She made small talk, asking what I studied. I told her that I have been working primarily with contemporary American Indian literature. Her response shocked me and made me nauseous: “I don’t really like them. You mean here Indians, right? Like Native Americans? Yeah, I mean, I’m just disappointed in them. Look at what other countries get for their history—like the pyramids. What do we get? All our Natives did was make tipis. I don’t know. I think they need to just get off of their horses and get their butts in gear.” Her ignorant response presents American Indians as an artifact of the past and as a homogenous, over-simplified group of people who all happen to live like a stereotypical representation of Plains Indians. She refers to American Indians as “our Natives”; thus, just as their land now “rightly belongs” to EuroAmericans so, too, do their bodies. Her response also completely disregards the genocide of Natives in North America. The “disappointment” this woman expresses is transferred onto Indians instead of onto her ancestors, the European colonizers who murdered millions of indigenous people.

Every person in the U.S. who is not of Native descent is living on stolen land, land that was taken by cruel, terrorizing force. The U.S. must acknowledge its genocidal legacy and its shameful history of brutal dealings with people of color. But the denial of these histories is at the very core of the U.S. because “America” persistently re-presents itself as the “land of the free,” the democratic ideal. Indigenous rage permeates the very

soil of the U.S. There may be no place of existence for indigenous rage within dominant culture because, firstly, Indians are largely absent from the dominant culture and also because anger is taboo. But rage pushes and screams—it is through expressions of indigenous rage that discursive spaces for this justified wrath can be created. And when these spaces begin to be opened, perhaps citizens of the U.S. will begin to force each other to remember the “American Holocaust.” As David E. Stannard says in his book *American Holocaust*:

The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world. That is why, as one historian aptly has said, far from the heroic and romantic heraldry that customarily is used to symbolize the European settlement of the Americas, the emblem most congruent with reality would be a pyramid of skulls. (x)

## WORKS CITED

- 500 Years Later. Dir. Owen Alik Shahadah. Videodisc. Halaqah Media, 2005.
- Ahmed, Sara. Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Alexie, Sherman. "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock." The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. New York: Harper-Perennial, 1993. 24-36.
- — —. "I Hated Tonto (Still Do)." Los Angeles Times. 28 June 1998. 3 pp. 3 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.fallsapart.com/tonto.html>>.
- — —. "Imagining the Reservation." The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. New York: Harper-Perennial, 1993. 149-53.
- — —. Indian Killer. New York: Warner, 1996.
- — —. Interview with Ross Frank, Dept. of Ethnic Studies. UCSD Guestbook. UCSD-TV, U of California San Diego. 29 Jan. 2002.
- Allen, Paula Gunn. The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions. Boston: Beacon, 1992.
- — —. "Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony." American Indian Quarterly. 14.4 (1990): 379-86.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts. Cambridge: Polity, 2004.
- Behdad, Ali. A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.



The Business of Fancydancing. Dir. and writ. Sherman Alexie. Videodisc. Wellspring, 2002.

Cheyfitz, Eric. "The (Post)Colonial Predicament of Native American Studies." Interventions 4.3 (2002): 405-27.

Christie, Stuart. "Renaissance Man: The Tribal 'Schizophrenic' in Sherman Alexie's Indian Killer." American Indian Culture & Research Journal. 25.4 (2001): 1-19.

Churchill, Ward. "Crimes Against Humanity." Exploring Language. Ed. Gary Goshgarian. 11th ed. New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007.

Churchill, Ward and Winona LaDuke. "Native North America: The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism." The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance. Ed. M. Annette Jaimes. Boston: South End, 1992. 311-44.

Crow Dog, Mary and Richard Erdoes. Lakota Woman. New York: Harper-Perennial, 1990.

de Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. 1952. Trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage-Random, 1989.

Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of the Earth. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove, 2004.

Harjo, Joy. How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975 – 2001. New York: Norton, 2002.

Hooks, bell. Killing Rage. New York: Henry Holt, 1996.

Jaimes, M. Annette with Theresa Halsey. "American Indian Women: At the Center of Indigenous Resistance in North America." The State of Native America:

- Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance. Ed. M. Annette Jaimes. Boston: South End, 1992. 311-44.
- King, Richard C. "Introduction: Dislocating Postcoloniality, Relocating Empire." Postcolonial America. Ed. Richard King. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2000. 1-17.
- Lesage, Julia. "Women's Rage." Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. Ed. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. 419-28.
- Lugo-Ortiz, Agnes, Robert Warrior, et. al. "Ethnic Studies in the Age of Transnationalism." PMLA 122.3 (2007): p805-14.
- Marciniak, Katarzyna. Alienhood: Citizenship, Exile, and the Logic of Difference. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- — —. "Immigrant Rage: Alienhood, 'Hygienic' Identities, and the Second World." Differences 17.2 (2006): 33-63.
- Mignolo, Walter D. Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.
- RAINN Statistics. 2008. Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network. 10 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.rainn.org/statistics>>.
- Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina. "Reading a Silence: The 'Indian' in the Era of Zapatismo." Nepantla: Views from South 3.2 (2002): 287-314.
- ShermanAlexie.com. 2009. FallsApart Productions. 16 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.fallsapart.com/index.html>>.
- Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. "Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle over

- Representation.” Unthinking Eurocentrism. New York: Routledge, 1994. 178-219.
- Smith, Andrea. Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide. Cambridge: South End, 2005.
- Smoke Signals. Dir. Chris Eyre. Writ. Sherman Alexie. Miramax, 1998.
- Stannard, David E. American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Trafzer, Clifford E. As Long as the Grass Shall Grow and Rivers Flow: A History of Native Americans. Belmont: Wadsworth-Thompson, 2000.
- United States. U.S. Census Bureau. United States Census 2000. July 2002. 25 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kprof00-us.pdf>>.
- Van Styvendale, Nancy. “The Trans/Historicity of Trauma in Jeannette Armstrong’s Slash and Sherman Alexie’s Indian Killer.” Studies in the Novel. 40.1-2 (2008): 203-23.
- Warrior, Robert. “Your Skin Is the Map: The Theoretical Challenge of Joy Harjo’s Erotic Poetics.” Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collection. Ed. Craig S. Womack et al. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2008. 340-52.
- Weaver, Jace, Craig S. Womack, and Robert Warrior. American Indian Literary Nationalism. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2006.
- Wilson, Waziyatawin Angela. Remember This!: Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2005.
- Zapatista. Dir. Benjamin Eichert, Richard Rowley, and Staale Sandberg. Big Noise, 1999.