

Language as a Healing Agent: Affecting and Effecting Change

A Master of Arts Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis studies how language can affect change which creates a healing effect for the people involved in its performance. It focuses on the works of Sherman Alexie as a means to investigate how language, primarily through the use of narrative and poetics, facilitates a way to create new meaning from events which impact our wellbeing through the introspection and reclamation of story.

The thesis takes into account the concept of writing therapy, Theresa Brennan's theory of the transmission of affect, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's and Lemyra M. DeBruyn's thesis of American Indian generational trauma and disenfranchised grief as well as Cathy Caruth's hypothesis of how recapturing the past facilitates healing. My thesis illustrates that through the use of language with the combined action of reflection to create new meaning or re-envisioning one's story, we are empowered and brought towards healing. I use the arc of Alexie's writing to illustrate these concepts.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, who has always been supportive of my efforts to continue my education; they often, particularly my husband, Lee John, had to forego my presence and carry extra responsibility to help me finish my degree. In particular this is dedicated to my daughter, Shanna, who, by her birth, inspired me to become an independent, open-minded, strong and compassionate individual.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

From exploring several texts in a Historical Trauma and Healing in Native American Literatures course I became intrigued with the notion of language as a healing agent. Throughout the works examined was the thread and theme of exploring an event as a means towards healing, sometimes consciously, many times subconsciously. What was compelling was if, in the discourse, new meaning of the event was discovered, the shift in perspective resulted in a restoration of balance, or healing.

The case in point for me was the significance of some of Sherman Alexie's (Spokane) works in the context of generational trauma and disenfranchised grief theories, and further, his use of his stories and writing to work through these painful and traumatic issues. While his works are often viewed as rebellious indictments of colonialism and the futility of Indian reservation life, his early works, such as First Indian on the Moon (1993) and The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993), also illustrate how Alexie first evidences internalized oppression and disenfranchised grief in his writing by bearing witness to their effects, and how he moves from these states towards creating a community of healing, as evidenced by poems in The Summer of Black Widows

(1996), and his film, Smoke Signals (1999). His latest works, Flight (2007) and The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007), also reveal indications of having achieved a sense of compassion and balance, through his protagonists' exploration of ways to overcome loss, anger, and confusion, leading to transformation while seeking regeneration and wholeness.

It became clear to me that giving voice to a hurt which causes emotional pain works as a means to release it, for in making meaning through reflective writing, the meaning of the story or the narrative reflects the successful journey through the event, thus also reaffirming one's validity and reinforcing positive self-esteem. To discover how Alexie achieves healing through the use of narrative, one obvious question as a rhetorician is, from a pedagogical standpoint, what composition theory supports language serving as a healing agent? In order to address this question we must look at the theory of therapeutic writing. Equally important is examining the traditional role the use of story has played for indigenous peoples as a healing modality and in their efforts to maintain community. Since Alexie is both a trained writer and an American Indian, these two systems of thought are the context, and thus the interface, of Alexie's writing.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Expressing as Therapy

In their article "Recuperating Writers—and Writing: the Potential of Writing Therapy" authors Ffion Murphy and Philip Neilsen indicate that though "poets and novelists for centuries have viewed writing as a way of transforming trauma and healing," the term *Bibliotherapy* "was coined to describe the intentional use of literature—of reading—for therapeutic purposes" in the early twentieth century (2), becoming the historical underpinning for the current pedagogical understanding of writing as therapy. They also point out that as that century progressed an "ethics of voice, affording each a right to speak her own truth [...] emerged in the context of postmodernism" (2). As the term "expanded to include expressive and creative writing by published authors, poets, and journalists, as well as those who would not describe themselves as writers, [...] a new term, 'writing therapy,' also came into popular and clinical use" (2). As Murphy and Neilsen point out, these "self stories" "have become a recognizable form of popular culture" (2). Consequently contemporary writing is resplendent with "narrative wreckage" or "stories of reconciliation, resistance, recovery, or restoration, and these stories, in turn, influence how further

stories are told" (2). However, Murphy and Neilsen also allude to a correlation between writing and serious mental health issues. They point to studies which indicate "that writers suffer from depression and other forms of mental disturbance at a significantly higher rate than the general population" (3).

While these studies suggest the correlation between writers and their mental disturbances to be causal, I assert the correlation to be symptomatic - that is to say, writing becomes a way for writers to give voice to the symptoms they already have. Writers illustrating their issues may paint writing therapy as problematic; furthermore, in her book Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling our Stories Transforms our Lives, Louise DeSalvo emphasizes that writing alone doesn't bring healing; she reports that research done by Andrew Brinks found "contemplation, discipline and ritual" necessary to the process, indicating that the writing must be accompanied by purposeful reflection (100).

To support the role of reflective writing facilitating healing it is useful to look at how we create meaning through language use. Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk discusses in her text Conversations of the Mind: The Uses of Journal Writing for Second-Language Learners how journal writing can engage the mental processes needed to further language acquisition

for ESL learners, using reflection to help make meaning. Even though Mlynarczyk's focus is on journal writing, since she illustrates how we can create meaning through writing reflectively, I've included her method for discerning its effectiveness. Mlynarczyk states that her book grew out of a desire to understand that when students were asked

to write about their attitude toward writing, or the difficulties of writing in English, or their thoughts about and reactions to the books we were reading, they responded with a freshness and directness—and often, it seemed, with fluency and correctness—that were missing from their formal essays. (xi)

Her quest led to the initiation of a study where journals were used to capture reactions in responses to readings and in-class discussions as well as their experience with journaling, and then analyzing those experiences. Recognizing that the "unique feature of the questions that prompt teacher research is that they emanate from neither theory or practice but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two" (9), led her to several guiding questions, but of primary concern was an interest in investigating her sense that "there were important differences between journal writing and more formal types of writing such as essays and reports" (9).

To support her study, she researched sources devoted exclusively to journal writing. One of the main themes evoked in such studies repeatedly is the role of introspective or reflective writing, which is described as "thinking about one's processes and then describing those thoughts in the language that gave form to them" (12). One reason journal writing seems to promote reflection stems from it being a kind of "inner speech captured in writing" (18). Recognizing that the act of writing transforms thought, Mlynarczyk asserts that journal writing "is more closely allied with inner speech than are more formal, presentational types of writing" (18). Part of this ability to write reflectively is the "development of an awareness of one's thought processes" (18). Mlynarczyk found that because "reflection is by necessity a personal response" (25), the connection between reflective writing and personal response was what, in effect, created meaning for the ESL students. Further elucidation illustrates that not only can reflective writing help us make meaning; it can help change the way we feel.

DeSalvo's text focuses on this point. She reports that while writing in order to examine her own feelings of grief, she began connecting to them—owning and honoring them. She states that transforming them into language made her feel differently about her feelings, giving her a different

perspective about them. She relates this shift in perspective to the efficacious nature of writing, asserting that it works this way because it acts as a means of discovering "strength, depth, power, wisdom, energy, creativity, soulfulness and wholeness" (9).

Writing then becomes a way to claim your voice and tell your story by linking your feelings to the events in your life. DeSalvo feels this happens because writing changes our response to the event from passive to active—the event is no longer something passively borne but rather something we can now dynamically engage and learn from:

Expressing it in language robs the event of its power to hurt us; it also assuages our pain. And by expressing ourselves in language [...] we [...] experience the order we create from the seeming randomness or chaos. (43)

Expressing is central to the role language plays in healing, paradoxically because language which causes emotional wounding will often leave us unable to express. When words are uttered at us in meanness or spite the physical effects of those verbal darts embed themselves in the body, often causing feelings of anguish and helplessness. Teresa Brennan, author of The Transmission of Affect, uses the term "transmission of affect" to capture a process that is social in origin but

biological and physical in effect (3). Whether it be language that causes grief, pain, anxiety or anger, according to Brennan, these affects come as interactions with others, but they have a physiological impact—that is to say the “emotions or affects of one person ... can enter into another” (3). Brennan tells us that the term “affect” is one translation of the Latin word *affectus* which can be translated as “passion” or “emotion.” Associatively, our present day definition essentially dictates that “bodily responses give rise to affective states” (4). With this understanding of the term, Brennan uses it specifically to mean the “physiological shift accompanying a judgment” (5). She also points out that affects have “an energetic dimension,” in that they enhance or deplete, which indicates that we are not “self contained in terms of our energies” (6). By virtue of the meaning and intent underneath these types of invocative words, as well as how that intent and meaning was received, their affects become embedded in our bodies, resulting in a rhetoric that negatively impacts the body.

Denise Riley, author of Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect, affirms Brennan’s stance, indicating that “there is a tangible affect in language which stands somewhat apart from the expressive intentions of an individual speaker; so language can work outside of its official content” (5). Words

aimed at us, laden with negative intent, resurrect themselves within us, lodging in the mind like a thorn. From its emotional materiality, it becomes "flesh and dwells among us" (9). As Riley points out, these splinters of words cause scar tissue embodied by a "knowing it by heart," creating an indwelling aspect of those words (9). That is not to say that the meaning attached to any verbal assault is the only affect at play. We bring our own meaning of those hurled words to the party as well. If I pick up on your affect, the linguistic content or the thoughts I attach to that affect are my own. The outwardly given received idea first has to be made mine, "to be interiorized as if I had summoned it up as my own creation, in order for it to live" (6). This suggests that what we believe "is the animated word's power" (5) and that language is indifferent until we imbue it with meaning.

As a result of this rhetoric of the body, Dr. Mimi Guarneri points out in her text The Heart Speaks, that an individual is also a person trailing a complex history along with them (45). She also indicates doctors are aware that suppressed emotions or ones we're not conscious of eventually manifest on a physical level (65), issuing as stress-related diseases of the body. This is due to repression being the energetic denial of an idea, be it born within or struck without. Since the nature of energy is the antithesis of

stasis, it must seek egress. Brennan tells us Freud postulates that energetics is the key to health; "put at its simplest: the more neurotic you are, the more repressed you are; the more repressed you are, the less energy you have" (42).

Brennan also reminds us that wavelengths literally affect the body as auditory traces which directly impact the physical by the reception of spectrum vibrations activating our neurology (10). As Brennan and Riley evidence, we dwell where our perspective and our use of language to make meaning coincide. But how might one refuse, or release, the affects of embedded rhetoric?

Brennan argues that "the capacity to resist or discern unwanted affects is not based on the boundaries that "healthy" persons are said to possess and "unhealthy" ones lack" (11). Indeed, she contends that the notion of "boundaries" "is a culturally specific idea" (25) and that the concept of transmitted affects "undermines the dichotomy between the individual and the environment and the related opposition between the biological and the social" (7). In the realms of Western philosophy and psychology the healthy person is seen as self-contained, with boundaries that are based on the premise of the separateness of other. This premise looks at and values the literal physical boundaries of skin while at the same time it negates the non-material ways we connect and

interact as beings. As children of this dominant mindset, when we begin recognizing where we physically end and where others begin, we are taught to establish 'healthy' boundaries, in the Westernized concept of subject/object. Within this paradigm, feelings and sensing are ruled out by the subject/object classification and seen as something outside the processes of intelligence. Consequently,

the Western psyche is structured in such a way as to give a person the sense that their affects and feeling are their own, and that they are energetically and emotionally contained in the most literal sense. In other words, people experience themselves as containing their own emotions. (25)

Yet Brennan tells us that when analysts are working with a person said to have mental illness, they often recount instances of being affected by feeling the other's affects (26). This indicates that the analyst is the recipient of affects from the patient, which is contrary to the notion that it is the patient that has weak boundaries (28). However, the fact that analysts, who are meant to have clear, strong boundaries in place, report feeling the other's affects contradicts the premise of self-containment. Brennan gives an account of one clinician who "discarded the clinic in favor of

a study of neurology [...] precisely because he was too susceptible to transmitted affects" (26).

Since the transmission of affect undermines the dichotomy between individual and the environment, or self and other, Brennan stresses that bypassing the negation of the transmission of affect requires a "theory of the psyche and material environment which is not premised on self-containment" (20). In support of this concept, Elizabeth Grosz, author of Volatile Bodies, states that while she was seeking "to invert the primacy of a psychical interiority by demonstrating its necessary dependence on a corporeal exteriority" she came across the model of the Möbius strip while reading the work of Lacan, in which he likens the subject to a Möbius strip, an inverted three-dimensional figure eight, and found it

suitable for a way of rethinking the relations between body and mind. Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives. The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another.

(xii)

Comprehending the self-contained identity as a Western construct thus requires a recognition of the need to strive towards equilibrium between our exterior and interior states; a way to balance the affects of embedded rhetoric. This is particularly relevant when we understand that health is balance. Since we each have our own unique place of balance, what we take in (be it literal or emotional) and what we let out affects the balance between our inner and outer worlds. How then do we look for ways to achieve this balance? One way is to examine the role of language as community.

Language evolves out of our inner motivation to express, to reach out and communicate. Its patterns and rhythms are energized, as with talking, by breath. The difference between talking in a Western European language such as English, with its understanding of meaning constricted by Western ideologies of separateness and containment, and stories as viewed from the perspective of an indigenous culture, is that the latter has the power to bypass cognitive inhibitions instilled by our Western philosophies, allowing for movement into the realm of feeling and experience—in affect creating a community of storytellers and listeners.

In his book Narrative Medicine, Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona (Cherokee) discusses how indigenous story has long been used as a healing modality, helping us better understand our

relationship with ourselves and others, and that which comprises our cosmology. The contemporary paradigm of Western medicine proposes that dis-ease (hyphenation used to emphasize a universal lack of ease in the body) can be reduced to pathological facts, claiming conventional medicine "to be the truth rather than one of many truths" (5). Mehl-Madrona proposes that, dis-ease, rather than being founded on biologic, mechanistic explanation, is systemic, resulting from the need for a restoration of harmony and balance (31). He also suggests that we are a collection of our stories (17). As Thom Hartmann states in the book's Foreword, "each of us carries in our entire body the legacy of our stories" (x), which is why having a better understanding of our story facilitates better health.

Within this framework, Mehl-Madrona asserts "the term *narrative medicine* arises from the impossibility of separating [...] the stories [...] the audience hearing the stories, and the context in which the stories are told" (6). This communal aspect of story emphasizes another important distinction between Western ideologies and those of indigenous peoples—the difference between collectivist cultures, such as the American Indians, and the individualist cultures of Western Europeans. As Juana Bordas points out in her book Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age, "Native American

leadership is based on time honored traditions, cultures, and religious beliefs, including an understanding of the relationships between human beings and the larger world (16), whereas an individualistic culture, such as the dominant culture of the United States, "values [...] rugged individualism and competition" (23), which results in a 'survival of the fittest' mentality.

Bordas sees collectivist cultures as "tightly woven and integrated" (47) which facilitates a vision of community "based on a great deal of introspection and work on identity - both individually and collectively, for the two are intertwined" (51). Yet colonization and assimilation efforts stifled this inherent "we" community, until the dominant society's ethnocentric perspective integrated one of the most harmful aspects of an individualistic culture— isolation. Compounded by a psychology of oppression, the worst of isolating afflictions also becomes apparent—that of despair. This framework then reveals the need for finding a way to reconcile the past in order to regain equilibrium, since as Bordas states "the vestiges of the past and the inequities that existed for centuries continue to impede inclusiveness and equity" (29). The inequities Bordas speaks of are a result of European contact which, as Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn (Lakota and French Canadian,

respectively), authors of the essay "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief" point out, brought decimation of the indigenous population, primarily through waves of disease, annihilation, military and colonialist expansionist policies. The forced social changes and bleak living conditions of the reservation system also contributed to the disruption of American Indian cultures. This painful legacy includes themes of encroachment based on the manifest destiny doctrine and betrayal of earlier agreements and treaties. (62).

Manifest Destiny, or what Marijo Moore (Cherokee), editor of Eating Fire, Tasting Blood terms "Greed disguised as God" (xvii), was the general notion of the right to expansion by the Europeans who settled in North America, and the belief that the American government was 'destined' to establish political authority from one side of the continent to the other.

Since the indigenous peoples stood in the way of this expansion and ability to establish authority, and from a colonialist perspective, were considered 'savages' and 'heathens' who had little or no rights in the eyes of the newly formed American government, the government's policy

became one of annihilation and assimilation. As Moore emphasizes, the results were

The immoral suppression of religious rights, the systematic slaughtering of innocent peoples, the attempted decimation of their cultures, broken treaties between the U.S. government and Indians, and misappropriation of funding, as well as the total annihilation of many Indian nations. (xiv)

Brave Heart and DeBruyn assert that the consequences of this trauma produced "a legacy of chronic trauma and unresolved grief across generations" (60), as each generation of indigenous people lived—and live—under the long shadow cast by 'manifest destiny.'

Within this context let us consider how Sherman Alexie has, in his efforts to reconcile and make meaning of his past, helped create his own community of storytellers and listeners, resulting in a community of healing, as evidenced in a number of his texts.

## CHAPTER THREE

## The Power of Story in Alexie's Works

Alexie uses his own stories and his own experience to help create connections as he uses the power of narrative to explore who he is and what he is capable of becoming. Within his narrative lyrical prowess and eye for metaphoric phrasing lie both the flame and the shadow of what shaped him and what shape he wishes to be, allowing him to illuminate the shadows in order to catch a glimpse of what initially cast a particular darkness.

His works suggest he does this with the inherent understanding of the power of the word, and thus the power of the narrative, as he uses his stories and writing to work through painful and traumatic issues brought about by ongoing colonialism and a dominant society ideology which leaves no place to express grief or outrage. Prior to being colonized, Indians were not taught the ideology of separating or disassociating their body and their selves from their thoughts or their community. Yet that is what the dominant ideologies have instructed—that they needed to be still and quiet—stifling both the movement and voice inherent and embodied in all of us. Natural rhythms were subverted. Feeling and sensing were forgotten because, as Don G. Campbell, author of The Roar of Silence: Healing Powers of Breath, Tone & Music points out,

"they are not named, mentioned, or developed into mature expressions of thought" (32). Since language serves as consciousness in action and awareness of self, language then becomes both the place of struggle and the venue for release for Alexie. By what author Laura Arnold Leibman terms "a bridge of difference," he also invites his readers into this experience as a means to create a community of healing.

In Alexie's 1996 collection of poetry entitled The Summer of Black Widows, his title poem draws upon the power of story as being akin to the power of spider. Spider's power is suggested in its use of web weaving, with the allusion more clearly illustrated in an introduction by Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna-Sioux) to the anthology Spider Woman's Granddaughters:

[S]tories are woven of elements that illuminate the ritual tradition of the storyteller's people [...] hold[ing] the listeners' attention so that they can experience a sense of belonging to a sturdy and strong tradition. (1)

This "sturdy and strong tradition" which carries the structure of an indigenous people's society within it is what Alexie references in "The Summer of Black Widows," which speaks to his awareness that the destructive force of the spider has overshadowed the powerful creative element it also inhabits, so that the story/spiders are seen as a threat which needs

"poisoned" and "burned to ash." However, Alexie also offers us a caveat: "The elders knew the spiders / had left behind bundles of stories [...] [which] neither fire / nor water, neither rock nor wind, / can bring them down" (13), thus reminding the Spokanes that they need to learn not to kill the story/spiders but instead to use the powerful creative energy he hints they contain.

Another poem Alexie uses to mourn the loss of story is "Elegies," a poem that laments the ways in which people die. The poem, which begins with the line "This is a poem for people who died in stupid ways" (49), is loosely framed in the elegiac form and organized as a list which moves from iterating wildly absurd ways of meeting death, "This is a poem for Napoleon's great-grandson who snapped his neck / when his ridiculously long scarf caught in the rear wheels of / the convertible he was driving" (49), to telling of the intimate deaths of his sibling and her husband: "this is a poem for my oldest sister and her husband, who died in a / trailer fire in Montana when a curtain drifted on wind and / touched a hot plate left burning..." (51). While Alexie is clearly mourning the death of his sister, the context of the poem also illustrates his view of the senselessness of that death. It is the final stanza, however, which illustrates how Alexie sees each of these deaths as a loss of both the individual and

collective stories they represent: "This is a poem for my tribe, who continue to live in the shadow of / the abandoned uranium mine on our reservation, where the / night sky glows in a way that would have invoked songs and / stories a few generations earlier, but now simply allows us to see / better as we drive down the highway toward a different kind of moon" (51).

Within both of these poems lie the embodiment of and mourning for a tradition lost by colonization. As Liebman points out in her article "A Bridge of Difference: Sherman Alexie and the Politics of Mourning," "the danger of the spoken word comes partly from white people, who once destroyed the Spokane through cavalry raids and alcohol but who more recently built the uranium mines and taught the Spokane to say 'cancer' as often as they say 'oxygen' and 'love'" (545). She asserts, however, that in grieving the losses of his tribe he also provides a place for restoration: "the community of mourning and renewal it enables represents an important shift in the politics of performance and in the use of formalism in Native American poetry" (542).

This shift is illustrated in Alexie's poem "Elegies," which is representative of his use of poetic form as ritual. Each line of the poem begins with the same words of repetition—"This is a poem for...," creating a rhythmic cadence

which echoes ritualistic practices of many indigenous healing ceremonies. Songs and music are often used as part of the healing process in shamanistic healing, and as author Marlene Dobkin de Rios tells us in her article "Ayahuasca and its Mechanisms of Healing," Ayahuasquero healers native to the Amazon often use whistling, singing, praying and reciting orations called *icaros* in the process of conducting a healing (2). Alexie's poetic repetitiveness also, as Stephen Evans points out in his article "Open Containers: Sherman Alexie's Drunken Indians" "reveals ongoing development that is entirely consistent with oral tradition techniques" (48). These features in Alexie's poetry then help to create a healing community through Leibman's "bridge of difference" which joins Alexie's readers "as allies in the cause for Spokane renewal" (542).

Yet how does the analogy of story as a web which emulates the relationship of humans and its connection to the rest of the world help facilitate a healing community? A look at how storytelling comes out of an experience and a desire to understand the meaning of that experience might be helpful. As Leslie Marmon Silko points out in her essay "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," in the oral tradition there is an emphasis on what the speaker is saying and the story itself which stems from "a view of narrative

particular to the Pueblo and other Native American peoples - that is, that language *is* story" (159). According to Silko, this perspective is derived from the belief that each word tells a story of its own, so that all words create their own word-stories, contributing to the notion that "one story is only the beginning of many stories" (160). This means that the telling of a story

always includes the audience, the listeners. In fact, a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listener. The storytelling continues from generation to generation. (160)

This type of transitive yet expansive storytelling is echoed by Silko's character, Tayo, in her novel Ceremony: "Distances and days existed in themselves then; they all had a story [...] it all depended on whether you knew the directions [...] it depended on whether you knew the story of how others before you had gone" (19).

Although Silko's stance echoes Murphy and Neilsen's assertion that the telling of a story influences how further stories are told ("Recuperating Writers" 2), it is the significance of the listening audience which Silko emphasizes. The importance of listening in this oral tradition is illustrated in Alexie's "Flight Patterns," a short story from

his 2003 collection Ten Little Indians, when he uses the Spokane term "*Su-num-twee*" while telling the story of William, a post 9/11 businessman who fears he will unravel if not for his family.

While on his way to the airport William tells Fedaku, an Ethiopian taxi driver, how much he loves his family and obsessively worries that "their love is the only thing that makes me human" (113). But as Fedaku shares his own story of having to leave his family in Ethiopia in order to save them from targeted oppression and will probably never be able to see them again, William comes to realize that all families are important, and that he has been using his as a crutch in order to not look at what it is inside that makes him feel not human. The story also illustrates how two people from different ethnicities can share the same important bond when they listen to each other:

"I have a story about contradictions," said the taxi driver. "Because you are a Red Indian, I think you will understand my pain." "*Su-num-twee*," said William. "What is that? What did you say?"

"*Su-num-twee*. It's Spokane. My language."

"What does it mean?"

"Listen to me." (118)

What happens though when a tradition of listening is subverted by colonization and buried under centuries of historical trauma and disenfranchised grief? Who is there to listen when an entire community suffers from the same wounds? To understand and support the concept of generational trauma, Brave Heart and DeBruyn convey psychologist Gershen Kaufman's notion that one source of disenfranchised grief "is the persistence of a previous experience of unsanctioned grief. The concept of unsanctioned grief introduces the idea of historical unresolved grief that is passed on for generations" (68). Generational trauma, then, is transposed and compounded by disenfranchised grief, described by Brave Heart and DeBruyn as "grief that persons experience when a loss cannot be openly acknowledged or publicly mourned" (66), resulting in "an intensification of normative emotional reactions such as anger, guilt, sadness, and helplessness" (67).

Since disenfranchised grief and internalized oppression go hand in hand, it's also useful to have an understanding of internalized oppression. Lisa Poupart (Lac Du Flambeau Ojibwe), author of "The Familiar Face of Genocide: Internalized Oppression among American Indians," points out what is true for colonized groups the world over:

American Indian people learned and internalized the discursive practices of the West - the very codes

that created, reflected, and reproduced our oppression. As American Indians participate in, create, and reproduce Western cultural forms, we internalize Western meanings of difference [...] viewing ourselves within and through the constructs that defined us as racially and culturally subhuman, deficient, and vile. As Western constructions of abject difference are both forced upon and accepted by American Indians, we define ourselves through these constructions and subsequently participate in the reproduction of these codes. (87)

Poupart further explains that internalized oppression is typically illustrated in the context of understanding that attempts at catharting anger at an oppressor "result in swift retaliation by the oppressor" and that it is therefore "safer to cathart anger on a family member" (90). The dominant culture has long proffered its own version of American Indians and their culture, verbalized in pseudo-native narratives, slanted historical perspectives and Hollywood films. Beverly R. Singer (Tewa and Diné), emphasizes in her book, Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video, that the earliest stereotypes

associating Indians with being savage, naked, and heathen were established with the foundation of

America and determined by two factors: religious intolerance for cultural and spiritual differences leading to the destruction of Native cultures, and rejection of Indian cultures as relevant subject matter by traditional historians in the writing of U.S. history. (1)

This perspective has fostered internalized oppression by contributing to what Amanda J. Cobb, author of "This is what it Means to Say *Smoke Signals*," terms the "conceptualization of American Indians not as distinct nations of people or distinct individuals [...] but rather as a singular character or idea, 'the Indian'" (210). Thus, since the inception of a colonized America, Indian peoples have been denied the chance to tell their own story. Alexie's work is filled with images and voices which portray this rage and grief, and consequently the generational trauma and internalized oppression Brave Heart and DeBruyn, and Poupart respectively, reference.

With the admission in the Introduction to the tenth anniversary of The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, that his stories are, to a great extent, quasi-autobiographical, Alexie acknowledges that he has been bearing witness to both his and his tribe's disenfranchised grief and internalized oppression since his earliest works. Alexie's 1993 collection of short stories, The Lone Ranger and Tonto

Fistfight in Heaven begins with "Every Little Hurricane" a story which speaks to the violence that surrounds the small boy Victor during a New Year's Eve party. Alexie's hurricane is metaphorical, brought about by his two drunken uncles fist fighting, "with such force that they had to be in love. Strangers would never want to hurt each other that badly" (2). Nobody moves to stop the fight, with Alexie via Victor describing those watching as:

All witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale. Victor's uncles were in the midst of a misdemeanor that would remain one even if somebody was to die. One Indian killing another did not create a special kind of storm. This little kind of hurricane was generic. It didn't even deserve a name. (3)

Victor observes the broken noses and sprained ankles, reflecting that there "was other pain [...] his [own] chest throbbed with absence" (4). In flashbacks, Alexie describes other mini hurricanes which are internalized and repressed, such as Victor watching his father "take a drink of vodka on a completely empty stomach" (6), to combat his inner storm of anger.

The hurricane prompted by Victor's uncles forces to the surface feelings of repressed anger and despondency from the other Indians who have watched the brawl, and the storm moves "from Indian to Indian" as they recount instances where each has experienced direct or indirect racism or cruelty outside the reservation boundaries. Victor's father remembers his own father being spit on while waiting for a bus in Spokane, while his mother reflects on the moment the Indian Health Service doctor sterilized her right after Victor was born (8).

In this manner Alexie reveals how historical racism has perpetuated historical grief and trauma, producing subverted rage which all too often leads to violence. Alexie sees it as ironic that these shared pains also produce bonds which continually perpetuate the cycle, for it's "this same bond that causes so much pain" (8).

Other instances of internalized oppression and disenfranchised grief show up in Alexie's 1993 collection of poetry First Indian on the Moon, which alternates between free verse poetry and short pieces of prose. His piece entitled "Year of the Indian" gives a month by month account of life on an Indian reservation, illustrating how American holidays have been transformed by poverty, racism and oppression, further isolating the reservation from American society. In "September," Labor Day has no real meaning, for the speaker

who has to work "at the Laundromat seven days a week [...] all for minimum wage. Every day I feel dirty and used. I'm a dishrag, cloth diaper, mismatched sock" (13). The hollowness of disenfranchised grief reinforced by deprivation has left the speaker feeling objectified and not even human.

In The Summer of Black Widows (1996), Alexie continues to bear witness to the hopelessness and pain in his people's lives as they reflect back their own dishonored state. He begins his prose poem, "Sonnet: Tattoo Tears," with the line "No one will believe this story I'm telling, so it must be true" (56), signifying that no one has believed the truth of their pain. He goes on to tell us of an "Indian woman with three tears tattooed under her left eye folded under the weight of her own expectations, after her real tears fail to convince" (56). Then moving from the microcosm of the one to the macrocosm of the many, the Fourth of July holiday Alexie portrays holds a very different meaning for these native peoples:

It's the Fourth of July and every Indian looks into the sky. Tears explode from their eyes, louder and brighter than a bottle rocket. Tears lick their cheeks like a Jimi Hendrix solo [...] tears pulled into a hypodermic and mainlined [...] Tears tattooed

under the eyes of Indians who believe everything  
their mirrors whisper. (57)

Since these Indians have never had anyone believe the truth of their pain, they disbelieve the validity of their own tears because their experience has been excluded by the hegemonic practices of a society that has attempted to subvert and assimilate them. It is significant that while this prose poem is titled a sonnet, Alexie appropriates the Western poetic structure, utilizing the form of the sonnet (or the elegiac form as illustrated in Alexie's poem "Elegies" discussed earlier), to the extent that it helps convey the images and subject he is intent on imparting to his audience, yet veering off in a shape and direction which is uniquely Alexie, in a renegotiation of poetic form. Appropriating the poetic forms accomplishes two purposes. To expand on and extend a tradition of listening which can encompass his audience, Alexie's poetry, as Liebman points out, "must include the strategies of the white world it fights - including its poetic forms" (545). Co-opting the poetic structure for his own purposes is also another way Alexie reclaims his story from a dominant society ideology.

In giving voice to what's been repressed by bearing witness, Alexie's stories serve as testimony to the inflicted trauma and subsequent perpetual grief he and his tribe have

endured for generations. And while we're also told in Alexie's 1996 novel, Indian Killer, through John, the schizophrenic and broken American Indian, "that storytelling is a way of mourning the dead" (48), the storytelling also serves to recover those dead and their experiences, for as Leibman points out in "A Bridge of Difference," Alexie's works witness to "the power of stories and show the Spokane community how to heal in the face of danger and tragedy" (542).

In the poem "Marriage," from The Summer of Black Widows, Alexie's community of healing begins with bread, in a recognition that, as Daniel Grassian points out in his book, Understanding Alexie, "food is ultimately the single most important item for forming community" (138): "What it comes to," Alexie writes, "is this: bread. / Its creation the product of hunger and imagination" (65). In seeking a universal common experience, "Every culture is measured by its bread," Alexie helps envision a community that can unite: "The sacred and the utilitarian share an apartment overlooking the river" (65). Grassian emphasizes that the poems in The Summer of Black Widows "often celebrate the strength and resilience of cultural traditions in the face of poverty and marginalization while offering ideas for empowerment of the Indian community" (127).

This strength in the face of impoverishment and marginalization is further evidenced in Indian Killer (1996), when a small group of homeless Indians band together to defend John, the schizophrenic Indian who has been attacked by three very white and violent attackers. After a quick and brutal fight in which the Indians sustain heavy damage, John wonders at the "small thread [that] kept them tied together now. Despite all their pain and suffering, these Indians held together, held onto one another" (377). Even though these homeless Indians have disparate tribal backgrounds, or even lack a tribal affiliation at all, the cohesive bandage that forms their bond is that each has grown up with an oppressive and bleak childhood fostered by poverty and pain. It is that same pain Alexie tells us of in "Every Little Hurricane" from The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven: "When children grow up together in poverty, a bond is formed that is stronger than most anything" (8).

Yet Alexie sees that this sense of communal and familial belonging can help sustain and even provide an impetus for creating change. In this same story, Victor tells us that

During all these kinds of tiny storms, Victor's mother would rise with her medicine and magic. She would pull air down from empty cupboards and make fry bread. She would shake thick blankets free from

old bandanas. She would comb Victor's braids into dreams. (5)

The mother who inhabits Victor's (and thus Alexie's) world magically creates food and dreams from the very things which comprise their cosmology—air and emptiness.

In Alexie's short story "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above" from Ten Little Indians (2003), Alexie's community of healing also starts with this mother/child dynamic. Written in the first person in which the protagonist is never named, Alexie explores a son/mother relationship as he humorously looks at gender, sexuality, and finally racial issues and where and how this type of information is received—that is to say, the social ways of thinking and making meaning.

The story begins with a reference to sex and the son conveying the concern that because of his beautiful looks and "black, long" eyelashes at thirteen, his aunt fears all the female attention he receives will make him gay (124). Although he admits to loving "a homoerotic circle jerk as much as the next curious teenage boy," he dreams "almost exclusively about girls and women" (124). Though this admission may not be compelling of itself, the fact that his mother is supportive of the hearty explorations of his sexual appetite ("Ma, I think about sex all the time. I'm always beating off ...") (133)

is significant. In her very matter of fact way ("No, don't call it your wang-doodle, it's your penis") (130), she conveys her understanding of a child's need for straight talk and understanding when it comes to a juvenile traversing the mysteries of sex and adolescent angst. And while he bemoans the fact that the much needed advice comes from his mother—" [W]hat son wants to hear these things from his mother?" (131)—he admits that, as a mother, Estelle does a decent job, telling his audience that she is "a B-plus mother, certainly good enough to get into Matriarchal State University but not quite good enough for St. Mary's College of the Blessed Womb Warriors" (128).

The son also questions what it means to be both male and Indian, with Indian decidedly subordinate to being male: "On the long list of things that I am, I'd put Indian at number three, behind "bitterly funny" at number two and "horny bastard" at number one "for the last twenty-seven years running" (135). As much as he grapples with being "an Indian man trying to hold on to the best of Indian" while at the same time being "an Indian man trying to let go of the worst of Indian" (135), his primary concern is whether he is doing a good job of being an adequate male: "Am I the best man I can possibly be...[?] (146). He tells his audience:

[A]s crazy as it sounds, I want to become the kind of man my mother would sleep with [...] I don't want to sleep with my mother, but I want to sleep with women my mother loves [...] I don't want to be cherished by my mother (and I am beloved) as much as I want to be respected by her. (143)

Throughout the narrative, the crux of the story is that as a mother, Estelle is an authentic woman who, to his benefit, loves and advocates for her son. Within this dynamic lies an awareness that when one has even one person who will play that role in one's life, though one's community may be small, it is enough to give a sense of acceptance and belonging—critical components needed for any sense of balance in life, particularly when that life may be in need of healing.

This understanding echoes the thesis of Dr. Gabriella M. Miotto, who, in her article "Bearing Witness and Healing Through Creativity," states that "Healing is an inner process through which a person becomes, whole, more individuated ..." (320). Because Estelle helps her son become an individuated person by listening to him, he is able to better live an authentic life. Alexie draws this comparison because he understands that this dynamic is often lacking in children who grow up in the shadow of generational trauma and disenfranchised grief. Generation after generation of

indigenous peoples have failed to be heard and so are denied the opportunity for *Su-num-twee*, or for someone to "listen to me"—a critical component in the healing process. Thus Alexie's testimony emphasizes the validity of his own story, and by extension the story of his tribe, and the need for it to be heard.

By telling of the experiences they share he is able to transcend the boundaries of what poet Adrian Louis termed in his poem "Elegy for the Forgotten Oldsmobile," the "reservation of the mind." Through the writing process an integration and incorporation of what Peggy Whiting & Elizabeth James in their article "Bearing Witness to the Story: Narrative Reconstruction in Grief Counseling" call a "loss experience" into the greater story of one's life, recovery from grief results with the "transforming of the story so that the future is created with resilience" (4). Whiting and James indicate that "In grief, we need persons who will bear witness to the evolving story with its nuances of meaning, characters, emotional patterns, consistency, and uncharted courses" (4). Whiting and James also emphasize Deena Metzger's statement that "Stories heal us because we become whole through them" (4).

Throughout the arc of Alexie's work lies the theme of bearing witness, with the recognition that the ability to

express through story is a means of reclaiming that story. Reclaiming story is all the more significant because it is a way to break the polarities of a dominant/colonialist perspective. As Gay Wilentz points out in her book Healing Narrative, "Precisely because the language of [narrative] is metaphorical and interpretive it allows displacement of these oppositions so that a healing discourse can be attempted and even achieved" (4). In reclaiming his story, Alexie is able to involve both himself and his community in a healing process as he envisions a life that can happen when one is able to express and be heard, or to echo William in "Flight Patterns"—*Su-num-twee*.

Alexie's reclamation of story is often evidenced in his tales as he explores how Indians redefine themselves with their own stories. His stories not only bear witness to his own experience—they are used to re-mythologize and establish a new dynamic in Indian storytelling, gifting new life to the already powerful oral tradition Indians are known for, and using it to help elucidate the people behind the stereotypes. In the next chapter we'll look at how Alexie re-mythologizes story in order to reclaim it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## Reclamation of Story

Since it has been established that his stories are quasi-autobiographical, we as readers understand that Alexie's re-occurring characters Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire are aspects of Alexie. The character of Thomas Builds-the-Fire is always the storyteller and his role is poignantly relevant to Alexie's re-visioning, as evidenced in the short story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" from the collection of stories in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993).

In this story, after losing his job, Victor learns that his father has died in Phoenix and needs to go there to claim his father's effects. Because Victor has no other money than the hundred dollars the tribal council gives him to make the trip, Thomas offers to help by providing him with additional money, on the condition that Thomas is allowed to come with Victor. Even though Victor and Thomas are the same age and "had grown up and played in the dirt together," because Thomas is "a storyteller that nobody wanted to listen to" Victor is reluctant to take Thomas on his journey. Thomas has tried desperately to hang on to a storytelling tradition, but living on an imagination-starved reservation has caused most of Thomas's tales to become dull and repetitious—so much so that

"Nobody talked to Thomas anymore because he told the same damn stories over and over again" (62). The fact that the reservation is a place where grief and anger have choked out imagination is particularly relevant in light of Alexie telling us in "Imagining the Reservation," another short story in the collection, that "Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation" (150), insinuating that without imagination, neither of these young men have the means to fight the cycle of apathy and hopelessness inherent on the reservation.

Thomas's request to accompany him causes Victor to remember a beating he gave Thomas when they were fifteen, for no reason other than being drunk: "All the other Indian boys stood around and watched it happen ... the beating might have gone on until Thomas was dead if Norma Many Horses hadn't come along and stopped it" (65). It is the same kind of brutal pounding Victor's uncles are guilty of when Victor was small in the short story "Every Little Hurricane" - anger and futile violence escaping through fists yet again, perpetuating a vicious cycle brought about by disenfranchised grief. Feeling a little guilty, he agrees to take Thomas on the journey. Since his redundant storytelling is all Thomas has to offer, he persists in telling stories for the duration of the trip. We learn that Thomas has heard these stories echo in his head since he was born: "I have only my stories which came to me

before I even had the words to speak. I learned a thousand stories before I took my first thousand steps. They are all I have. It's all I can do" (73). Even though the repetitious storytelling is a desperate attempt to maintain his Indian heritage and culture, something Thomas fervently needs, Alexie also uses it as an indictment of using tradition as a crutch for the same reason—tradition itself does not allow for transition or creation of a new dynamic—or more poignantly put by Silko in Ceremony: "[T]hings which don't shift and grow are dead things" (126).

Though Victor initially continues to be annoyed by Thomas's storytelling, he comes to appreciate what they represent to Thomas, which, according to Grassian, "changes Victor psychologically" (63). Sharing the journey leaves Victor wondering "Whatever happened to the tribal ties, the sense of community?" (Alexie 74). Even though they don't part as friends, they do find a new sense of respect for each other, and the tale closes on a more promising note, with Thomas finally finding a new story: "So Victor drove his father's pickup toward home while Thomas went into his house, closed the door behind him, and heard a new story come to him in the silence afterwards" (75). With a new ending and a new story Alexie shows us how he has taken back the power first born in the native oral tradition, with his story serving as a

response to the question Alexie himself poses in "Imagining the Reservation" from The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven: "How can we imagine a new language when the language of the enemy keeps our dismembered tongues tied to his belt?" (152).

Alexie's first movie, *Smoke Signals*, is a continuation of his exploration of how to redefine Indians with their own stories. Though it in general follows the premise of "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," it varies significantly in several respects, and in these variances Alexie takes the opportunity not only to expand the idea of re-creating myth, but also as Meredith K. James, author of Literary and Cinematic Reservation in Selected Works of Native American Author Sherman Alexie points out, to adapt his own book and establish "his authorial control and his commentary on the dynamic power of storytelling" (42). This is significant because it allows Alexie to show how "the stories we tell affect those around us and how these stories are part of who we are" (42). In Dennis and Joan West's "Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals: an Interview with Sherman Alexie," Alexie emphasizes that "the characters in [*Smoke Signals*] are Indians, and they're fully realized human beings. They're not just the sidekick, or the buddy, they're the protagonists. [P]lacing them within this [...] cinematic structure is

groundbreaking" (29). This is an important aspect of the film in terms of helping to break stereotypes, since it means that the characters of Victor and Thomas are "rooted in this time and place and not a fictionalized past" (28).

This fictionalized past that Alexie refers to is in part based on the hundreds of Hollywood films dealing with what were called 'Indian' themes. Most significant is the fact that these films aren't really about Indians; as Cobb points out, they are about Americans searching for an American identity "distinct from its European origins" (210). Alexie is very proud that his movie is, as he explains, "The first feature film written, directed and co-produced by Indians ever to receive a major distribution deal" (Grassian 4). Being foremost a poet, Alexie sees screenplays as more like poetry than fiction. In his essay "Making Smoke" printed in the 1998 Fall edition of Whole Earth, Alexie suggests that "screenplays rely on imagery to carry the narrative, rather than the other way around" (103). He asserts that while his poetry does contain a strong narrative drive, "it was always about the image, and about the connection, often of very disparate, contradictory images" (West and West 31).

Given that the short story from which *Smoke Signals* is derived had the long title of "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," Alexie also wanted a title that would fit

thematically with the film, which would at the same time identify it as a film about Indians. The title *Smoke Signals* fit for Alexie for a number of reasons, all of which illustrate how this contemporary movie works on multiple levels:

When you see the movie, you realize that, in a contemporary sense, smoke signals are about calls of distress, calls for help. [...] It's also about the theme of fire. The smoke that originates from the first fire in the movie is what causes these events, and the smoke from the second fire brings about the beginning of resolution. (West and West 32)

To lend accessibility to mainstream audiences, *Smoke Signals'* format is a typical road trip/buddy movie (e.g. Hope and Crosby), which takes the two protagonists from the Coeur d'Alene Indian reservation in Idaho to Phoenix, Arizona, and back again. Yet it is done in a way that appropriates the traditional Western format while poking fun at overly romanticized representations of Indians. In this way Alexie uses his film to offer a critique of how these stereotypes are portrayed in Hollywood, as well as conveying a vision of Indians as contemporary Americans. In the movie, one rather humorous scene illustrates this.

Instead of taking a plane for their journey as in the initial story, Victor and Thomas are riding towards Phoenix in a Greyhound bus, with the bus ride time frame providing more opportunity for visual and dialogical interaction between the two protagonists. After stopping for a break and to pick up additional passengers, Victor and Thomas re-board the bus to find their seats occupied by two hulking cowboys, who in typical redneck fashion, refuse to relinquish the seats to the two Indians. As the bus driver and passengers watch, Victor and Thomas move to the back of the bus. Rather than quietly fading into the background, however, they begin singing a satirical song about "John Wayne's Teeth" 49 style, referring to the songs sung at 49 parties, which occur after powwows (James 40). James notes that making fun of an idolized Hollywood icon by singing in this style "reinforces the fact that Indians are in control of the narrative" (40).

On their journey these two Indians also eat breakfast at Denny's, shoot hoops and watch television. One humorous scene in *Smoke Signals* shows Thomas making himself at home in Suzy Song's (the young woman who befriended Victor's father and found his body) trailer house, holding a bowl of fry bread and watching a Hollywood film about Indians, to which he comments: "You know, the only thing more pathetic than Indians on T.V. is Indians watching Indians on T.V." (*Smoke Signals*). While

the above scene humorously juxtaposes the stereotypical role of Indians in film with a more contemporary Indian experience, these conventional American pastimes also firmly situate Indians as participants in the American culture. Alexie emphasizes in his interview with West and West that he intentionally uses this approach to "bridge the cultural distance between the characters in my movie and the non-Indian audience" (35). It also, according to Cobb, helps audiences to think of Native Americans as "regular people" (219). Significantly, these "regular people" are "Indian people telling an Indian story and that is the heart of the matter" (211).

As Singer states, "Traditional Native American storytelling practices and oral histories are a key source of our recovery of our authentic identity" (3). More important though is that "we be able to tell our own stories in whatever medium we choose" (3). It is all the more significant that Alexie uses the comfortable predictability of the road trip/buddy film format to convey a uniquely Indian storytelling perspective that breaks apart this singular notion of the Hollywood Indian. This in essence allows Alexie to use the very medium that has helped create the stereotypes of Indians to address how erroneous those assumptions are. Woven into this format with wit and poignancy are the

incidents and challenges that affect Thomas and Victor's emotional development throughout their journey. Alexie's film version then becomes, in part, a story of Indians learning what it means to be Indian, in an odyssey of the indigenous.

Another way Alexie conveys a uniquely Indian perspective is through the differences between the character of Victor in the story and the film. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Victor is a mean alcoholic, but in the movie version Victor is adamantly sober. This change is significant because it illustrates Alexie's refusal to follow stereotypical Hollywood patterns. In fact the person who abuses alcohol in the movie is a white character, Burt Cicero, whose drunk driving is responsible for a car wreck Victor and Thomas are involved in. The only other white character is the sheriff, who even after Cicero tries to claim the duo is responsible for the crash, believes them when they claim "We was framed." Alexie purposely does not establish clear categories of good and bad and white and Indian, in order to make a comment on Hollywood's representations of both.

Always interested in "going outside the narrative and traditional formats" of storytelling, Alexie, fascinated with "dreams and stories and [...] playing with conventions of time," also defines the film as Indian by his use of non-linear scene sequences, which add a dream-like quality. As Gay Wilentz

points out in her book Healing Narrative, non-linear narratives represent "the power of the word as well as the context of the story" (15). Even though the dream sequences often offer foregrounding and definition of character, they also emphasize how dreams affect the memory of an event and vice versa, as well as how these lines blur in order to create a story. This technique also serves to emphasize that these two young Indian men are not searching for the American dream; they are beginning to have their own dreams, and this journey is, in part, a way to help fulfill them. By having Victor and Thomas encounter these experiences off the reservation Alexie illustrates how the reservation boundaries have now shifted as they come to an understanding of the reservation as community rather than simply a place with boundaries, which helps them establish a new way to reconnect. It is within this re-envisioned community that Thomas is able to find a new story because the journey has helped kindle a new flame of imagination. He reclaims his Indian culture by being able to re-mythologize and redefine his sense of "Indianness."

For Victor, being able to return to the rez in his Dad's pickup not only allows him to transcend the reservation's boundaries, both literally and figuratively, but also gives him a sense of reconciliation with his father, which in turn helps him reconcile his Indian identity. This resolution is

further facilitated by a small family photo Victor finds in his father's wallet. On the back of the photo is written one word: Home. In claiming this photo Victor accepts the truth of his father, as Victor comes to understand that while his father left the reservation, he never lost his sense of the reservation being his home.

Alexie's treatment of story and imagination in both accounts of this tale provides him with an opportunity to break the artifice of assumed Indian identity which the dominant culture has imposed upon a misinformed nation, illustrating a resiliency and ability to 'wipe the war paint off the lens,' in order to have his voice heard. Telling their own stories in every medium possible is indeed the most likely way that Indians will break barriers.

Creating films like *Smoke Signals* not only allows indigenous peoples to bear witness, but to re-mythologize and ultimately, to reclaim their own stories. By doing so through both the written and visual mediums, Alexie is able, in many ways, to rectify the image that Indians have been burdened with, through the recognition that they ultimately can take power over their own story and reclaim it, illustrating how imaginative abilities and re-mythologizing can help transform both the inner and outer landscape, a transformation that is essential in healing.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Relationships and Resolution

With the importance of being heard and reclamation of story emphasized in his earlier works, Alexie's two latest books, Flight (2007) and The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007), move beyond the voice of a Spokane Indian who grew up indicting tradition and acquiescence to status quo on a moribund reservation, as he evidences evaluation of and concern for relationships in all their forms. This expansion of story from self to others is facilitated in part by Alexie's ability to use his writing as a new type of ritual or ceremony. In his book Coyote Medicine, Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona addresses the importance of story as ceremony, in that ritual helps create awareness in order to accomplish a purpose (250). Walentz too states that writing and narrative are "a literary formulation of the storytelling ceremony" (4). The question then becomes: why is ceremony such an important aspect in the healing process?

In Cathy Caruth's essay "Recapturing the Past: Introduction" from the anthology, Trauma: Explorations in Memory, she discusses how Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a "possession of the past," in that the "overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess [...]the one[s] who [have]lived through them" (151). Reliving the trauma, however, doesn't

merely serve as testimony; it serves as bearing witness "to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred" (151). This means, according to Caruth, the trauma doesn't "simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of the experience that is not yet fully owned" (151); that is to say, the experience has not been fully integrated due to the lack of exploration of the event's implications. Thus, Caruth impresses, the "phenomenon of trauma [...] urgently demands historical awareness" (151). Yet in the context of the generational trauma experienced by indigenous peoples, there has been a refusal by the dominant society to acknowledge that these traumas have indeed even occurred. Because of this refusal, no such awareness has been facilitated. This means, as Caruth points out, that the traumatic recall of events remains insistent and unchanged to the precise extent that it has never, from the beginning, been fully integrated into understanding. The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge (153).

Yet Caruth emphasizes that the trauma needs to be integrated "both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure" (153), which implies the need for the event to be spoken of in the context of making meaning of the experience. However,

Caruth stresses that the danger of speaking of the experience "may not lie in what it cannot understand, but that it understands too much" (154). The difficulty of understanding too much the events indigenous peoples have, for generations endured, lies, in part, with the inability to comprehend why there is no acknowledgment from the dominant society that these events have even occurred. How does a people initiate the process of integration if the history remains unspoken and unheard?

As Caruth points out, "challenging our usual expectations of what it means to tell, to listen, and to gain access to the past" (154) suggests that "historical truth may be transmitted in some cases through the refusal of a certain framework of understanding, a refusal that is also a creative act of listening" (154). This implies that in the refusal of acknowledging past events, a new way of gaining access to the knowledge of that past must be sought. Telling the story of the event[s] then becomes a process of discovering the lesson within the story, creating anew the understanding, and thus the meaning, of the event. As Caruth emphasizes, "what is created does not grow out of knowledge already accumulated but, [...] is intricately bound up with the act of listening itself" (155). Therefore "it is ultimately in the ways in which it exceeds simple understanding" that the communication

of the event from those who endured the trauma "opens up the possibility of what could be called a truly historical transmission" (156). Part of creating the story anew is recognizing the role of others and fostering a role that is cognizant of the importance of relationship in all its forms, which indicates the need for dynamic interaction within those relationships. This dynamic interaction can be facilitated by a ceremony to connect the old with the new.

Since Alexie's writing (such as The Summer of Black Widows) draws upon the thread of story weaving, suggesting a strong connection to and understanding of Silko's Ceremony, a look at how ceremony is used in that context may be helpful. Authors Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin tell us in their essay "The Origins of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*" published in the Yale University Library Gazette, that the key theme of the novel is, according to Silko, the "power inherent in storytelling" (23). This inherent power of story was illustrated for Silko while growing up in her Pueblo community: "The curing ceremonies of the Pueblo and other Indian people have always depended upon the chanting of ancient stories to effect certain cures or protection from illness and harm." (23). Storytelling then itself becomes a ceremonial ritual, where the pattern of each story radiates "from a center, criss-crossing each other. As with the web,

the structure will emerge as it is made and you must simply listen and trust [...] that meaning will be made (Silko, "Language" 159).

As illustrated in Ceremony, this emergent structure depends on a dynamic element of the ceremony, a lesson conveyed throughout the novel to its protagonist, Tayo, as he searches for a cure to the affliction he's carried back from fighting in a world war, defending a land that has already been lost to his people—despair. Recovering from the trauma of fighting in a war that is not his own and discovering what his own story means to him, Tayo comes to understand his role in the story ceremony he performs. This realization comes gradually as he remembers the stories of the holy men striving to honor the life around them: "Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, [...] It was a world alive, always changing and moving" (95). The medicine man Betonie reminds Tayo "you are at an important place in this story" (124). As he recognizes the inherent truth behind Betonie's words, he realizes that "[h]is sickness was only part of something larger and his cure would be found in something great and inclusive of everything" (126). Betonie impresses upon Tayo that it "is a matter of transitions, [...] the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely" (130).

Betonie's guidance propels Tayo towards extricating the part the sickness has played in Tayo's own story: "He had proved something to himself; it wasn't as strong as it had once been. It was changing, unraveling like the yarn of a dark heavy blanket wrapped around a corpse ..." (198). This unraveling happens in part with the realization of the importance of living in the present moment: "He knew then why the oldtimers could only speak of yesterday and tomorrow in terms of the present moment: the only certainty; and this present sense of being..." (192). This dynamic intertwining of all stories impresses upon Tayo why Betonie declares the need for new ceremonies:

[A]fter the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong. (126)

Using ceremony as repair facilitates a dynamic storytelling in that, according to DeSalvo, "the act of writing transforms the events into something meaningful" (42). This creative ritual has instilled recognition in Alexie that a generosity in spirit is what redeems and ultimately, heals the broken narrative that is one's life. It is this need for new ceremonies that Alexie recognizes as he tells his story,

and why he suggests that tradition, without integration and recognition of the now, acts as a crutch for his people; this is evident in a comment from his essay "A Train is an Order of Occurrence Designed to Lead to Some Result" from The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven: "There is a moment when an Indian realizes he cannot turn back toward tradition and that he has no map to guide him toward the future" (134). This outlook is why, in the short story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" Alexie's character, Thomas, illustrates tradition in isolation creates stagnation, and why, in the end Thomas must find a new story. In an interview reported by Grassian, Alexie further discusses his misgivings about the role tradition plays, stating that because of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> [2001],

I am now desperately trying to let go of the idea of [...] making decisions based on imaginary tribes. The terrorists [...] thought they were right and that they had special knowledge, and we continue to react [...] We are making these decisions not based on any moral or ethical choice, but simply on the basis of power and money and ancient traditions that are full of shit, so I am increasingly suspicious of the word "tradition," whether in political or literary terms.

(6)

This indictment of tradition has not endeared him to his Spokane relatives, a perspective Alexie reveals in his screenplay, *The Business of Fancydancing*, through a dialogue between Seymour, a Spokane Indian who has gone to college and had some success with his poetry, and Aristotle, another Spokane Indian who wants to go back to the reservation after dropping out of college:

**Aristotle:** I've got the car packed up. Come with me.

We'll be home in five hours, man, five hours, and we'll celebrate. We'll get drunk like Indians, man.

**Seymour:** No.

**Aristotle:** There's nothing out here for us. We don't belong here.

**Seymour:** I don't belong on the rez.

**Aristotle:** You always thought you were too good for the rest of us.

**Seymour:** I am too good for the rest of them.

**Aristotle:** How can you talk like that? That's our tribe, man, that's our reservation.

**Seymour:** You're too good for the rest of them. You just don't want to admit it.

**Aristotle:** I'm too good for all these white people.

**Seymour:** You've got a lot more in common with all these white people than you do with the Indians back home.

**Aristotle:** Maybe you do, man. You like it out here, don't you? Playing Indian, putting on your feathers and beads for the white folks? Out here, you're the Public Relations warrior, you're Super Indian, you're the expert and the authority. But back home, man, you're just that tiny little Indian who cries too easy.

**Seymour:** Go home, Aristotle, and live a small life. I've got other things to do.

*(The Business of Fancydancing)*

In his hunger and his need, Seymour wants, and feels he deserves more, than a stagnant, self-flagellating tradition, which means to the rez Indians he has become the "Public Relations warrior," bringing him the distrust of his people and vice versa. Yet the character, Agnes, reminds the reservation Indians that "at least he's out there. What do you do all day? You sit on your asses. You don't do shit. He's fighting the war. He's telling everyone that we're still here" ("TBOF Screenplay" 96), reminding them that there is a contemporary story of these Indians that still needs to be told. It is, however, a version of the story that not all indigenous people want to be told.

Criticized for his often negative portrayal of Indians, many Natives see Alexie as perpetuating stereotypes. Author

Louis Owens (Choctaw, Cherokee) finds Alexie's portrayal disparaging,

reinforc[ing] all of the stereotypes desired by white readers: his bleakly absurd and aimless Indians are imploding in a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing; there is no family or community center toward which his characters ... might turn for coherence; and in the process of self-destruction the Indians provide Euramerican readers with pleasurable moments of dark humor [...] [T]he non-Indian reader of Alexie's work is allowed to come away with a sense ... that no one is really to blame but the Indians, no matter how loudly the author shouts his anger. (79-80)

Owens fails to acknowledge how Alexie uses stereotyped composites to create characters which embody certain preconceived notions as an analysis, and in most cases a condemnation, of those behaviors. Many of the writings examined in this thesis evidence Alexie's own construction of family and community, such as Estelle and her son in "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above," who not only do not self-destruct, but manage to thrive in their small familial community.

Evans tells us that author Gloria Bird (Spokane), also criticizes Alexie for what she sees as a lack of a "traditionalist approach for writers of Indian fiction" ("Drunken Indians" 49). According to Evans, one of Bird's main concerns arises from his use of pop culture, "when this is the only exposure to native literature to which mainstream readers are exposed" (49). This perspective leaves little room for viewing how Alexie uses popular culture as an intersection for his readers and audience, a place where they are encouraged to approach these characterizations and references from an 'us' rather than 'other' mentality.

Alexie understands that by being able to comprehend the extent to which popular culture has infiltrated Native culture speaks to how integral colonialism has become to Indian 'reality.' Evidencing this reality in his works serves to illustrate, as Agnes, the character from *The Business of Fancydancing*, reminds us, that Indians still have a story to tell. More importantly it says that Indians are still *here*. They did not vanish with the buffalo; they live in the United States we all live in, except with more poverty, racism and oppression. Even though Alexie shows the societal issues of living with these challenges, such as alcoholism, abuse and abandonment, Alexie does not paint reservation Indians as a lost cause. Grassian points out that it is not Alexie's intent

to represent "reservation Indians as helpless, poverty-stricken alcoholics." Rather, Alexie "portrays reservation Indians as battered but resilient survivors of an unacknowledged American Genocide, who continually struggle against the culture that stripped them of property, pride, and their indigenous culture" (16). Given all the reasons Alexie sees tradition as a form of stagnancy, representing a traditionalist perspective of Native Americans is not something he is interested in doing.

Well known for his scorn of the "corn pollen and eagle feather school of poetry," when asked during an interview with John and Carl Bellante how his work has been influenced by the oral tradition, Alexie states "Well, my writing has nothing to do with the oral tradition because I typed it" (Sherman Alexie 14). Yet Flight (2007) and The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007) illustrate how Alexie has taken the essence of the oral tradition, in that the telling of a story influences how further stories are told, and has created his own storytelling dynamic. In these two stories Alexie pushes past the boundaries of being a colonized Indian struggling to deal with generational trauma, disenfranchised grief and the often moribund traditions these elements have perpetuated, to understanding the need for reflecting on, not only what it means to be Indian, but also what it means to be human.

Flight is a young adult novella that, with its metaphysical elements, looks at the interplay and evolution of the character, Zits, the half-white, half-Indian adolescent boy who's been bounced from foster home to foster home since his mom died at the age of six, and who has learned that it's better to stay stoic and remote because he's "always been punished for showing emotion" (10). This kid who's slipped through the cracks understandably has a lot of resentment and hurt, which in Alexie's world (anyone's really), could be written as Anger + Hurt = Hatred, and this kid's got plenty.

Programmed to believe that "if a kid has enough bad things happen to him before he turns five, he's screwed for the rest of his life" (17), Zits is ready to be befriended by Justice, a white kid who inculcates Zits with a bullets and gun doctrine ("I practice killing people until it feels like I'm really killing them" (33), that, by the end of the chapter, has Zits ready to practice his new-found religion in a bank lobby in downtown Seattle, where he kills several people: "I spin in circles and shoot and shoot and shoot. I keep pulling the triggers until the bank guard shoots me in the back of the head" (35). He wakes up via transmigration as the white FBI agent, Hank, and is astonished when his partner, Art, hands him a pistol: "I am stunned. I am the psycho teen who shot up a bank filled with people and a cop just handed me

a gigantic freakin' gun! A .357 Magnum!" (39). When he realizes his partner's intent to help kill Junior, the young Indian man who's been beaten to a pulp on the Nannapush Indian Reservation by the double agent Indians Elk and Horse, he wishes he could save him: "I wish I knew what Art wanted to know. Maybe I could save Junior if I knew" (50).

When Art shoots Junior, which makes Zits/Hank vomit, Art wonders what's wrong with him and tells Zits/Hank to shoot the already dead Indian so that they'll both "be in this one together" (53). In the moment that Zits/Hank pulls out his pistol and stands over Junior's body, the metamorphosis is evident as he realizes he doesn't even want to shoot someone that's already dead: "I can't do this. It somehow seems worse to shoot a dead body than to shoot a living man. Justice made killing make sense. But it doesn't make sense, does it?" (53). Understanding that Art will shoot him if he doesn't pull the trigger, he does the deed and passes out as he realizes, "Maybe you can't kill somebody twice for real, but it sure hurts your heart just the same" (53). Death up close and personal has made him begin to feel like an actual person, and the soul of Zits has moved from a hateful vengeful street kid, into one who has begun to understand compassion, an understanding that's driven home by the next transmigration.

When next Zits wakes up, he has jumped into the body of another young Indian boy whose voice box has been damaged and who literally has no voice. Realizing he's been transported to the middle of an Indian camp of the nineteenth-century, he initially looks at the camp as idyllic, because Justice has told him that the Indians of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century are "how Indians are supposed to be" (60). He recognizes admiringly that one of the Indians is "Crazy Horse, the strange man of the Oglalas [...] the famous mystical Indian warrior who killed hundreds of white people. This guy was the greatest warrior ever" (67).

Yet when he realizes he's been transported to June 1876 and watches the massacre of Custer and his Seventh Cavalry and the subsequent carnage, he feels "sick in my stomach and brain" (72). He watches as all around him, "Indian men, women, and children are desecrating the bodies of the dead white soldiers" (73). The Indian warriors then surround the only surviving six white soldiers and begin torturing them. Zits becomes aware that his father, who hands him a long knife, wants him to "want revenge" for another white soldier slashing his throat with a bayonet (75). Staring at one of the white young soldiers, he initially feels "the anger building inside of me. I feel the need for revenge" and then wonders if revenge is the reason he killed all the people in the bank:

Did I want revenge? Did I blame those strangers for my loneliness? Did they deserve to die because of my loneliness? Does this little white soldier deserve to die because one of his fellow soldiers slashed my throat? If I kill him, do I deserve to be killed by this white soldier's family and friends? Is revenge a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle? (77)

This experience creates awareness for Zits that white people are not the only ones who have perpetrated heinous acts—that Indians have committed horrific deeds as well. This realization makes him look inside himself and see why, after he “learned to stop crying” and “to hide inside” himself—“learned how to be cold and numb” and to hurt others before they hurt him; he is “tired of hurting people. I am tired of being hurt” (161-62).

Zits ultimately jumps back into his own body and turns himself in to the police. A despondent Zits is visited by Officer Dave, the white police officer who has repeatedly rescued Zits from his own behavior, and Alexie, through a dialogue between the two, illustrates how compassion and understanding can create a safe space for the mourning that needs to happen in order to forgive one's self and others:

“You're going to die,” he says. I'm trying to be as tough as I used to be, but it's not working. I feel

like a carton of eggs holding up an elephant.

"You're going to die," Dave says again. He says each syllable like it was a cussword. Or a prayer. "So I'm going to die," I say. "What does it matter? I don't matter. I'm nothing." "Zits," he says. "You matter. Everybody matters. You matter to me."

"You're a cop," I say. "You don't care about anything." "I care too much, man," Dave says. I look at him. Tears are rolling down his big cop face. Who knew that cops could cry? (168)

Officer Dave goes on to tell Zits how, during a recent nine-one-one call, he arrived to find a man and a woman passed out in a small dirty house. In the bathroom of that house he finds two toddlers, dead from the scald burns of the hot water pouring from the tub faucet. Dave cries because he is too late to save them: "They were just babies," Dave says to me. "helpless little babies. I couldn't save them. I was too late." "I don't know what to say. Dave weeps. I weep with him" (172). Zits, who is adopted by Dave, comes to understand that even though

the world is still a cold and cruel place [...] that people will always go to war against each other [...]that children will always be targets [...] that people will always betray each other [...]and] that I

am a betrayer, [...] I'm beginning to think I've been given a chance. (180)

This revelation brings Zits back to a semblance of balance, with his redemption being facilitated by his understanding of the destructive nature of violence and its particularly forceful impact on children. Alexie has purposely blurred the lines of what is labeled good and what is labeled bad, illustrating that things are not so black and white—that life is not comprised of binaries; rather, it consists of human relationships and the connectedness that simultaneously and paradoxically encompasses our existence.

In The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, another young adult novel complete with comedic illustrations, Alexie further explores the universal role relationships play in defining who we are, and who we have the potential to be. It is a poignant, yet funny and hopeful story, with the historical elements of Alexie's own childhood as the backdrop, as Alexie works to reconcile the experience of growing up on a poverty stricken reservation where grief greets you at every turn, with the understanding of how those experiences help create who you are.

In the story, the teenage Spokane Indian, Junior, transfers from the outdated reservation school on the Spokane reservation, to an all-white school in the nearby farm town of

Reardon. As he tries to integrate and be accepted at his new school, his own community terms him a traitor. Alexie imbues Junior with his own satirical sense of humor to help him navigate the trials of being a 'part-time' Indian with more than his share of challenges. Junior frequently grapples with finding ways to excel at his new school when there is seldom enough gas money for the drive and often his alcoholic father is too drunk to get him there. Further, when he finally gets to school he endures the stereotypical racial slurs the white boys hurl at the "reservation Indian," for which he finally punches one of them in the face (65). When he tells his grandmother that he's punched this huge guy in the face, she calmly asks him why. When Junior tells her it's because the big guy called him 'squaw boy,' she humorously responds: "Then you should have kicked him in the balls" (68).

Humor has always played a large role in Alexie's writing, and is readily evident in his earlier works as well. In Diary, Alexie uses humor to protect and deflect, heal offences and create bonds, conveying a hopeful element in its employment. It works, as humor often does, to establish ways of broaching sensitive issues and to break the most resistant of barriers, and is a tactic Alexie frequently employs, as Joseph Coulombe, author of the essay "The Approximate Size of His Favorite Humor" points out, to "force listeners/readers to re-evaluate

accepted ways of thinking" (Coulombe 4). A scene from the chapter "And a Partridge in a Pear Tree" illustrates how, even in the most futile of moments, hopefulness through humor sustains, as Junior talks with his alcoholic father after his dad binges right through Christmas:

"Hey, Dad," I said. "Hey, kid," he said. "I'm sorry about Christmas." "It's okay," I said. But it wasn't okay. It was about as far from okay as you can get. If okay was the earth, then I was standing on Jupiter. I don't know why I said it was okay. For some reason, I was protecting the feelings of the man who had broken my heart yet again. Jeez, I'd just won the Silver Medal in the Children of Alcoholics Olympics. "I got you something," he said. "What?" "It's in my boot." I picked up one of his cowboy boots. "No, the other one," he said. "Inside, under that foot-pad thing." I picked up the other boot and dug inside. Man, that thing smelled like booze and fear and failure. I found a wrinkled and damp five dollar bill. "Merry Christmas," he said. Wow. Drunk for a week, my father must have really wanted to spend those last five dollars. He could have spent that five bucks and stayed drunk for another day or two. But he saved it for me. It was a

beautiful and ugly thing. "Thanks, Dad," I said. He was asleep. "Merry Christmas," I said, and kissed him on the cheek. (151)

Here, Alexie sees the resilience of hope as a type of glue which can bond people together, combating the despair that can arise from the bleakest of circumstances. When asked whether humor is a common theme in his work during a televised interview with the North Idaho College Public Forum panel, Alexie reinforces the role it plays in his life and his writing, by responding, "There's a lot of laughter on the reservation." To illustrate its importance he goes on to quote one of his own passages: "White people don't understand that humor for Indians is like an antiseptic to clean the deepest of personal wounds." Alexie sees that "it can be a very positive thing and a very strong healing force," further stating, "I see hope and I don't write with a feeling of hopelessness [...] if a people have humor then they're not without hope" (NIC Interview). The above scene from Diary demonstrates how he uses humor to illustrate that sense of resilient hopefulness.

Compassion is another quality Alexie illustrates in Diary. It is an inherent trait in Junior's eccentric Grandmother, who, although she is no pushover, is the only character who displays any sort of balance. This is an

important aspect for Junior to experience in order for him not to spin wildly out of control. Throughout the story she has been not only the voice of (perhaps unorthodox) reason, but also the voice of compassion, of which there is precious little in either Junior's life or on the reservation. Her role is epitomized in the chapter "Red Versus White," when Junior tells his readers that "the very best thing" about Wellpinit is his grandmother:

She was amazing. She was the most amazing person in the world. Do you want to know the very best thing about my grandmother? She was tolerant. And I know that's a hilarious thing to say about your grandmother [...] My grandmother was smart and kind and had traveled to about 100 different Indian reservations, but that had nothing to do with her greatness. My grandmother's greatest gift was tolerance. (154)

After his grandmother is struck and killed, ironically, by a drunk Indian driver, Junior tells us that her last act on earth is "a call for forgiveness, love, and tolerance," when, before she slips away, her last words are "Forgive him." (157). The message Junior's grandmother conveys is perhaps the most important of the story because there is so little of this spirit evidenced in his world.

Junior tells us that at his grandmother's wake, "almost two thousand Indians showed up that day to say good-bye. And nobody gave me any crap." (159). The grief-stricken Junior takes solace in the fact that even though "I was still the kid who had betrayed the tribe [...] I was also the kid who'd lost his grandmother. And everybody knew that losing my grandmother was horrible. So they all waved the white flag that day and let me grieve in peace" (159). His grandmother's funeral is just one of several Junior attends that year, and "when we said good-bye to one grandmother, we said good-bye to all of them. Each funeral was a funeral for all of us" (166). Having attended "forty-two funerals" in his short life (199), Junior discovers that for him, the definition of grief is "When you feel so helpless and stupid that you think nothing will every be right again, and your macaroni and cheese tastes like sawdust, and you can't even jerk off because it seems like too much trouble" (172).

In his grief and rage, while playing a winning basketball game against his former reservation school teammates, he humiliates his former best friend, Rowdy. Becoming "ashamed of my anger, my rage, and my pain" he realizes that of those former teammates,

I knew that two or three of those Indians might not have eaten breakfast that morning [...] I knew that

seven or eight of those Indians lived with drunken mothers and fathers [...] I knew that two of those Indians had fathers in prison [...] [a]nd I knew that Rowdy's father was probably going to beat the crap out of him for losing this game. (195-96)

He reaches out for absolution by emailing Rowdy after the season ends, telling him he is "sorry that we beat them so bad and that their season went to hell after that." Rowdy responds by telling Junior, "We'll kick your asses next year [...] and you'll cry like the little faggot you are" (197). Even though the responding email is full of insults, Junior tells us "it was also a little bit friendly, and it was the first time that Rowdy had talked to me since I left the rez. I was a happy faggot!" (198).

Some of the compassion his grandmother evidenced to Junior is starting to show through his cracks. In the final chapters of the book, Junior realizes that he is beginning to change when he goes with his mom and dad to clean the graves of those they've recently lost, and in an emotional release he begins to cry. He tells us he cries for his sister, who's been killed in a house fire, and he cries for himself, but

I was crying for my tribe, too. I was crying because I knew five or ten or fifteen more Spokanes would die during the next year, and that most of them

would die because of booze. I cried because so many [...] were slowly killing themselves and I want them to live. I wanted them to get strong and get sober and get the hell off the rez. (216)

Tears shed in a safe place to mourn once again provide a means for forgiveness and release, as Junior realizes "that I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I was not alone in my loneliness. There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream" (217). He realizes too,

that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms [...] to the tribe of poverty [...] to the tribe of funeral-goers [...] to the tribe of beloved sons. And to the tribe of boys who really missed their best friends. It was a huge realization. And that's when I knew that I was going to be okay. (217)

Within this huge epiphany, Junior, and thus Alexie, finally understands that in his search for equilibrium, he has found his identity expanded, without having to give up his tribal identity in order to find his individual identity. He recognizes that when we can unravel the story of who we are and how we got where we are, the healing has begun.

This reflection echoes Mehl-Madrona's assertion that the ability to reflect answers the four questions one traditional elder told him are essential to healing: "Who are you? Where did you come from? Why are you here? Where are you going?" ("Narrative Medicine" 6). These questions are "powerful because they force us to tell a story about ourselves" (6). It is in the fire—the traumas of our lives—that we are compelled to find the answers to these questions, and when we recognize that our story is entwined with all the stories that came before and that our own story influences the stories that will come after, we are able to discover wholeness.

## CONCLUSION

In sharing his stories, Alexie has evidenced an arc of healing through an evolution of characterization, tone and theme. Illustrating the move from and through the anger and outrage of internalized oppression and disenfranchised grief, to understanding the need for forgiveness and empathy, he helps create a healing community. This healing community is comprised of all who engage with his writing and stories, Native and non-native alike, and are willing to allow his perspective and range of evolution to sympathetically alter their own understanding of the effects of historical trauma.

This empathic coming together helps 'wipe the tears,' echoing the indigenous healing ceremony of the same name. As author George Blue Bird tells us in his article "Wicozani Wakan Ota Akupi (Bringing Back Many Sacred Healings)" the Wiping of the Tears ceremony

is very important because it unites the spirits of our dead relatives and lets them pass on to the world up above. In this ceremony we gather the family and relatives of those who are deceased, and we release the dead through prayer, memorial songs, food, tobacco, and crying. (255)

This sympathetic uniting validates the pain of the trauma, aiding in actively moving through the event[s] towards

release. As Mehl-Madrona emphasizes in Coyote Medicine, "Transformation happens because we are actively participating in creating an experience for ourselves" (277).

Within his attempt to build a community of healing, Alexie has, as Liebman points out, replaced "the dead with his art" (548), effectively releasing the old to make room for the new, with the creative use of language as his vehicle. Through Alexie's creative use of narrative and story he has emphasized the power of language to help his Native community recognize their own power within language. As in "The Summer of Black Widows," the danger of the spoken word is reclaimed in the sharing, demonstrating that if we face our emotions and give them voice, it allows them to be released.

In the interaction between the old story and the new emerges a newly created ceremony, attuning the storyteller with the community that's listening, creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The story's place of living then becomes outward rather than inward—no longer embedded in the body but shared in the greater collective of the community of healing. The storyteller then no longer exists with the story in isolation; rather he or she is defined in relationship to the others sharing the story, with the story now existing relative to rather than as a traumatic absolute, in effect healing the wounded relationship. In remembering,

and thus recovering, our story, we can transcend limitations  
and restore a healing balance.

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