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**'Breaking and Entering':
Sherman Alexie's Urban Indian Literature**

Tom Farrington

**PhD English Literature
The University of Edinburgh
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Declaration

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

An earlier version of chapter one was published in the *Journal of American Studies*, 47.2, May 2013, as 'The Ghost Dance and the Politics of Exclusion in Sherman Alexie's "Distances."' I certify that I have obtained permission from the publisher, Cambridge University Press, to reproduce parts or all of this publication here.

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Tom Farrington

Thesis Abstract

This thesis reads the fiction and poetry of Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie as predominantly urban Indian literature. The primary experience of the growing majority of American Indians in the twenty-first century consists in the various threats and opportunities presented by urban living, yet contemporary criticism of literature by (and about) American Indians continues to focus on the representations of life for those tribally enrolled American Indians living on reservations, under the jurisdiction of tribal governments. This thesis provides critical responses to Alexie's contemporary literary representations of those Indians living apart from tribal lands and the communities and traditions contained therein. I argue that Alexie's multifaceted representations of Indians in the city establish intelligible urban voices that speak across tribal boundaries to those urban Indians variously engaged in creating diverse Indian communities, initiating new urban traditions, and adapting to the anonymities and visibilities that characterise city living.

The thesis takes a broadly linear chronological structure, beginning with Alexie's first published collection of short stories and concluding with his most recent works. Each chapter isolates for examination a distinct aspect of Alexie's urban Indian literature, so demonstrating a potential new critical methodology for reading urban Indian literatures. I open with a short piece explaining my position as a white, British scholar of the heavily politicised field of American Indian literary studies, before the introductory chapter positions Alexie in the wider body of Indian literatures and establishes the historical grounds for the aims and claims of my

research. Chapter one is primarily concerned with the short story 'Distances', from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), and the Ghost Dance religion of the late nineteenth century, reading Alexie's representations of this phenomenon as explorations of the historical and political tensions that divide those Indians living on tribal lands and those living in cities. Chapter two discusses the difficulties of maintaining a tribal identity when negotiating this divide towards the city, analysing the politics of indigenous artistic expression and reception in Alexie's first novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995). Alexie's second novel, *Indian Killer* (1996), signals the relocation of his literary aesthetics to the city streets, and chapter three detects and unravels the anti-essentialist impulse in Alexie's (mis)use of the distinctly urban mystery thriller genre. Grief, death and ritual are explored in chapter four, which focusses on selected stories from *Ten Little Indians* (2003), and explains Alexie's characters' need for new, urban traditions with reference to an ethics of grieving. Chapter five connects the politics of time travel to the representation of trauma in *Flight* (2007), and addresses Alexie's representations of violence in *Ten Little Indians* and *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), proposing that it is the structural violences of daily life, rather than the murder and beatings found throughout his work, that leave lasting impressions on urban Indian subjectivities. My conclusion brings together my approaches to Alexie's urban Indian literature, and suggests further areas for research.

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Überthanks to Dr Kenneth ‘Ken’ Millard for being a top-drawer supervisor, an actual real-life inspiration, and a most excellent dude. This thesis exists because you believed in it. Now, isn’t that sweet?

Thanks to M & FD, Denise and Julian, and Mr & Mrs Farrington. You are the most important people in the world to me.

Maximum respect to those who saw me at my maddest and didn’t make a fuss:

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It would take a lifetime to explain why Morvern Cunningham and Rabiya Choudhry deserve all the gifts in the world. I’ll start tomorrow.

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Thanks to Cambridge University Press for granting permission to reprint that article in a modified form here.

And thanks for reading this, you.

Dedication:

To Joan and Jim Baverstock, who would probably disapprove of such frivolous sentimentality.

Disclaimer

‘When I was a boy, a friend and I used to keep pet crows.’
- Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, xi.

‘Where I grew up there wasn’t much around except books and trees.’
- David Treuer, *Native American Fiction*, 8.

‘As an Indian scholar in graduate school...’
- Sean Teuton, ‘Writing American Indian Politics’.

‘Way back in June 2002 Craig Womack invited me to participate...’
- Janice Acoose, ‘Honoring *Ni’Wahkomakanak*’.

‘I look out my window now on this land, as it begins to turn...’
- Lisa Brooks, ‘Locating an Ethical, Native Criticism.’
(Teuton, Acoose, and Brooks, all from *Reasoning Together*).

‘I am always leery of a critical essay that begins with a personal anecdote. Typically, such forays into the personal lives of the author are thinly veiled moments of self-indulgence. And while I am certainly not going to claim that this essay is any exception, I have decided to throw caution to the wind and ask for the forbearance of the reader as I trace a very brief history of how I arrived at the work of...’
- Dean Rader, ‘I Don’t Speak Navajo: Esther G. Belin’s *In the Belly of My Beauty*.’

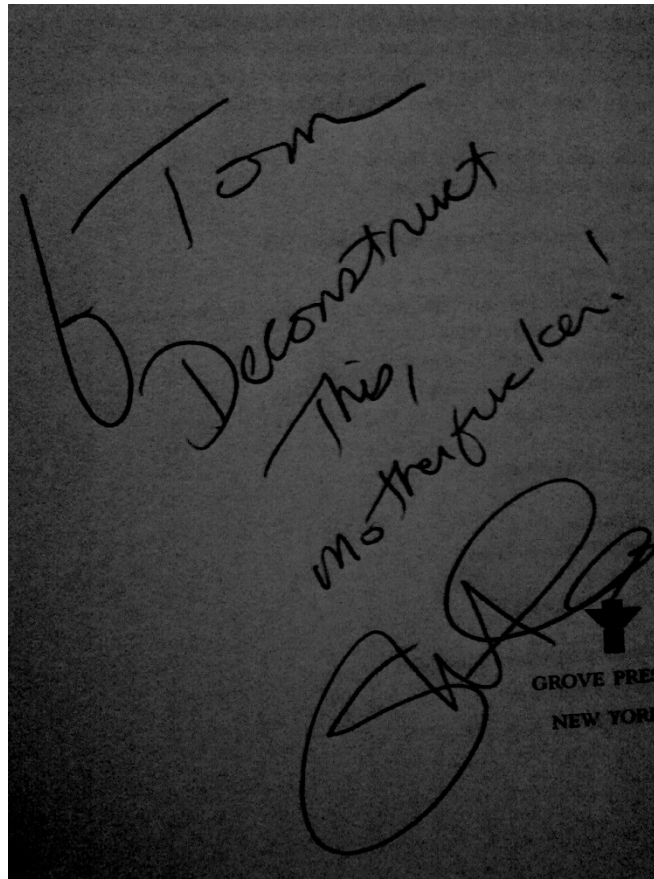
‘There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings.’
- Charles Kinbote, *Pale Fire*.

In recent years it has become somewhat traditional for the critic of Indian literatures¹ to provide informal autobiographical reflections on their path towards this or that publication, in order to indicate their personal investment in the act of literary criticism. Such reflections often begin with the acknowledgement of a tribal affiliation or an Indian relative, which leads into a recollection of the moment at which he or she was inspired to take seriously the study of Indian literatures, before the final paragraph contextualises the composition of this particular piece by noting some pertinent aspect of the critic’s physical surroundings. The perceived need for

¹ See the ‘Terminology’ section for a note on what is meant here by ‘Indian’ and ‘Indian literatures’.

these disclaimers is certainly indicative of the political sensitivity with which one is expected to approach Indian literatures, whilst at the same time hinting at the preference that the reader may or may not feel towards a critic immediately positioned (or not positioned) as a cultural insider. My introduction responds more fully to these problems of reading, but for now, in the interests of keeping tradition alive, it seems appropriate that before I begin examining (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) Sherman Alexie's representations of self and other, I offer my self, as other.

I am a white, British male. I was born in Hull, England in 1982 and moved to Dunblane, Scotland when I was four years old. I have no tribal affiliations nor any Indian relatives, though I did meet two individuals who identified themselves as Indian: one at a youth hostel in Berlin, Germany, and one at a birds of prey centre in Biggleswade, England. We didn't talk about tribes or literature. We did talk about the city and owls, respectively, but not as they appear in, say, *Indian Killer* (1996). I first began to take seriously the study of Indian literatures when I read Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) as part of Dr Kenneth Millard's 'Contemporary American Fiction' class in 2004, during my final year as an undergraduate studying English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. I believe I wrote about the aforementioned collection's 'community' of stories in an exam, though I can't fully recall. My copy of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was purchased for me, by a friend, at one of Alexie's book readings. My friend told Alexie about this thesis, and so my copy bears the following inscription:



Although I think the comma is a mistake, the political fervour and indigenous wisdom that respectively surge and speak through this piece hold me safe in the knowledge that I am approaching Alexie's fiction and poetry in precisely the manner which he has personally demanded of me. I'm joking, of course. The truth is that I found this inscription instantly terrifying: an invitation to fail and move on from the author I wanted everyone to read and love. This sense of exclusion was exacerbated by my initial forays into the field of Native American Studies, particularly the literary and cultural criticism written by Indians. (Laguna Pueblo) Paula Gunn Allen's assertion in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1992) that 'the rules that govern traditional American Indian literatures are very different from those that govern western literature' (Gunn Allen 74) made

me think that I might have recommended Alexie's novels, short stories, and poetry to friends for entirely the wrong reasons. (Creek-Cherokee) Craig Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999) caused me to question the validity and significance of my non-Native, non-tribal critical perspectives, while the pieces collected by Devon Abbott Mihesuah (Choctaw) and Angela Cavender Wilson² (Dakota) in their *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* (2004) left me with the (somewhat ironic) impression that the mere presence of my non-Native scholarly voice might prevent Indian scholarly voices from being heard. The opinions and readings put forth by proponents of literary separatism and tribal nationalism, including Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow-Creek Lakota Sioux), Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), Jace Weaver (Cherokee), and (Osage) Robert Allan Warrior (discussed in the introduction and chapter one below) seemed to preclude my aspirations of writing anything worthwhile about Indian literatures.

Of course, I was wrong to be so thoroughly discouraged by these writers, but right to be encouraged to stop and think about my position as a white, British male, writing about Indian literatures. Robert Dale Parker notes the resonance of bell hooks' claim that '[s]cholars who write about an ethnic group to which they do not belong rarely discuss in the introductions to their work the ethical issues of their race privilege' (Parker 15). As mentioned, as far as I am aware, I have absolutely no traceable biological connection to American Indians, other than the quite significant fact that I am a human being. At present I do not knowingly donate any money to any organizations that benefit Indian peoples. I also haven't made any money from

² Wilson changed her name to Waziyatawin in 2007. The former name is preserved here for reference purposes only.

any of my writing on Indian peoples, and I am not confident that my personal income or sense of social responsibility will allow me to extend my charitable contributions across the Atlantic. Nonetheless, if society finds in my favour, as well as in that of the tens of thousands of children across the globe dying of starvation every day, then I will put what I can afford into those organizations that help urban Indian peoples find homes and communities in the city, and that help all Indian peoples towards a college education. In the meantime, I truly hope that the years I have put into writing this thesis may at least be worth something to those engaged in the field of Native American Studies.

As far as my race privilege is concerned, I am aware of my relative and necessarily undeserved good fortune to be born into a hard-working (and often equally fortunate) white British family who are free to take holidays abroad, but of course this is the only upbringing I could have experienced. Like Terry Goldie in his *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures* (1989), 'I realize that my own reading has a certain very specific centre' and 'I write as an "insider" of only one culture' (7). Unlike Arnold Krupat in his 'A Nice Jewish Boy amongst the Indians' (1996, 88-130), I cannot claim that my ethnic background or family history might provide any particular insight into my critical perspective. I hope that my approach to studying Indian literatures has been suitably respectful of the myriad threats and opportunities that face Indian peoples in the past and present, though of course, I also have no idea of what might change next week.

Whilst I initially found comfort in the cross-cultural cosmopolitanism and mediation of non-Native writers, such as Krupat, James Ruppert, and Elvira Pulitano

(also discussed in the introduction), it was clear that neither these nor the nationalist/indigenist approaches specifically considered urban Indian voices, and that as such there might be a place for my critical voice after all. It struck me that much of the purported incompatibility of these opposed critical perspectives was based on anxieties of the insider/outsider variety, and that what the vast majority of these approaches (both nationalist and cosmopolitan) ultimately suggest is that Indian literatures must be read with closer and more flexible attention to the inescapably diverse representations of Indian individuals and communities. This general, initial sweep across the criticism of Indian literatures should not be taken as my final word on the matter, and is investigated and refined in the introduction, and developed throughout. As indicated throughout the thesis, Alexie's representations of Indians are dynamic and contextual, and it is this resistance to the imposition of definitive Indian characteristics that continues to excite me when reading his works. And I am happy to say that I do still love reading Alexie, and will continue to recommend his work to friends for what I am now sure are the right reasons. Alexie's writing is iconoclastic, unabashed, powerful, funny, sad, and never, ever dull.

Although my initial reactions to Indian literary nationalism proved foolhardy (which is really quite helpful in this sort of personal storytelling), my concerns about my place in all of this remain, and I hope the readings that follow will demonstrate an associated sensitivity to voices and contexts. In order to scholastically recuperate this section, I turn now to Wendy Rose ((Hopi/Miwok), who writes that

The fear exists among non-native writers that we are somehow trying to bar them from writing about Indians at all, that Indian people might be "staking a claim" as the sole interpreters of Indian cultures, most especially of that which is sacred, and asserting that only Indians can make valid observations on themselves. Such fears are not based in fact; I know of no Indian who has ever said this. Nor do I know of any who secretly think it. We accept as given

that whites have as much prerogative to write and speak about us and ours as we have to write and speak about them and theirs. The question is how this is done, and to some extent, why it is done. (Jaimes 415)

I am writing about Sherman Alexie because I think he writes well about difficult things that should be acknowledged and understood by as many people as possible. I am trying to point to the reasons as to why it is not common knowledge that the majority of Indian peoples live in cities. I am definitely not in this for money.

- Tom, Leith, 2014.

Terminology

Where possible I introduce Indian peoples and characters by their tribal affiliations. Please note this occurs for several Indian writers in the section above.

When referring to Indian tribes and tribal nations, I have tended to use the tribal names that are most commonly used in English, rather than those names by which tribal peoples refer to themselves in their own languages.

‘Indian’, ‘American Indian’, ‘Native’, and ‘Native American’ are used interchangeably to refer to those peoples of American Indian or Native Alaskan descent.

By ‘Indian literatures’ I mean literatures written by those of American Indian or Native Alaskan descent who write predominantly about those of American Indian or Native Alaskan descent.

Urban Indians are those Indian peoples who predominantly reside in cities or large towns.

Reservation Indians are those Indian peoples who predominantly reside on an Indian reservation.

I am aware that many Indian peoples do not choose to refer to themselves as any of the above. I do so only for the purposes of this thesis, and hope that those purposes are well-received. None of these terms are designed to limit self-determinations.

‘Euramerican’ is used to refer to white American peoples of European descent, and also Europeans who live in America.

‘Non-Native’ is used in this context to refer to those are not of American Indian or Native Alaskan descent.

Following Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor’s usage, I use ‘*indian*’ to refer to the ongoing process of colonial simulation that replaces the plurality of Indian peoples with an empty container for ‘Indian’ ideas. This is explained further in the introduction.

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Introduction

Breaking with tradition, or: ‘the individual Indian artist’s basic right to be an eccentric bastard.’

Despite the fact that a growing majority of Indians live in cities,³ the growing majority of contemporary criticism of literature by (and about) American Indians continues to focus on the representations of life for those tribally enrolled American Indians living on reservations, under the jurisdiction of tribal governments. This thesis focuses on Sherman Alexie’s fictional representations of Indians in cities, and argues that his unique body of urban Indian literature performs a crucial and corrective intervention into the histories and traditions that otherwise seek to deny the presence of Indians in modernity. To date there are no full-length studies and very few journal articles or chapters that focus on urban Indian literatures. This study of Alexie’s fiction and poetry is intended to be the initial step towards a fuller critical theory of urban Indian literatures, denoting and deploying certain ways of reading representations of city life for Indian peoples. My original contribution to knowledge is the finding that Alexie’s urban Indian literature depicts a heightened possibility of personal decolonisation and economic success for Indians in the city, as opposed to a very low possibility of the same for reservation Indians.

This introductory chapter begins by positioning Alexie’s literary output in relation to the wider body of Indian literatures, from the earliest publications in

³ According to the Urban Indian Health Commission 2007, ‘nearly seven out of every 10 American Indians and Alaska Natives – 2.8 million – live in or near cities, and that number is growing’ (1).

English through the so-called ‘Native American renaissance’ (Lincoln 1983 7) of the late 1960 and 1970s, into the twenty-first century, thereby describing Alexie’s literary expansion of and divergence from the concerns of other Indian writers. The development of scholarship on Indian literatures is then discussed, charting the origins and outcomes of the debate between cosmopolitanism and nationalist approaches. Attention is paid to the thinking of those whose work has most significantly shaped the reception of contemporary Indian literatures, namely Arnold Krupat, Gerald Vizenor, and the most prominent literary nationalists, Robert Allan Warrior, Jace Weaver, and Craig Womack. The chapter then presents historical overviews of Indians in the city, the emergence of colonial stereotypes, and federal policy, before considering the relevance of postcolonial perspectives to this study. The final section explains my critical approach.

Alexie and (a) tradition

Author, filmmaker, and comedian Sherman Alexie’s four novels, six short story collections, twelve books of poetry, two screenplays, and various film and television credits place him alongside Louise Erdrich (Chippewa) and Gerald Vizenor as one of the most prolific and diverse of contemporary American Indian writers. Born in 1966, Alexie was born and raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Alexie’s father was of Coeur d’Alene descent and his mother of Colville, Flathead, Spokane, and Euramerican descent. Alexie currently lives in Seattle, and according to his website, fallsapart.com, ‘has been an urban Indian since 1994’. These biographical facts are of particular importance when reading Alexie’s early poetry collections and his first book of short stories, *The Lone*

Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, as many of these initial pieces are based on Alexie's lived experiences growing up on the Spokane Indian reservation.⁴

In hailing Alexie as 'one of the major lyric voices of our time' (n. pag.), James R. Kincaid's review of *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992) in *The New York Times Book Review* (1992) brought Alexie considerable attention from academic and mainstream audiences. Further details of Alexie's career trajectory can be found in the introductory chapters of Daniel Grassian's *Understanding Sherman Alexie* (2005) and Jeff Berglund and Jan Roush's *Sherman Alexie: A Collection of Critical Essays* (2010). Since the latter, Alexie has published *Blasphemy* (2013), being a collection of new and previously published short stories, the poetry collection *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned* (2013), and multiple very short stories, articles, and opinion pieces at *The Stranger*, which is an online newspaper based in Seattle. These latest works do not receive sustained critical attention in this thesis, nor does his multi-award-winning YA novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), although *Blasphemy* is briefly discussed in the conclusion.

Alexie has also written screenplays for films, broadly based on his poetry and prose. *Smoke Signals* (1998) was adapted primarily from the short story 'This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona' from *The Lone Ranger...*, and features Alexie's lyrics on the soundtrack. This musical collaboration with guitarist Jim Boyd (Sinixt) can also be heard on *Reservation Blues: The Soundtrack* (1995), written to accompany Alexie's novel of the same name. Alexie also wrote and directed *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), which explores the tensions between city and

⁴ Despite this early reservation focus, Alexie's imagination was already engaged by the distinct threats and opportunities represented by the city, and it is the contention of this thesis that his writing has featured predominantly urban concerns since the publication of *Indian Killer* in 1996. Chapter one discusses the urban concerns of even Alexie's earliest short story collection.

reservation living experienced by Seymour Polatkin, a gay urban Indian poet, and wrote the documentary short *49?* (2003), which looks at the genre of ‘49’ songs alongside the work of various Indian artists. This extensive list of projects, considered alongside his many television appearances, public readings, poetry slam triumphs, stand-up comedy performances, and daily observations on twitter.com as @Sherman_Alexie,⁵ should help to convey some sense of the range of Alexie’s oeuvre.

It is Alexie’s novels, short stories, and poetry that are of primary relevance to this study, and so it is important to consider this literary output in relation to the development of a wider body of Indian literatures. Several detailed and broadly similar general surveys of Indian literatures have been published in recent years,⁶ and it is my intention to utilise rather than replicate such scholarship. Whether or not their authors choose to comment upon the ambiguity and controversy of the term ‘renaissance’,⁷ these surveys acknowledge Kenneth Lincoln’s *Native American Renaissance* (1983) in noting the unprecedented critical and public attention brought to Indian authors following N. Scott Momaday’s Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his *House Made of Dawn* (1968). In *Native American Literatures: An Introduction* (2004), Suzanne Lundquist explains that this ‘renaissance’:

took three forms: confidence on the part of contemporary Native authors in reclaiming their heritage in their own literary expressions; concern with finding and reevaluating early literary works by Native authors; and renewed

⁵ Like much of Alexie’s writing, these online observations are often overtly political, apparently self-contradictory, and very funny. For example, on 27th November 2014, Alexie tweeted: ‘You know, without the Pilgrims, we Natives wouldn’t have WiFi’, swiftly followed by ‘To celebrate Thanksgiving, I got a lower back tattoo of my tribal enrollment number inside a dreamcatcher.’ As will become apparent in chapter six, Alexie often uses dark humour to tackle the gravest topics.

⁶ For example, see the introductory chapters of Lundquist 2004, Porter and Roemer 2005, Tillett 2007.

⁷ See Womack et al. 2008 16-17.

interest in anthologies of translations of traditional artistic expression – myths, prayers, ceremonies, rituals, love songs, oratory, etc. (38).

I choose Lundquist's summation of the effects of Momaday's prize on Indian literary output over Lincoln's broad assertions of the associated authors' 'written renewal of oral traditions translated into Western literary forms' (Lincoln 1983 8) for reasons that will be made clear in the next section of this chapter. Crucial to the immediate discussion is Lundquist's central point that, of course, Indian literatures were being published, read, and reflected upon in previous centuries. Although a greater number and variety of works by Indian authors were published after 1968,⁸ and typically Alexie's writing has been compared with that of this later period, this thesis understands Alexie as adopting an explicitly critical approach to the representation of contemporary Indians that may be traced back to the earliest Indian literatures published in English.

The first such publication in English of an Indian author is generally accepted to be (Mohegan) Samson Occom's *Sermon Preached by Samson Occom, Minister of the Gospel, and Missionary to the Indians; at the Execution of Moses Paul, An Indian* (1772), in which Occom discusses the evils of excessive alcohol consumption. As Rebecca Tillett notes, whilst this may initially appear to confirm 'pervasive popular Indian stereotypes' (Tillett 10) (such stereotypes are discussed later in this chapter, and in chapter three), Occom in fact aims his argument 'at the additional crimes resulting from white abuses of unequal power relations' (10), and 'equates the sin of alcohol abuse with the sin of alcohol provision' (10). Robert Warrior's assessment of (Pequot) William Apess's *Eulogy on King Philip* (1837) as 'a stunning

⁸ In *Other Destinies* (1992), Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee) notes that 'before 1968 only nine novels by American Indian authors had been published' (24).

revision of American history in which Apess condemns the historical and contemporary practices by which Natives lost and were losing their lands' (Warrior 2004 1) places a similar emphasis on the political function of the earliest Indian literatures. Tillett charts this 'tradition of activism' (24) through the best known novels by Indian authors, such as (Muscogee Creek) S. Alice Callahan's *Wynema: A Child of the Forest* (1891), (Okanogan) Mourning Dove's *Cogewea: the Half-Blood* (1927), (Osage) John Joseph Mathews's *Sundown* (1934), (Cree/Salish & Kootenai/Salish) D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (1936), *House Made of Dawn*, and (Blackfoot/Gros Ventre) James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974). Tillett finds these novels tackling problems faced by contemporaneous Indian individuals and communities according to their relative social and historical contexts. For instance, relative to their publications in the 1930s, *Sundown* and *The Surrounded* consider the tensions arising when 'Euro-American demands for greater socio-cultural integration and assimilation are pitted against Indian attempts to maintain traditional cultural concepts and values' (Tillett 28). Along with several other works by Indian writers, Vizenor's debut novel *Darkness in St Louis Bearheart* (1978)⁹ is also discussed by Tillett, and Alexie is later briefly considered, but without reference to the activist approach earlier identified.¹⁰

⁹ Vizenor is given particular mention here as his typically surreal and energetic fictions remain perhaps the most challenging of all Indian literatures, in their seemingly haphazard structures, openly eclectic range of cultural influences, experimental styles, and overtly taboo-breaking content. Vizenor's later novels, such as *Dead Voices: Natural Agonies in the New World* (1992) and *Hotline Healers: An Almost Browne Novel* (1997) can certainly be considered urban Indian literature, and it is a limitation of this thesis that these novels are not here given the critical attention they deserve. These unique works are so entirely absorbing that their analysis here would threaten the coherence of this thesis. Attention has instead been given to Vizenor's theoretical writings, which significantly inform my critical perspectives, and which are discussed later in this section.

¹⁰ That this identification is not fully developed by Tillett is perhaps due to the introductory nature and purpose of her study.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the activist approach finds its clearest expression in non-fictional political and historical writing by both Indian and non-Native writers, such as (Standing Rock Sioux) Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969), Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970), Vizenor's *The People Named the Chippewa* (1984), (Comanche) Paul Chaat Smith and Warrior's *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (1996), (Kahnawake Mohawk) Taiaiake Alfred's *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (1999), and Daniel K. Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country* (2001). These works variously seek to revise and re-present the history of Indian and Euramerican relations from (or through the incorporation of) indigenous perspectives, critique the underlying prejudices and power structures of federal and tribal governance, and lay the political, sociological, and philosophical groundwork for tribal sovereignty and self-determination. In order to position Alexie in relation to the wider body of Indian literatures, I contend that his literary output is an often explicit continuation of this activist strand of Indian literatures into the twenty-first century, exploring issues relevant to twenty-first century Indians, the growing majority of whom live in towns and cities. This is not to imply that other Indian authors such as Paula Gunn Allen, Esther Belin (Diné), Louise Erdrich, Diane Glancy (Cherokee), Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), Joy Harjo (Muskogee Creek), Thomas King (Cherokee), Adrian C. Louis (Paiute), Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), Louis Owens, Rose, Greg Sarris (Pomo/Miwok), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), and many others have not been or are not currently involved in activism or politically engaged writing. Furthermore, these and other Indian authors have certainly written fiction and/or poetry that presents or refers to urban Indian

characters. For instance, Hogan's *Savings* (1988) focuses on the experiences of urban Indians in Minneapolis, Glancy's *Firesticks* (1993) in various cities in Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma, and Sarris's *Grand Avenue* (1994) in Santa Rosa. I contend that Alexie is the Indian author who most actively and fully explores the disparity between the primarily urban lived experience of the growing majority of American Indians and the continued emphasis on tribal and reservation living in contemporary writing on Indian literatures and cultures. At a basic level of tone, that which distinguishes Alexie's writing from that of other Indian authors, and which is initially indicative of his often bare literary engagement with tribal and federal politics, is anger.

Again, it would be foolhardy to suggest that Alexie is the only Indian writer whose writing expresses anger. It is rather that Alexie is the only contemporary Indian writer who consistently receives critical attention for writing anger. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez writes of Alexie's 'powerful voice that speaks of the realities of worlds that continually push each other to the point of discursive and actual implosion' (190), reading '[t]hroughout Alexie's writing...a critically discursive stance against virtually anyone and anything' (191) and 'an equal opportunity anger that perceives both the weaknesses and failures of both Indian and white worlds' (191). As discussed in chapters three and six, Krupat reads *Indian Killer* as a 'frightening' but necessary articulation of a cathartic 'rage stage' in Indian literatures (2011 103, 115). Grassian sees something more concrete in this anger, claiming that 'Alexie...uses poetry precisely to transform rage or anger into something productive or constructive' (48). Ron McFarland finds 'a combativeness that distinguishes Alexie's often polemical poems...and there is nearly always controversy or

argument, implied or direct, in his poems and stories' (253), while Lincoln goes so far as to brand Alexie an 'enfant terrible' (1999 239). This political anger, I suggest, is that which most convincingly connects Alexie's work not to the fiction of Lincoln's narrow 'renaissance', but to the long strand of literary activism that begins with Occom's eighteenth century *Sermon*....

In *Seeing Red: Anger, Sentimentality, and American Indians* (2008), Cari M. Carpenter discusses the implications of 'making anger a subject of Native American literature' (11-12), such as the potential for 'simply reifying Euro-American constructions of the "savage" or "stoic"' (12), and the importance of 'consider[ing] whether anger is represented and understood differently in Native [and non-Native] communities' (12). I do not wish to suggest that anger is characteristic of a pan-Indian literary aesthetic, and I hope that the readings of Alexie's works offered below are understood to be established within a framework that is specifically and suitably responsive to individual and cultural differences. At the same time, whilst the contexts, subjects, and expressions of their angers certainly differs, I contend that Alexie's anger is indicative of the politicised literary activism of a similar sort to that identified by Carpenter in nineteenth-century writing by Callahan, E. Pauline Johnson (Mohawk), and Sarah Winnemucca (Paiute). Continuing and expanding the activist tradition identified above, Alexie's urban Indian literature incorporates historical revisionism, federal and tribal governmental critiques, and extended meditations on what it might mean to be Indian in the city. I argue that Alexie's multifaceted representations of Indians in the city establish intelligible urban voices that speak across tribal boundaries to those urban Indians variously engaged in creating diverse Indian communities, initiating new urban traditions, and adapting to

the anonymities and visibilities that characterise city living. Alexie's is not the only writing on Indians in the city, but (I contend) no other author publishes on Indians in the city with comparable fluency, frequency, and critical insight.

Aesthetics, Activism, and Schism

At this point, it may appear that I am following most other critics of Indian literatures in attempting to discern and describe an aesthetic approach (writing anger) that appears to be particular to Indian literatures from a given point in history onwards, before going on to compare and contrast this with works from a selected author. I wish to make it as clear as possible that this is not my approach. As Parker points out in *The Invention of Native American Literature* (2003), critics such as Gunn Allen and Kimberly M. Blaeser (Anishinaabe) make such attempts to describe an Indian aesthetic, with Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* determining an 'Indian consciousness' (Gunn Allen 151) only in those works that display the 'psychic integration of ceremonial time' (150), which is deemed 'a factor in the ultimate significance of the book' (150). Blaeser reiterates the Indian specificity of this non-linear characteristic, discerning a 'Native aesthetic of circularity, both spiritual and literary' (Blaeser 563) in 'works by writers such as Hogan, Diane Glancy, Leslie Silko, and Marilou Awiakta [Cherokee]' (556). Parker is critical of such an approach, asserting that '[m]ore non-Native than Native writers practice the aesthetic (or collection of aesthetics) that Blaeser describes; nor is her aesthetic necessarily congenial to all Native writers' (11). Although Womack excuses the approach taken by Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop*, arguing that her apparent essentialism¹¹ is

¹¹ See chapter three for an extended discussion of essentialism.

strategic in form, and pioneering in content, he is similarly critical of attempts to describe an Indian aesthetic. In *Reasoning Together* (2008), Womack criticises de Ramirez's characterisation of Native novels as 'oral novels' along the same lines as Parker does Gunn Allen and Blaeser, remarking that

[i]f one deems the criteria for what makes an Indian novel Indian to be based on a universalized set of cultural traits rooted in the oral tradition that differentiates it from "white" writing, one ironically, runs the risk of reducing difference, making these traits much the same as the European literary movement that dominated a good deal of the twentieth century – given modernism's similar characteristics of disrupted chronology and so forth that Brill claims for the oral tradition and for oral novels (Womack et al. 38).¹²

One of the problems, of course, with the decision that particular narrative forms and strategies are emblematic of a particular culture or tradition is the limitations such a decision imposes on future readings, and even future artistry. The immediate critical reaction to such declarations might be to point out exceptions to the rule, or to offer alternative readings of these aspects, and the immediate artistic reaction might be to create such an exception, but these activities still operate within a framework that typically seeks to establish tradition and counter-tradition. It is not that critics who take this approach cannot offer convincing readings, or provide critical insight within that framework. N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1978) do both exhibit an 'achronology' (Gunn Allen 147), and Gunn Allen's assertion that this form exposes and responds to the 'connection between factories and clocks, and...between colonial imperialism and factories' (151) is enlightening. Blaeser's reading of Awiakta's *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom* (1993) as 'address(ing) our

¹² Of course, the accepted traits of modernism can be found in both much earlier and later writing (e.g. the nonlinear chronology of Laurence Sterne's *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, gentleman* [1770] and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* [1969]), which further complicates the process of creating literary history.

involvement with the world at large: the impact our mode of living has on the health of our environment and our response-ability to it' (560) is fairly interesting, if a little expository. These readings may work for individual texts, but the additional metacritical claims that such forms are indicative of a general Indian aesthetic are at best narrow-minded, and at worst exclusionary. Quoted in Lincoln's *Native American Renaissance*, Rose articulates further problems of discerning a singular notion of Indian literature as follows:

If your idea is based on the Indian-authored works you have read, consider the fact that it is often chosen according to editors' stereotypes. If your idea is based on a solid academic background about tribal literatures, consider that many of us do not speak our native language, were not raised on our ancestral land, and have no literary tradition other than what we received in some classroom. If your idea is based on the observation of certain themes or images, consider that there is no genre of "Indian literature" because we *are* all different. There is only literature that is written by people who are Indian and who, therefore, infuse their work with their own lives the same way that you do (Lincoln 1983 183).

Within Rose's general argument for the acknowledgement of thematic and aesthetic diversity across all literatures, Indian-authored or not, the influence of any sort of Indian literary tradition on (at least) non-tribal Indian literatures is here explicitly denied, as is even the usefulness of 'Indian literature' as a generic classification.¹³ Rose's first comment here points to the restrictive effect such classifications have upon the literary canon,¹⁴ prefiguring Parker's remark that '[a]ll too predictably, the visibility of best-sellers has the accidental side effect of letting a few writers take over the landscape of Indian writing and blot out the many other Indian writers both past and present' (vii). Womack notes the contribution of

¹³ Problems of genre are discussed in chapter four.

¹⁴ From the title alone, Krupat's *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (1989) may appear to offer some insight at this point, yet this study is largely concerned with arguing for the incorporation of Indian literatures into the canon of American Literature.

scholarship to this occlusion, writing that '[b]y 1990, though more than two thousand books had been authored by Native people in twenty years, a huge proportion of the critical attention had been focused on... five novels' (Womack et al. 17), being *House Made of Dawn*, *Winter in the Blood*, *Ceremony*, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, and Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984). The process by which certain artefacts are chosen to represent a period of cultural output is famously described by Raymond Williams as 'the selective tradition' (54) which 'creates, at one level, a general human culture; at another level, the historical record of a particular society; at a third level, most difficult to accept and assess, a rejection of considerable areas of what was once a living culture' (55). As such, suggests Womack, '[m]ost Native authors of fiction have a greater chance of batting in next year's World Series than receiving critical recognition, even in an Indian literary journal' (Womack et al. 17).

Following Pierre Bourdieu (1985), Nel van Dijk explains that 'it is the relative positions of the persons and institutions that produce, consume, and evaluate cultural objects that determine their status – and therefore the very conditions of their production, evaluation, and consumption' (van Dijk 122-3). Thus van Dijk notes the defining role of 'literary institutions and in particular the institution of criticism' (123) in the formation of the literary canon. Womack concurs that '[m]uch of this has to do with pedagogy' (Womack et al. 17), as

[t]hose who write the articles [and] teach these particular canonical works in their classes... would have to rethink the Indian world if they began teaching fiction outside of... modes that have been prevalent in the popular fiction and its attendant criticism (Womack et al. 17).

When the majority of contemporary criticism of literature about American Indians continues to focus on the representations of life for those tribally enrolled American Indians living on reservations, the novels that will be anthologised in

collections and promoted to general readers are those that reflect this focus. It is worth making a distinction at this point. Whilst novels such as *Ceremony* and *House Made of Dawn* feature characters moving between reservation and city settings, they are not novels primarily concerned with representing Indians and Indian communities living permanently in the city. It is these representations of urban Indians (in Alexie and elsewhere) that force a ‘rethink [of] the Indian world’ for scholars and general readers.

To some extent, the development of scholarship on Native American literature in recent years has turned away from the generalising impulse demonstrated by Gunn Allen and Blaeser. In *Politics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Native American Literature* (2010), Matthew Herman writes that the publication of Krupat’s *Voice in the Margin* and Warrior’s *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (1995) led the way for a series of scholarly texts on Indian literatures that share a ‘commitment to politics’ (2010 2). Herman lists Cook-Lynn’s *Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner* (1996), Weaver’s *That the People Might Live* (1997), and Womack’s *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* as key texts amongst a post-1980s Native American literary criticism and theory

marked by an undeniable preoccupation with questions of power, propriety, authority, representation, and status and how these relate both to individual texts and the concerns they narrative and to sociological inquiries into the practice, production, distribution, and reception of Native American literature (2010 2).

This ‘determined political turn’ (Herman 2010 3) in Native American literary criticism thus offers an alternative overall approach to the focus on describing a definitive Native aesthetic, seeking instead to acknowledge the diversity of Indian

voices and purposes. As expected from a freshly politicised field, a schism became immediately apparent between the critical assessments of Krupat and Warrior. Herman first explored this in his article ‘The Krupat-Warrior Debate: A Preliminary Account’ (2003), and whilst I do not wish to repeat his discussions, an understanding of the approaches offered by these seminal works helps to clarify my subject position. As Herman notes, these texts ‘constitute both the origin and the core of the primary active nationalism versus cosmopolitanism debate’ (2003 61) that continues into all but the most recent scholarship on Indian literatures.

Krupat’s critical approach to Indian literatures may be broadly understood as a variant of the hybridity theories developed by scholars of postcolonial theory such as Homi K. Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and Gayatri Spivak.¹⁵ Specifically, it is the Bakhtinian notion of hybridity, associated with the political force of linguistic multiplicity, that drives Krupat’s critical work, and which provides a theoretical basis for his reading of Indian literatures as dramatisations of negotiations between local, national, and international cultures, so challenging the colonial cultural stasis maintained by the stereotyping of Indian identity. Krupat’s ‘ethnocriticism’ offers readings of Indian literatures that emphasise multicultural influences, thereby ‘contributing to the possibility of institutionalizing...the *polyvocal polity*’ (Krupat 1992 4, emphasis in original). This ‘polyvocal polity’ is explained in Krupat’s essay ‘The Dialogic of Silko’s *Storyteller*’, which finds ‘dialogic as dialectic’ (Vizenor 1989 65) in *Storyteller* (1981), and maintains that the plurality of voices within the collection is presented as a set of responses to the ‘normative [Pueblo] voice’ at the

¹⁵ See Bhabha 1994, Gilroy 1993, Hall in Williams & Chrisman 1993, and Spivak 1987, 2004. Curiously, Krupat does not consider Indian literatures to be postcolonial literatures. The issue of postcolonialism and Indian literatures is taken up in a dedicated section below.

novel's linguistic and thematic centre (Vizenor 1989 65). Krupat clarifies the political potency of polyvocality by relating the concept to Paul Rabinow's definition of cosmopolitanism 'as an ethos of macro-interdependencies, with an acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of places, historical trajectories, and fates' that must avoid 'reify[ing] local identities or construct[ing] universal ones' (Rabinow 258). So Krupat offers a methodology of reading Indian literatures that situates the studied text or texts within increasingly larger and more diverse contexts, pointing to similarities in theme and form shared by texts written by authors of arguably disparate cultural and political locations.¹⁶

Warrior's supposedly oppositional approach in *Tribal Secrets* is to read the works of Vine Deloria Jr. and John Joseph Matthews in relation to tribal political concerns and Indian critical and cultural theories, thereby offering 'a sincere engagement with a variety of voices and perspectives that make up contemporary Native America' (xviii). In doing so, Warrior develops the concept and framework of 'intellectual sovereignty' (87) as providing 'a way of recognizing the important influences of economics, gender, and the politics of publishing and the academy' (107) in order to challenge the 'colonial networks' that surround colonized peoples (107). Warrior's 'intellectual sovereignty' lacks a definitive conceptualisation, but may be understood as an assertion of the importance of understanding tribal politics and cultures through a wholesale engagement with the intellectual traditions of those tribal nations. As the title suggests, Warrior's subsequent book-length work of literary criticism, *The People and the Word: Reading Native Nonfiction* (2005) focuses on creative non-fiction, which Warrior sees as understudied and fundamental

¹⁶ Krupat's principal reading of Alexie's work focuses on *Indian Killer*. This is discussed in chapter three.

in its influence on tribal literatures. Again, Warrior's prioritisation of tribal experience and traditions is here part of a larger political strategy that takes the achievement of intellectual (and political) sovereignty as its primary motivation.

The literary nationalist approach has been developed by (amongst others) Weaver in *That the People Might Live* (1997), in which Weaver discusses the 'communitist' trend in Native literatures, contending that 'the single thing that most defines Indian literatures relates to this sense of community and commitment to it' (43), and Womack in *Red on Red*, in which Womack reads a traditional Creek story as 'an example of how profound the literary nuances of Creek traditional narratives can be' (1999 76). Womack's purpose is 'to contribute...toward opening up a dialogue among Creek people, specifically, and Native people, more generally, regarding what constitutes meaningful literary efforts' (1). Noting their shared critical debt to the nationalist critical agenda of Simon J. Ortiz' 'Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism' (1981), Weaver, Womack, and Warrior have recently joined forces to produce *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006) which currently resides at the forefront of Native literary scholarship. Here and elsewhere, the literary nationalists (further discussed in chapter one) then, describe an approach to creating a tribal-centric literature and literary theory which, as you might expect, takes as its central focus the stories and representations of specific tribes and tribal nations.

As noted by Herman, Warrior presents three central criticisms of Krupat in *Tribal Secrets*. Warrior asserts that Krupat privileges traditional oral storytelling as the 'most worthy of inclusion in the canon' (Warrior 29), that he 'assumes that American Indian literature belongs first to the *national* literature of the United States

and only secondarily to itself and to the literature of other colonized people' (Warrior 30), and that he wilfully ignores 'the context of contemporary American Indian political struggles' (30). It is difficult to defend Krupat's earliest publications against the general thrust of these criticisms, although as Krupat points out in his subsequent *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism & Culture* (1996) the notion of a literature 'belonging' to anyone is not a claim he has ever made. As noted above, the privileging of oral storytelling as the primary mode of Indian expression is unnecessarily restrictive, and despite Krupat's apparent sensitivity to stereotyping, this approach risks essentialism. There is certainly a lack of engagement with the unique situations of Indian politics in *Voice in the Margin*, and whilst his discussion of postcolonialism in *The Turn to the Native* may be read as an implicit acknowledgement of this criticism, it is not until *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (2002) that Krupat attempts to incorporate tribal politics and literary nationalism into a revised 'cosmopolitan comparativism' (2002 ix). This strategy is reminiscent of Spivak's transnational approach to cultural studies in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), and appears to be at least partially driven by Warrior's earliest criticisms, in that it specifically relates Indian literatures 'to the literature of other colonized people' (Warrior 30). Indeed, *Red Matters* signals a significant shift in Krupat's critical perspective, which sees Krupat apparently admitting that 'extending sovereignty...is the foremost political task Native nations face today' (2002 3).¹⁷ In *All That Remains: Varieties of Indigenous Expression* (2009), Krupat appears to largely abandon his earlier cosmopolitanist approach and align himself

¹⁷ Unfortunately, as Sean Teuton (Cherokee) points out, in discussing Indian nationhood Krupat relies upon definitions produced in a court case 'that actually reduced Native state sovereignty' (Teuton 153).

further with the nationalists, devoting an entire chapter to Cherokee literary history. Although Krupat's most recent volume *'That the People May Live': Loss and Renewal in Native American Elegy* (2012) returns to oral texts, his central contribution is to highlight and analyse tribal-specific elegiac expression that has largely gone unexamined, with predominant reference to tribal-specific intellectual and cultural traditions. That this work borrows its title from Weaver is surely an acquiescence to the dominance of literary nationalism in contemporary scholarship on Indian literatures.

In *Plural Sovereignties and Contemporary Indigenous Literature* (2009), Stuart Christie provides a helpful overview of the development of this intellectual schism, which still tends to divide and direct the study of Indian literatures. Christie places the cosmopolitan, multi or cross-culturalist, dialogic, and/or hybridist critics in the 'constructivist' corner, pitted against the tribal-centric, nationalist, indigenist, and/or separatist critics that can be found endorsing tribal sovereignties in the 'materialist' corner (Christie 4). Krupat, Owens, and Vizenor are the constructivists most frequently published and referenced, whilst Ortiz, Warrior, Weaver, Womack are the opposed materialists. As mentioned in the disclaimer, I am not convinced that these views were ever entirely incompatible; they simply approach the same basic problem from different angles. The problem is the silencing of Indian voices through colonial processes. The constructivist points to an international plurality of voices that exert their authority only within specific parameters, so destabilising colonial authority, but in doing so this approach is said to dissolve the authority of the tribal voice. The materialist approaches the problem by asserting the individuality of tribal traditions, but in doing so is said to withdraw from the wider world. In fact, neither

of these approaches necessarily detracts from the validity of the other. The constructivist can benefit from the materialist establishment of another perspective, and the materialist can benefit from the differentiating multiplicity of perspectives granted when that voice is seen as part of a global network. I believe much of the perceived tension has stemmed from early critical aggression between Krupat, Warrior, and Weaver (which Womack admits was regrettable [Eliot]), and a tendency from both camps to define themselves by what they definitely were not. In 2011 these two sides met for a filmed discussion, featuring Krupat and Pulitano on one side, and Womack and Lisa Brooks (Abenaki) on the other. The expected sparks did not fly, with Womack stating that '[n]ationalist criticism is necessarily internationally relevant, in that 'we're talking about stuff that originated with three countries, France, England and Spain, working out power relations in the New World' (Eliot). Womack then admitted that his infamous rebuttal (in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*) of the position expressed by Pulitano in her *Towards a Native American Critical Theory* (2003) was a result of Pulitano's critical aptitude, saying

I think it made me recognize things in myself that I wasn't quite ready for yet...I think then one of the things that's been consistent since I cooled down is that my concern is...you're so convincing...I mean, I think that's part of why I was so defensive is because...how are you ever going to argue against this because she's right? (Eliot)

Similarly, Krupat concedes that '[c]osmopolitan values had to work through the category of the nation, so I don't see myself as opposed to broad critical nationalism in the ways that it's been articulated' (Eliot).

This once fiery debate can perhaps be seen as a completed chapter in the history of Native literary scholarship, but the approaches articulated by both sides of the debate are still useful in situating current perspectives. As such, my readings of

Alexie's urban Indian literature are both constructivist, in the sense that they assert the subjectivity of allegedly objective voices but do not engage with tribe-specific intellectual traditions, and materialist, in the sense that they establish the discrete conditions from which urban Indian subjectivities are developed, and attempt to look at urban issues from urban perspectives. The problem with both of these perspectives for my purposes is that none of the aforementioned constructivists or materialists make any significant reference to representations of urban Indians. None of them, that is, apart from Vizenor, whose place on the constructivist side of the debate is curious to say the least, given, for instance, his sustained interest in tribe-specific histories and intellectual traditions, and his ongoing concerns with sovereignty.

Whilst Cook-Lynn associates Vizenor with 'a tacit notion of the failure of tribal governments as Native institutions and of sovereignty as a concept, and an Indian identity which focuses on individualism rather than First Nation ideology' (1996a 67), Womack specifically contests Cook-Lynn's criticism and asserts that Vizenor's 'futuristic tribal pilgrims...in [the] Mad Max postapocalyptic road journey [of] *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*...have something to teach us about the human, and the tribal, condition, the real Indian world' (Womack et al. 82). Similarly, Weaver claims that Vizenor 'uses the postmodern to deconstruct outside view predicates of what constitutes "Indians"...to create new potential for cultural identity and coherence' (1997, 141). As mentioned above, at least two of Vizenor's novels focus on urban Indians, and establishing 'the sound of our new stories in the cities' (Vizenor 1992 136). As Vizenor seems to have occupied a fairly unique position in this debate, I now turn to a consideration of his theoretical writings in order to further refine my critical position.

Gerald Vizenor and the absence of the real

Vizenor engages with ideas from theorists whose writings have gained critical currency in contemporary studies of postmodernism, namely Mikhail Bakhtin, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, in order to define his useful theories and evocative neologisms. In explaining his notion of the *indian*, Vizenor employs Baudrillard's definitions of the simulation and the hyperreal. This simulation is a process of the colonial legacy, replacing the plural dynamics that inform Indian identities with a void that is filled with shifting symbols of 'Indian-ness'. As Baudrillard has it, the simulation is 'no longer that of the territory, a referential being or a substance...[i]t is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it' (Vizenor 1999 9). The definitions placed on indigenous peoples in the pursuit of colonial dominance, which refer to a static 'Indian-ness' that was always already a colonial fiction, become models for engaging with and defining real Indian peoples, despite the inherent falsity of the original definitions. This process of simulation continues today, in stereotypes and in the cultural and market values ascribed to *indian* spirituality, knowledge, and artistry. This chimes with Vizenor's use of Eco's idea of the 'absolute fake' as representing authenticity in the 'American imagination' (1999 9). Vizenor's writing style is immersive, subversive, and often unforgiving, but his ideas are fundamental to this thesis, so it is important to reflect adequately upon them. I have attempted to explain his concepts by engaging with them in a style that respects his innovation, but I also use examples from Alexie's urban Indian literatures to illustrate Vizenor's ideas. This

is despite Alexie's apparent dislike of Vizenor, who he accuses of 'obtuse...word masturbation' (Purdy 7).

As 'the absence of real natives', the *indian* provides a blank space onto which can be projected the derivations of the colonial 'lexicon' (1999 vii). Rather than being an easily dismissable stereotype of Indian peoples, the *indian* must be understood as 'an overseas enactment that has no referent to real native cultures or communities' (1999 vii). When Jack Wilson imagines who the Indian Killer might call on a free 'phone, he immediately defaults to anachronism, thinking of 'an ancient ancestor, somebody from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, a wise old medicine man...who was murdered by white people' (*Indian Killer* 233). This reach into the simulations of the 'tragic archives of dominance and victimry' (Vizenor 1999 x) is Wilson's demonstration of his *indian* knowledge.

At the same time the *indian* may be utilised by Indian peoples in exhibiting a valuable sense of authenticity. Turning briefly to Alexie's 'Fearful Symmetry', we find Sherwin Polatkin (Spokane) selling his writerly talents to a Hollywood producer as an *indian*, claiming 'I'm indigenous to the West, and to the idea of the West, and you're not going to find that sort of experience in film school' (*War Dances* 165). Although Sherwin immediately retracts this statement, his deployment of the *indian* is a tactic used by other urban Indian characters to allude to an esoteric exceptionalism and so prevent further inquiry. This silence that is expected to follow is perhaps the best way of understanding the *indian* as 'the absence of real natives', in that the silence is expected to be filled by the imagination of the non-Native, in attaching some sort of meaning to the idea that all Indian peoples have inherent access to knowledge that others do not. Although Vizenor asserts that even 'Indian'

is now a sign with no referent, preferring to use ‘native’ instead, I use ‘Indian’ and ‘Native’ interchangeably, preferring ‘Indian’ simply because this is Alexie’s preference.

‘Survivance’ is another important concept, combining survival and resistance to create ‘an active sense of presence’ inscribing and inscribed by ‘the eternal traces of native modernity’ (Vizenor 1999 vii). Survivance is that which resists the denials by colonial histories of continuing Native engagement with the history of modernity. By asserting an active place for Indian peoples in the past, present, and future of America’s industrial successes, Indian peoples can both claim the right to be in the city that is typically denied, and resist the hopeless *indian* simulations that threaten their psychological wellbeing. Vizenor imbues the concept with the notion of ownership, writing that ‘[s]urvivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy’ (1999 vii). My overall claim for Alexie’s urban literature is that his stories of Indians in the city enact this survivance by depicting successful urban Indians taking ownership of their cities. One such character is George Wilson (Spokane), who lives and works in Seattle as a freelance editor and who, when wrongly assumed to be a white man, announces his membership of the Spokane tribe on television (*War Dances* 13-15). Wilson asserts his right to own his identity, which can be considered an act of survivance in light of the history of colonial naming described above.

The embodiment of survivance is the ‘postindian’, who is a storyteller working within ‘the associated context of postmodernity’, creating ‘narratives [that] observe natives, the chance of totemic associations, conversions, and reversions of tribal cultures, as postmodern survivance and vivancy’ (1999 viii). This concept is

more difficult to exemplify, as it is both idealistic and open to interpretation, though there is the distinct possibility that Alexie himself comes close to being a postindian. I take ‘totemic’ (with some trepidation) to be derived from its Chippewa connotations that prohibit siblings from marrying. Thus observing the ‘chance of totemic associations’ may be understood as being open to the influences of all cultures. I take the ‘reversions of tribal cultures’ to be critical engagements with tribal leaders, rather than passive acceptance of leadership. In ‘Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers’ Alexie asserts that he was ‘*reborn* inside the collision of cultures’ and that his ‘tribe tried to murder [him]’, all in a ‘hybrid sonnet sequence’ that is either ‘[a]n indigenous celebration of colonialism or maybe a colonial celebration of the indigenous’ (*Face* 80-1). If it is actually possible to be a postindian¹⁸ then this poem suggests its author (at least at the moment of its composition) might be one.

The final concept of Vizenor’s to be noted here¹⁹ is that of ‘manifest manners’, which ‘are the course of dominance, the racialist notions and misnomers sustained in archives and lexicons as “authentic” representations of *indian* cultures. Manifest manners court the destinies of monotheism, cultural determinism, objectivism, and the structural conceits of savagism and civilization’ (1999 vii). I understand manifest manners to be the contemporary performances of internalised colonialism by both Natives and non-Natives. The term is derived from the myth of Manifest Destiny, mentioned above by Slotkin, which Brown describes as that ‘which lifted land hunger to a lofty plane’ by legitimising the belief that ‘Europeans and their descendents were ordained by destiny to rule all of America’ (1991 [1970]

¹⁸ I am not convinced by Vizenor’s identification of Russell Means as a postindian, due to his belief in the ‘in Dios’ myth, as noted in chapter six. However, Alexie is an impressively self-contradictory writer, so perhaps I am guilty of favouritism.

¹⁹ All of these phrases occupy the same page and a half of Vizenor’s introduction. This is indicative of his famously immersive stylistics.

8). I discuss the process by which this colonial legacy is internalised in chapter six, but for now I shall return to the often exemplary Wannabe Indian Jack Wilson from *Indian Killer*. Alexie's description of Wilson in his apartment functions here as a precise cataloguing of manifest manners, and is worth quoting at length:

He wondered if a real Indian was capable of such violence. He knew about real Indians. He'd read the books, had spent long hours meditating, listening to the voices from the past. From the confusing and complicated cornucopia of tribal influences that made up Wilson's idea of ceremony came burned sage and tobacco, a medicine pouch worn beneath his clothes, and a turquoise ring on his right hand. While beating the drum he'd ordered from a catalog, Wilson played Southern and Northern style, often within the same song. Some nights, Wilson would slip into the traditional dance outfit he'd bought at a downtown pawn shop, drop a powwow tape into the stereo, and two-step across the floor for hours. He dreamed of being the best traditional dancer in the world. Wilson saw himself inside a bright spotlight in a huge arena while thousands of Indians cheered for him. Real Indians (178).

Wilson's approach to Indian cultures is entirely sustained by confused notions of authenticity, and the belief that he can archive objective knowledge about those cultures. Although he appears to be a sympathetic character, his appropriation of *indian* artefacts and performances implicates him in 'cultural determinism, objectivism, and the structural conceits of savagism and civilization' (Vizenor 1999 vii) indicative of the internalised colonialism of manifest manners.

Despite their inherent falsity, such myths retain a social and political currency, and so (as we have seen) one political purpose often proposed for Indian literatures and the study of Indian literatures is to work towards decolonization. Justice takes this notion a step further, asserting that 'the very existence of indigenous literatures, not to mention the decolonization imperative of indigenous peoplehood, is a rebellion against the assimilationist directive of Eurowestern imperialism' (Womack 2011 155). This suggests that the mere *presence* of urban Indian literatures is a form of resistance to colonial structures and the colonial

legacy. In chapter four I argue that Alexie's thematically and politically innovative urban Indian literature, already a form of resistance according to Justice, also *depicts* the processes of decolonisation.

In his essay 'Native American Novels: Homing In', William Bevis describes the 'homing plot' as the common trope of the most popular novels by Indian authors (610), through which McNickle, Momaday, Silko, Welch, and Erdrich all present 'a Western "self" seeking to transfer energy to a tribal context' (618), namely the reservation. In more recent years, Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1994) and Cook-Lynn's *From the River's Edge* (1991) similarly return their narratives to tribal lands. The homing plot is not unique to either the 'renaissance' period of writing, nor Indian writing in general, but it is primarily in Indian literatures that one will find reference to the reservation, and Alexie's attitude towards the reservation affects his writing in a way that distinguishes him from these other writers: he sees the reservation as an instrument of colonialism. Asked in a recent interview with *TIME* magazine about what had changed regarding the reservation, Alexie replied:

I've spent very little time on my reservation in the last twenty years – too much pain, y'know, stuff I won't get into personally, but... it's a haunted place for me. The reservation is a white creation, so to valorise it has been destructive. I think I'm more traditional as a writing nomad than people who never leave the reservation (n. pag.).

In an interview in 2005 with Åse Nygren, he explains the symbolic appeal of the reservation to many Indian peoples:

'Because our identity has been so fractured, and because we've been subject to so much oppression and relocation – our tribes dissipated, many destroyed – the concept of a pure Indian identity is really strong in Indian literature. For instance, very few of the top 30 or 40 Native writers publishing now grew up on the reservation, and yet most Native literature is about the reservation. So there is a nostalgia for purity: a time when we were all together and when our identity was sure.' (154)

Referring to statements from the author in order to illuminate his or her creative writing can easily constitute critically unsound practice, particularly in a thesis that claims to be exploring the shifting parameters of objectivity and subjectivity. However, Alexie's tendency as an interviewee to paraphrase lines from his poetry and fiction in articulating his personal perspective is indicative of the extent to which his creative output reflects his personal experience. With this in mind, quotations from Alexie's interviews are employed sparingly, and only when linked directly to a corresponding statement in his fiction and poetry. Regarding the above, Alexie asserts in 'The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me' that

Reservation Indian writers are rarely published in any form. [...]
 Indians often write exclusively about reservation life, even if they never lived on a reservation. [...]
 Non-Indian writers always write about reservation life.
 Nobody has written the great urban Indian novel yet.
(*One Stick Song* 20-22)

Alexie's personal reasons for leaving the reservation are not crucial in forming a critical approach to his fictional representation of moving to the city. The important point of the quotations above is that Alexie's fiction and poetry often portrays the reservation as an internally oppressive remnant of a particular period of colonialism, and as perhaps the least likely place for a decolonised sense of identity to develop and flourish. Again, it is my contention that Alexie's urban Indian literature depicts the city as a place where personally satisfying approaches to Indian identities are more easily formulated.

This contention is illustrative of what might be called my constructivist impulse to reconfigure the bases, or rather, to multiply the bases from which contemporary literary criticism might engage with its surroundings. Yet this thesis does not intend to degrade literary criticism that expounds the relevance of those

tribal hermeneutics and traditions that the Euramerican colonisers endeavoured to extinguish. The ongoing project of establishing multiple, regionally and tribally-specific frameworks through which the artistic output of Indians might be interpreted is admirable, and absolutely crucial to a larger democratic aim of amplifying and listening to the voices of marginalised communities. At the same time, it is one of Alexie's principal concerns, which this thesis examines, that with regards to Indian identities, the literary separatism of Cook-Lynn is overly nostalgic, uncritically laudatory, and neglectful of those Indians who for various reasons feel they do not, or legally do not belong to a tribe or tribes. As we shall see, despite his vital commitment to representing urban Indians, and the partial validity of his criticisms, I believe that Alexie's fiction and poetry expresses values of community, tradition, and decolonization that are shared to a significant extent by the constructivist and materialist critics.

It is worth now briefly assessing my claim that the vast majority of scholarship on Indian literatures does not engage with representations of Indians in cities. Tillett and Lundquist's introductions to Indian literatures make only passing reference to representations of Indians in the city, and the studies by Parker, Gunn Allen, and Blaeser mentioned above focus almost entirely on representations of tribally enrolled Indians living primarily on reservations. Despite Sarris's depiction of urban Indians in *Grand Avenue* and *Watermelon Nights* (1998), his *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (1993) pays little attention to urban Indians. Ruppert's *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction* (1995) sets out 'to consider the multiple narratives of identity [in] contemporary Native American literature' (viii), but overlooks the multiplicity of the

city. More recent studies display similar preferences, with none of the pieces collected by Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (2005) discussing urban Indian issues. Helen May Dennis's *Native American Literature: Towards a spatialized reading* (2007), (Ojibwe) David Treuer's *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (2006), and Joseph L. Coulombe's *Reading Native American Literature* (2011) make no reference to Indians living permanently in cities. Not one of the critical volumes discussed in Womack's excellent and exhaustive survey 'A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997' (Womack et al. 3-104) focuses on urban Indians, nor do any of the chapters in *Reasoning Together* (2008), to which Womack's piece offers an introduction.

Again, this is not to say that these studies do not contain insightful readings and perspectives on Indian literatures, it is simply to demonstrate that the general focus taken by critics of Indian literatures largely omits discussion of urban Indian literatures. As mentioned above, this does not necessarily entail critical attention to Alexie, as there are a number of other Indian authors writing about urban Indians. Indeed, one of the limitations of this thesis is that it does not examine the urban Indian literatures of writers such as Keith Egawa (Lummi), Janet Campbell Hale (Coeur d'Alene), and Treuer. The crucial point here is not that most Indian authors do not focus on representing urban Indians, it is that any attempt to discern an Indian aesthetic or populate an Indian literary canon that does not consider urban Indian representations ignores both a significant number of works by Indian authors, and the reality that most Indians live in towns and cities. In this heavily politicised field of study, such a marked abstraction from lived experience creates a representative

imbalance that must be addressed. This introduction now shifts focus from the absence of the urban Indian in criticism to a wider absence of Indians from the history of modernity.

Making history

In ‘Socioacupuncture: Mythic Reversals and the Striptease in Four Scenes,’ (Martin 1987) Vizenor describes the manipulation of photographs of Indians by Edward Curtis. It is now widely known that Curtis, who captured tens of thousands of images of Indian peoples at the turn of the twentieth century, erased signs of modernity from his photographs, in order that his Indian subjects might correspond more comfortably with the anachronisms of the colonial imagination. The removal of an alarm clock from ‘In a Piegan Lodge’ testifies to this need for undisturbed access to images that bear no signs of progress. These ‘romantic and inhibited images of tribal people’, from which Curtis initially made thousands of dollars, are thus assessed by Vizenor as ‘discontinuous artifacts in a colonial road show’ (Martin 181, 183). The systematic removal of Indian peoples from the history of modernity for the sake of profit is illustrated nowhere more clearly than by the truths hidden within these photographs. Still, written histories certainly participate in the process, and in telling these stories it is necessary to use several short quotations.

Richter’s *Facing East from Indian Country* exposes for critique the motivations of the dominant voices that plot American history, noting that

[t]he emergence of an aggressively expansionist Euro-American United States from what used to be the Indian country of eastern North America is a problem to be explained, not an inevitable process to be traced from the first planting of English seeds on Atlantic shores to their flowering in the trans-Mississippi west (7-8).

Richter thus argues for (and writes successfully from) a shift in perspective that places ‘Native Americans...in the foreground’ and views the ‘continent [as] a place where diverse peoples had long struggled against and sometimes worked with one another, where societies and political systems had long risen and fallen, and where these ancient trends continued right through the period of colonization’ (8).

He explains that

[w]hites and Indians had to *learn* to hate each other – had even to learn that there were such clear-cut “racial” categories as “White” and “Indian” - before “westward expansion” across a steadily advancing “frontier” could become the trajectory for a nation that was itself a belated result of the same learning process. Perhaps the strangest lesson of all was that in the new nation Whites were the ones entitled to be called “Americans.” Indians bizarrely became something else (2).

The divisions of European settlers thus alienate the indigenous population, and the disfiguring strokes continue. Richter explains that the

ethnic diversity and religious fervor that did so much to give the British provinces their distinctive “American” shape were equally important forces in Native life. Yet...diversity wrought an increasingly pervasive view that “Indians” and “Whites” were utterly different, and utterly incompatible people who could never peacefully share the continent. [...] They also learned that, despite ancient rivalries among nations and speakers of different languages, they were all Indians (180-181).

That which was introduced to the indigenous population in order that they might share in the boundedness of communal religious experience is instead used to further divide and consolidate opposing groups. Finally, Richter asserts that in

writing their nation’s past, [White Americans’] greatest erasure of all was of memories of Indians who neither uncompromisingly resisted like the King Philip of their imagination nor wholeheartedly assimilated like the Pocahontas of their fantasies. Native people who instead struggled to find ways to incorporate European people, objects, and ideas into Indian country on Indian terms – who adapted and changed in accordance with their own histories and traditions rather than in accordance with Euro-American scripts – could find no place in the mythology of a nation marching triumphantly westward across the continent (252).

Richard Slotkin notes the continuing resonance in popular culture of these mythologisations of figures and events that populate traditional representations of American history, such as those of the Last Stand and Custer, ‘Manifest Destiny’, which is derived from the ‘Myth of the Frontier’, and ‘Cowboys and Indians’ (15, 19). His *The Fatal Environment* (1985) draws on theories of mythmaking such as those of Roland Barthes and Northrop Frye²⁰ to make the claim that ‘a modern, industrial, and imperial society may see the basic concern or issue of human history as the struggle for class or racial hegemony in a secular world’ (26). The power of the colonial imagination to refashion its subjects is maintained by these myths, embedded in films and playground games, and internalised through the expected premature participation in both.

Writing on ‘the White image of the Indian’ (xv) Robert F. Berkhofer finds ‘several persistent practices found throughout the history of White interpretation of Native Americans as Indians’,²¹ being ‘generalizing from one tribe’s society and culture to all Indians...conceiving of Indians in terms of their deficiencies according to White ideals [and]...using moral evaluation as description of Indians’ (25-26). This thesis finds such practices represented and addressed throughout Alexie’s fiction and poetry, with particular attention paid to the first in chapter three. Further to these, Berkhofer discerns the ‘two fundamental but contradictory conceptions of Indian culture’ (28) that form the imagined basis of Indian stereotyping, and anachronistic assumptions about Indian peoples that continue into the present day.

These are worth quoting at length:

²⁰ See Barthes 1972 and Frye 1973

²¹ Berkhofer here understands and uses the term ‘Indian’ in much the same way as Vizenor does ‘*indian*’. This is discussed later in the introduction.

the good Indian appears friendly, courteous, and hospitable to the initial invaders of his lands and all Whites...with handsomeness of physique and...great stamina and endurance...the noble Indian exhibited great calm and dignity in bearing, conversation, and even under torture...the Indian, in short, lived a life of liberty, simplicity, and innocence (28).

The bad Indian is designed according to 'a list of almost contradictory traits':

[n]akedness and lechery, passion and vanity led to lives of polygamy and sexual promiscuity among themselves and constant warfare and fiendish revenge against their enemies. Cannibalism and human sacrifice were the worst sins...[i]ndolence rather than industry, improvidence in the face of scarcity...timidity or defeat in the face white advances. (28)

Ultimately, Berkhofer finds:

a curious timelessness in defining the Indian proper. In spite of centuries of contact and the changed conditions of Native American lives, Whites picture the "real" Indian as the one before contact or during the early period of that contact...White Europeans and Americans expect even at present to see an Indian out of the forest or a Wild West show rather than on farm or in city...Present-day historians of the United States, likewise, omit the Indian entirely after the colonial period or the last battles on the Plains (28-9)

Such omissions from the historical record are explored in chapter six, while the notion of the Indian as 'timeless' is discussed in chapter one. Here then, Berkhofer points us to the beginnings of a history of the popular image of Indian peoples that continues to supplant the empirical evidence of revisionary scholarship. Goldie's *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand* traces the development of various imagined indigenous traits, such as being oversexed, incomparably violent, and inscrutably mystical. The most pertinent of these to this discussion is his identification of the separation of indigenous nature from white culture, or of indigenous primitivism from white technological advance. This 'view of nature as alien to the physical requirements of civilization' (23) is a crucial part of the corrupted historical and cultural record that denies the active role of Indians in establishing, building, and populating modern

American cities and towns. Again, this violence to the historical record is discussed at length in chapter six.

Further explorations of the image of Indians in literature and popular culture can be found in Brian W. Dippie's *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes & U.S. Indian Policy* (1982), S. Elizabeth Bird's edited collection *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture* (1998), and Shari M. Huhndorf's *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (2001). These describe similar stereotypes and practices extending into the twenty-first century, such as *indian* sports mascots, and contemporary portrayals of Indians in television and film,²² showing that even twenty-first century stereotypes may be traced back to the fundamental colonial caricatures of deficiency and excess.

The activity of Indian literatures and Native-centric histories upon the history of Indian-Euramerican relations in the United States is typically both corrective and creative. This activity is considered necessary in order to revise the Euramerican-authored histories borne of the colonisation of North America and the legacy of that colonisation, explored by Berkhofer and the critics above. As we have seen, such histories tend either to take as their founding principle the superiority of Euramerican over Indian peoples or, when claiming neutrality, ascribe equal standing to Indian peoples according to Euramerican ideals and classifications. Drinnon and Slotkin's multiple volumes of revisionist history explore in incredible detail this 'mythologization of American history' (Slotkin 34). A prominent example of this mythologization in practice can be found in Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), in which he describes the

²² Alexie's *Smoke Signals* was the first and remains the only film with an entirely Indian cast and crew.

frontier as ‘the meeting point between savagery and civilization’ (32), and depicts the colonisation of North America as ‘the record of social evolution’ (38). This particular history ‘begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization...and finally the manufacturing organization with city and factory system’ (38). Turner’s is a key text in the exceptionalist interpretation of American history, following Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835), in which de Tocqueville defines the ‘position of the Americans [as] quite exceptional’, given ‘their exclusively commercial habits...the proximity of Europe...[and] a thousand special causes’ (518). American exceptionalism does not necessarily imply superiority, but has gained political currency as justifying patriotism,²³ and specifically places Euramericans, and not Indian peoples, at the centre of the industrial revolution.

Although I explore this problem of history further in chapter six, I cannot and do not intend to claim that the absence of urban Indians in literary criticism is related to the denigration of the role of Indian peoples in the histories of the United States. Having demonstrated the impulse towards the erasure of Indian participants in Euramerican historical and cultural representation, this section now moves on to the history of urban Indians, in order to present some of the historical threats and opportunities that might affect Alexie’s urban Indian characters.

²³ See, for example, Joyce 1992, Johnston 2002, Ceaser 2012, Onuf 2012.

Urban Indian History

In 2007 the Urban Indian Health Commission reported that ‘[t]o many in the United States, [the urban Indian] population is invisible, leaving an important problem unnoticed: the health of nearly 67 percent of the nations 4.1 million self-identified American Indians and Alaska Natives’ (1). The report makes it clear that ‘[t]oday’s urban Indians are mostly the products of failed federal government policies that facilitated the urbanization of Indians, and the lack of sufficient aid to assure success with this transition has placed them at greater health risk’ (1). Before beginning the task of practical criticism of Indian literatures, it is particularly valuable to understand some of the history of Indian and white relations, as certain policies and programmes of the federal government have tended to produce deleterious effects for the majority of Indian peoples, in terms of land ownership, access to food and water, identities pan-Indian and tribal, community bonds, political agency, and mental and physical health. Even a brief outline of this history allows the reader to assess the immediate and cumulative social damages wrought by U.S. governmental policies, and so begin to contextualise the profound anger so often made explicit in Alexie’s representations of Indians. Another important aim in presenting the history of reservations and Indian migration is to show that Indian peoples have been living in cities for much of the last thousand years. This may not be a surprise to the knowledgeable reader, but the absence of publications representing and discussing urban Indian experiences is certainly indicative of an artistic and academic imbalance, that I argue Alexie’s work attempts to redress.

Richter discusses the enormous city of ‘Cahokia’ that thrived around 1100 A.D., that ‘was probably the largest American city that existed north of Mexico

before the eighteenth century...home to more than twenty thousand people' (3). The description of this city is both fascinating and crucial to the argument that the notion of Indian peoples as naturally predisposed to a rural lifestyle is a product of colonial discourse. Near what is now East St. Louis, this and

other major centers [such] as those now known as Coosa and Etowah in Georgia, Moundville in Alabama, and Natchez in Mississippi were home to highly stratified societies, organized as chiefdoms and characterized by a sharp divide between elites and commoners, a specialized artisanry, widespread trading networks, and elaborate mortuary rituals, to which the burial mounds attest. Surrounding networks of agricultural hamlets provided food to support the urban centers, where priests and chiefs...apparently conducted rituals centered on the solar cycle and the seasons to ensure the success of crops and the power of community. (3)

Before they were called Indians, indigenous communities thrived in large, socially complex cities. This directly contradicts any notions of inherent 'savagery', the tendency towards nomadic isolation, and ignorance towards institutions of religion and trade. Indeed, regarding this last sign of engagement with urban existence, Richter notes that by the eighteenth century, '[a]part from food and shelter, virtually every aspect of Indian material life depended upon economic ties with Europe' (175). Thus many Europeans relied upon their interactions with Indians, rather than feared their attack.

In discussing the absence of such Indian histories from recent 'standards' adopted by the California school system, Jack D. Forbes (Powhatan-Renapé/Lenape) writes that '[b]y ignoring our country's history, the history of our land, the preparers have sought to deal almost exclusively with the history of only the Anglo-American group and not with all the peoples who make up our country today' (15). Not only is this exclusion 'sure to tell non-white youth that they do not belong', it also distorts the meaning of the word 'history', as '[w]hen one ignores 30/40,000 years of

chronology what does the term *chronologically* mean?’ (15-16). The promulgation of ostensibly objective historical data is here determined according to the political motivations of the dominant culture, which precludes future debate by simply not passing on pertinent information.

At the other end of this disputed chronology, publications relating specifically to contemporary urban Indians are almost exclusively academic and anthropological. These provide information about the various lived experiences of Indians in the city that is useful in introducing some of the realities of urban Indian existence, but can easily slip into qualitative assessments of Indian peoples according to Euramerican standards. Moving into the twentieth century, Sorkin writes that:

[f]rom 1880 to 1934 the federal government put strong pressure on Indian tribes to discard their traditional customs and to be assimilated into American society. The General Allotment Act of 1887 (the Dawes Act) which remained the instrument of federal Indian policy for thirty years, permitted the breaking up of tribal or reservation land into individual allotments if the president believed the land could be advantageously employed. Each head of a family was eligible for 80 acres of agricultural land or 160 acres of grazing land. ... It was believed that pressuring Indians to become individual farm operators would accelerate their assimilation into the dominant culture and help to make them productive members of the community. ... By 1933, 91 million acres, two-thirds of the Indian land base, had passed into non-Indian hands (2).

The Dawes Act both formalised the pressure to be successful as an individual whilst remaining active as part of a community, and at the same time divided already oppressed communities into individual landowners. As we shall see the pressures and contradictions of maintaining community ties within an environment refigured around principles of competitive individualism are to be found negotiated throughout Alexie’s urban Indian literature. Writing when there were only ‘approximately 160 reservations’, Sorkin’s *The urban American Indian* (1978) finds that ‘[m]ost urban

Indians were born or raised on reservations and subsequently moved to the city’, and stresses that it is important to understand the policies of the federal government relating to reservation Indians, in that ‘these policies...affect the attitudes of urban migrants in regard to the usefulness of social programs and their general feelings towards the dominant (non-Indian) culture’ (1). Sorkin claims that ‘Indians have nearly all the freedoms other Americans possess; restrictions apply only on tribal funds and property’ (1). This is a troubling claim, as there are clearly examples that demonstrate that Indians do not have the freedoms other Americans possess, such as the freedom to hunt and fish within their territory, and the freedom to peacefully protest against injustices.²⁴ Sorkin also claims that ‘[t]he federal government does not, in balance, either encourage or discourage Indians from leaving reservations’ (3). This may have been a legal truth in the late nineteen seventies, but the continued inadequacy of federal government support for reservations certainly encouraged²⁵ many Indians to leave reservations, whilst the lack of social services and employment discrimination encountered by Indians in cities would at the same time discourage many from leaving what little support they had.

Sorkin claims that ‘[t]he most important research project ever undertaken in regard to Indian affairs was completed in 1928 by the Institute for Government Research...known as the Meriam Report.’ The Meriam Report ‘documented the dismal socioeconomic status of reservation Indians and the failures of federal Indian policy’ yet ‘the findings on the status of migrated (urban Indians) give the impression of rapid assimilation and living standards nearly as high as the whites’

²⁴ See Wadewitz’s *The Nature of Borders: Salmon, Boundaries, and Bandits on the Salish Sea* (2012).

²⁵ The Urban Indian Health Commission reports that ‘for the most part, recent policies have stripped many [urban Indians] of their rights to health care when they move to cities’ (1).

(4). Unfortunately, the federal government ‘chose to base much of its off-reservation policy on the Meriam Report’, which concluded that ‘no effort should be directed toward building up an independent organization for aiding migrating Indians but rather toward establishing cooperative relations with existing agencies which serve the population as a whole’ (669). Simply put, Indian peoples were forced from their homes, ignored, and then told that they were doing almost as well as those who forced them out. The phrase ‘living standards nearly as high as the whites’ is indicative of the subjective bias of the report.

The Snyder Act of 1921, which authorised the appropriation of funds ‘for the benefit, care, and assistance of the Indians throughout the United States’ (Urban and Rural Non-Reservation Indians Task Force Eight 9), makes no distinction between those Indians living on or off reservations, and according to Sorkin’s explication of the opinion of Charles Soller, the assistant solicitor of the Department of the Interior, ‘makes urban Indians eligible for Bureau of Indian Affairs services’ (Sorkin 5). Unfortunately for urban Indians, the official duty of the BIA remains to provide services only to those ‘on or near the reservation’.

Sorkin notes that ‘[a]lthough part of the increase in [the urban Indian population] results from the fact that [certain] cities are places where the BIA relocates Indians for purposes of training and employment, this phenomenon does not account for all of the population gain. Thus cities like San Diego, California and Seattle, Washington have experienced rapid gain in the number of Indians, but neither of these cities participated in the BIA relocation program’ (Sorkin 10). This research shows that migration is not always an enforcement of government policy, and that many urban Indians moved to the city voluntarily, or at least without explicit

governmental compulsion. This suggests that many Indians felt otherwise compelled to leave the reservation and enter the city, despite the possibilities of straining and losing contact with their tribal communities. This is significant in a study of Alexie's representations of urban Indians as much of his urban fiction features Indians in the city of Seattle, and as we shall see, the active decision to leave the tribal community of one's upbringing causes consternation for his characters (e.g. Marie Polatkin in *Indian Killer*), whilst posing problems for the tribal nationalist agenda (e.g. does denouncing the politics or practices of their affiliated tribal nation render an Indian anti-nationalist?). This issue is taken up in chapter one.

In recent years, the politics of tribal belonging have been further complicated by the increasing instances of forced disenrollment. Disenrollment is the exclusionary outcome of the policies that determine eligibility towards membership of a particular group, in this case membership of a particular Indian tribal nation. On the third of December 2011, a disputed majority of Chukchansi tribal members voted to replace the tribal council, their governing body, with members that opposed the tribe's disenrollment practices. (Pechanga 2013 n.pag.). Since the opening of the Chukchansi Gold Resort and Casino in 2003, the disenrollment policies of the Chukchansi tribal council are estimated to have disenrolled about half of their 1,800 former members, although some sources estimate almost a seventy per cent disenrollment. (Pechanga 2012 n.pag). These statistics are approximate and disputed due to both historically poor record-keeping, and the fear of further disenrollments as retaliation against the families of those who testify to being removed. In her report on the 2011 vote on including genetic tests in eligibility criteria, Linda Geddes notes that the tribe had 'already expelled more than 500 members through non-genetic

means' (9), which many believe to be a direct consequence of the distribution amongst enrolled tribal members of royalties from the Chukchansi Gold Resort and Casino. The Chukchansi are a sovereign nation, and as such the tribal council is the ultimate legal authority on the majority of matters economic and social but at the time of writing there are now two tribal councils, both claiming themselves to be rightfully elected. The political tumult on the Picayune Rancheria is not an isolated case. Disenrollment disputes are ongoing in many tribes across the United States, though not all are (allegedly) to do with the per capita proceeds of tribal gaming. The tribal council of the Nooksack Indians of Washington is being sued for its attempt to disenrol 306 tribal members due to 'incomplete [and] missing documents' (Toensing n.pag.). The practice of disenrollment is often referred to as 'cultural genocide' (in the paperwork of this lawsuit, for example), though as one commentator notes, disenrollment is an example of the 'standard approach' towards tribal governance (Payne n.pag.), that is heavily criticised by Stephen Cornell and Joseph P. Kalt (Cornell and Kalt 8). The Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians, the Oneida nation of New York, the Santa Rosa band of Cahuilla Indians, the Robinson Rancheria, the Jamul Indian village of the Kumeyaay Nation, the Cahto Indians of the Laytonville Rancheria, CA, the Te-Moak Western Shoshone of Elko, NV, and many other tribes have ongoing disputes about members being disenrolled. Moving from the reservation, then, is not necessarily a simple decision. I explore some of the tensions that arise from this move in chapter two, on *Reservation Blues*.

Donald Lee Fixico takes a more general approach to urban Indians in *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (2000), in which he makes some very broad claims about Indian peoples. The book, he writes, 'is about the transformation of

native identity from the original tribal identity to a more generic “Indian” identity’ (3). Almost all of the Indian literary criticisms that I have encountered deny there is any such thing as a generic *indian* identity, yet this is anthropology, and as such must make these sorts of claims. And in fact, such claims are probably quite accurate. I discuss the theoretical work of Vizenor below, in which he makes some interesting claims about what that generic identity might symbolise and produce. Fixico notes that ‘[f]ollowing World War II, a steady stream of Indians migrated to various cities across the nation. Once placed in jobs and having found housing in metropolitan areas, American Indians discovered that their minority identity conflicted with the mainstream assimilation that involved living as urban whites (2-3). As a general theme, the minority conflicting with the mainstream is certainly apparent in Alexie’s urban literature. More specific features of Alexie’s fiction are prefigured by Fixico’s claims that

Overpowering pressures of urban society create a psychological imbalance within the urban Indian. On the reservation, one’s psychological or spiritual balance was in tune with the community and familiar surroundings. Community-oriented values and tribal cultural norms guided one’s life. In acute contrast, the urban environment was alien to Indian persons, who had to adjust to a strange new lifestyle. In the city, American Indians were out of sync with the rest of urban society...[f]acing the encounter alone without the support of community, many Indians may develop an inferiority complex (178).

Again, these are fairly general claims, but they seem to anticipate my reading of *Flight* in chapter five as a narrative of urban trauma. Similarly, John Smith’s mental illness in *Indian Killer* looks to be the results of what could be considered his ‘generic’ urban Indian identity, with Fixico’s assertions that

Trying to imitate the urban mainstream, Indian Americans sometimes experience a form of schizophrenia. This is the gray dimension or marginality that many Indians enter in trying to decide which culture they belong to. Too often their minds and actions do not coincide, causing an imbalance; the

person may appear outwardly solid, but there is confusion inside. The individual personality is important in facing this situation; the basis of the identity is tested, and the personality utilizes strength from it in attempting to retain Indian tribal cultural identity or to adopt a new culture. The process of cultural change is probably stronger than retaining one's original culture. One's personality must be strong enough to experience regression during an adjustment period before developing, adjusting, and adopting a new culture (179).

At this point Fixico delves into the possibility of prejudices, concluding that the heightened exposure to other skin colours is particularly difficult for '[f]ull-blood urban Indians [who] epitomize the urban Indian experience', and 'have no choice because they physically look Indian (although they may be mistaken for another minority' (144). For all Fixico's general assertions and unsophisticated language, the urban Indian experiences that he describes are those that begin to shape Alexie's urban Indian characters. Of course, these publications do not discuss the ways in which these experiences might shape or be shaped by the problems of history that drives this thesis, and Indian literatures and literary criticisms in general. Having discussed the anthropological and legislative realities of urban Indian experiences, the chapter now returns to the development of scholarship on Indian literatures.

Indian Literatures and Postcolonialism

In a study that makes claims for Alexie's representations of Indian decolonisation in the city, it is vitally important that the place of Indian literatures within postcolonial studies is at least briefly addressed. There is some disagreement over whether or not Indian literatures can even be called postcolonial, being written as they are under arguably colonial conditions. Krupat writes that 'it is tempting to

think of contemporary Native American literatures as among the postcolonial literatures of the world' (1996 30), in that

they share with other postcolonial texts the fact of having, in the words of the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* 'emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre' (1996 30).

At the same time, Krupat rejects this classification due to the fact that 'a considerable number of Native people exist in conditions of politically sustained subalternity', and so 'there is not yet a "post-" to the colonial status of Native Americans' (2000 73). Almost as soon as he has concluded that 'it may not be particularly useful to conceptualize contemporary Native American literature as postcolonial' (1996 31), Krupat decides that some Native American fiction 'not only has the look of postcolonial fiction but also...performs ideological work that parallels that of postcolonial fiction elsewhere' (1996 32). Krupat's subsequent claim that Indian literatures are actually engaged in what he calls 'anti-imperial translation' (1996 32) suggests that Krupat's problem with postcoloniality is purely semantic. Indeed, the centrality of hybridity (Bakhtinian or not) and nationhood to his cosmopolitanist approach effectively engages Krupat in postcolonial reading whether or not he agrees with the terminology.

As C. Richard King notes in *Postcolonial America* (2000), although the 'orthodoxies' of postcolonial studies (such as the work of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin [1989] cited by Krupat above) are 'devoted to Europe and its former colonies' (3), more recent scholarship 'propose[s] more fluid, dynamic notions of postcoloniality...underscor[ing] [its] processual qualities' (5). Such a 'processual rendering of the postcolonial turns attention away from happy endings,

tidy temporal schemes, and progressive, irreversible ruptures to stress emergent formations shaped by social struggles, persistent asymmetries, and novel arrangements' (5). In her introduction to *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory* (2003), Deborah L. Madsen addresses the variability of the term, noting the 'three primary meanings' acquired by 'postcolonialism' (2):

First, post-colonialism refers historically to writings produced in a previously colonized nation after its independence from colonial control...second...it is used to encompass the whole complex of historical and cultural processes, starting with the pre-colonial period and leading up through independence from colonial control to a state of decolonization...third...it is the critic, rather than the text or its author, who adopts a post-colonial perspective (2).

It is these second and third definitions which liberate the term from the temporal and geographic stasis applied by Krupat, and which assert the undeniably postcolonial approach of this thesis. This understanding of postcolonialism allows postcolonial theories and concepts to illuminate unexpected areas of time, space, and art, in studies such as *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies* (2003), edited by Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts, Sarah Phillips Casteel's *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (2007), and *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (2006), edited by Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen.²⁶ Whilst I do not engage at length with the principal theorists of postcolonialism,²⁷ I do consider this thesis to take a broadly postcolonial approach, and I hope that this brief section alludes to my appreciation of the importance of postcolonial theory to the study of Indian literatures.

²⁶ Postcolonial detective fiction is discussed in chapter three.

²⁷ Franz Fanon crucially informs my reading of structural violence in chapter six.

Postcolonial theories remain relevant, enlightening, and invigorating in the study of literature, society, and politics, and not only in countries that have gained independence from colonial rule. To reiterate, whilst I consider this study to be postcolonial in its engagements with colonial legacies and depictions of personal decolonization, such an approach does not and should not suggest a substantial physical or ideological withdrawal of colonial power from the United States.

Critical approach

My overall critical approach to Alexie's poetry and fiction begins with considerations of subjectivity and objectivity, i.e. attention to the voices and discourses that are depicted as telling some form of truth about Indian identities, and to those depicted as contributing to the falsehoods of *indian* mythology. This approach stems from my research into the erasure of Indians from the history of modernity, as discussed both above and in chapter three. This approach is of particular relevance to the study of Alexie's urban Indian literature because, as Georg Simmel notes:

the metropolis places emphasis on striving for the most individual forms of personal existence – regardless of whether it is always correct or always successful. The development of modern culture is characterized by the predominance of what one can call the objective spirit over the subjective; that is, in language as well as in law, in the technique of production as well as in art, in science as well as in the objects of domestic environment, there is embodied a sort of spirit (*Geist*), the daily growth of which is followed only imperfectly and with an even greater lag by the intellectual development of the individual. (1903 18)

The specific opportunities and threats presented by the city thus provide the most exciting backdrop against which to explore these tensions: the official discourse and the counter-narrative; the potential liberation of urban anonymity; the absence of 'close-knit' communities in the presence of increased social proximity, all these aspects of urban life come to bear on Alexie's urban Indian subjectivities. My

methodological approach towards achieving this is one that combines close reading and practical criticism with explanatory interventions from relevant critical and theoretical sources. I have chosen to incorporate a broad range of theoretical and critical viewpoints, eschewing the approach of some critics such as Elvira Pulitano and James Cox to employ only those of Indian scholars. I engage critically with these viewpoints in order to ascertain their differences and similarities, and to situate my critical voice.

The chapters of the thesis each engage in specific ways with the tensions that exist between objectivity and subjectivity. This is primarily achieved by placing Alexie's representations in dialogue with relevant traditions and established histories, which produces the theoretical grounds for close textual readings. Chapter one reads the short story 'Distances' as dramatising the tensions that exist between reservation and urban Indians, demonstrating Alexie's concerns about the assumed authority of reservation tribal councils in broader discussions of Indian identities, even at this early stage in his career. Alexie's representations of the Ghost Dance religion of the late nineteenth century are read as explorations of the divisions sustained by the aforementioned historical and political reservation/urban tensions. Chapter two discusses the limitations placed upon human agency by constructions of authenticity as depicted in Alexie's first novel, *Reservation Blues*. This discussion follows on from the previous chapter by charting the challenges faced by Coyote Springs in meeting and failing to meet the expectations of their reservation communities, at the same time as those of the city. The chapter concludes with a critical assessment of Alexie's employment of the trickster figure, Coyote. Alexie's second novel, *Indian Killer* (1996), signals the relocation of his literary aesthetics to the city streets, and

chapter three detects and unravels the anti-essentialist impulse in Alexie's (mis)use of the distinctly urban mystery thriller genre. This chapter contends that the killer is a physical manifestation of the essentialist discourse of *indian* authorities Truck Shultz, Clarence Mather, and Jack Wilson, activated by the relative anonymities and proximities of the city streets. Chapter four explores grief, death, and ritual in several poems and short stories, focussing on selected poetry, and 'What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?' and 'Do Not Go Gentle' from *Ten Little Indians* (2003). I read these texts in dialogue with their literary precursors, specifically poetry about death, and 'conduct' literature. This critical engagement asserts a subjective ethics of grieving. Chapter five connects the politics of time travel to the representation of urban trauma in *Flight*. Zits' entirely internal flight through time and space takes him to historical events in order to broaden his understanding of colonial history. At the same time, Zits' journey through history is a journey through memory; as he slowly comes to terms with historical violence, so he slowly comes to terms with personal trauma. Chapter six addresses Alexie's representations of structural-symbolic violence, rather than the murder and beatings found throughout his work, arguing that these less visible instances of violence, which I find variously resolved through processes of decolonization, deserve critical attention. I conclude by bringing together these readings and suggesting several potential areas for further study.

Chapter One

The Ghost Dance and the Politics of Exclusion in 'Distances'

'I wasn't saved by the separation of cultures; I was *reborn* inside the collision of cultures.'

'Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers' *Face*, 80.

Critical responses to Sherman Alexie's stories of the Spokane Indian reservation and its (semi-)fictional inhabitants in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) tend to polarise over the problem of the collection's cultural authenticity. The majority of these criticisms fall into one of two categories: those who condemn the author's prose for trafficking moribund Indian stereotypes, and those who defend his commitment to realistic portrayals of a struggling reservation community. In either case, it is the perceived capacity of the stories to develop a particular sense of indigenous community that typically functions as the measure of their cultural authenticity. Readers of American Indian literatures (and their critics) will notice that such an approach is not unique to the study of Alexie's writings; in fact, it forms a basic principle shared by the various articulations of American Indian literary nationalism. Nevertheless, several critics have taken the opportunity to clarify their position on this culturally separatist spectrum through specific engagement with Alexie's earlier fictions. One story from *The Lone Ranger...* that has received none of this critical attention is 'Distances', which describes the contemporary realisation of Wovoka's late-nineteenth century Ghost Dance prophecy, thereby explicitly simulating a state of enforced racial purification and intracultural segregation. Characters, events and settings otherwise shared by the surrounding stories are notably absent from 'Distances', and this sense of relative

isolation both underlines and is underlined by the story's distinctly dystopian mode. This apparent withdrawal from the collection's featured community and 'reservation realis[t]' (*The Lone Ranger...* xxi) aesthetic affords Alexie the critical distance to examine the exclusionary principles that underlay the formation of American Indian communities, and the value of these principles for the individual members. A close reading of 'Distances' thus reveals Alexie's representations of contemporary Ghost Dances to be crucial interjections into the debates surrounding American Indian literary nationalism, as his writing seeks to dramatise the problems of a separatist agenda for urban Indian communities.

Sherman Alexie's Contemporary Ghost Dances

Although it has fascinated historians and anthropologists since James Mooney's contemporaneous ethnographic work, relatively little critical attention has been paid to the Ghost Dance as it appears in fiction, poetry and drama, despite the profound metaphorical richness with which representations of the movement have been invested by both indigenous and non-indigenous authors. It is not surprising that the traumatic events of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre have stirred writers to write: an indigenous aesthetic (the dance) expressing a revolutionary political message is censored, misinterpreted, and violently suppressed by the colonial forces, ultimately blamed for an horrendous and unjustifiable massacre of its participants and surrounding community. Further, in historical texts, the Ghost Dance has continued to be conflated with the massacre at Wounded Knee, so shifting aggression and blame from coloniser to colonised, and cementing in

American popular culture the mythic teleology of the ‘vanishing Indian’.²⁸ This tragic collision of art, politics, hermeneutics and physical violence must first be understood as historical reality, as life and the unwarranted taking of lives, before coming to function at a removed level of metaphor. Of course, it is often on a metaphorical level that the Ghost Dance is understood as it reappears in contemporary literature.

Lisa Tatonetti’s essay ‘Dancing That Way, Things Began to Change: The Ghost Dance as Pantribal Metaphor in Sherman Alexie’s Writing’ (2010) provides the only survey of the Ghost Dance as it appears in Alexie’s poetry and fiction, arguing that over the course of his writing ‘the Ghost Dance image transforms from tragic iteration to triumphant sign, ultimately identifying the imaginative spirit of the dance as the hope for the next generation of American Indian people’ (Tatonetti, 2010, 21). As the communally-bonding aspects of the dance have been explored elsewhere in fiction and criticism, so this notion of the Ghost Dance as a pantribal or pan-Indian movement has long been recognised in non-fictional historiography, into which Tatonetti curiously chooses not to delve. In *The Search for an American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* (1971), Hazel W. Hertzberg refers to ‘the Ghost Dance of the late [eighteen] eighties and nineties’ as ‘the last great Pan-Indian messianic movement’ (241) and, more recently, S. E. Wilmer reads the Ghost Dance as ‘a political performance’ with an ideology that ‘called for a new nation to be created, a nation that would bring back the buffalo, that would reunite the Indians’ (97). Similarly, Gregory E. Smoak’s *Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion*

²⁸ As Lisa Tatonetti points out (2004, 27-8), the notion of Wounded Knee as the ‘end’ of indigenous history can be discerned from titles alone, even before considering the repeated structures of relevant historical texts, such as Robert Utley’s *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (1963), Ralph Andrist’s *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians* (1964), and Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1972).

and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century (2006) characterises the historical Ghost Dance as developing and maintaining a ‘shared sense of Indianness’ (202), the movement being ‘part of a pan-Indian religious continuum, which has included the Sun Dance and the Native American Church as significant expressions of Indian identity’ (204). These assertions certainly support Tatonetti’s notion of the Ghost Dance in Alexie’s writing as continuing in the established vein of ‘pantribal metaphor’, and though prior pantribal movements have also prophesied a return to pre-contact indigenous existence (such as those initiated by the Delaware and Shawnee prophets²⁹), Tatonetti here points convincingly to semiosis, the ‘iconic power of the Ghost Dance’ (2010, 2), as one reason why Alexie chooses to focus upon this movement over its indirect historical predecessors. Thus the relative overdeterminations of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre allow Alexie to imagine multiple sites of indigenous resistance, from the twisted economics of genocide in ‘Custer Speaks’ (*Old Shirts and New Skins* [1993]) to the visionary possibilities of Native youth in ‘A Drug Called Tradition’ (*The Lone Ranger...*). Indeed, Tatonetti contends that the Ghost Dance as it appears in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* represents a vital shift in Alexie’s approach to the phenomenon, being ‘imagined as a site of future possibility, rather than historical loss’ (Tatonetti, 2010, 9).

²⁹ As in Hertzberg, Mark A. Michaels notes in his legal review ‘Indigenous Ethics and Alien laws: Native Traditions and the United States Legal System’ (1998), that ‘[c]ertain eighteenth and nineteenth-century Native religious movements, such as the one led by the Delaware Prophet or the Ghost Dance, were imbued with a pan-Indian spirit that advocated and prayed for a return to old ways and the expulsion of Europeans’ (1567). Gregory Evans Dowd’s *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (1992) also argues that prior to the Ghost Dance, the late-eighteenth century was ‘the period of North America’s most widespread intertribal activity’ (xix).

There are some notable omissions from Tatonetti's survey, stories and poems that are explicitly concerned with the Ghost Dance, but which do not follow the positive curve of this proposed trajectory.³⁰ In these texts Alexie directly addresses the 'future possibility' of the Ghost Dance by describing imagined contemporary performances. These performances result in violence that divides Indian communities, separating Indians from whites, and Indians from Indians. Alexie's suspicion of the exclusionary politics that motivate the Ghost Dance achieves a distinctly literary focus in his later critique of those separatist scholars who have denounced his writing as narcissistic, irresponsible and potentially damaging to Native communities. In the literary nationalism of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn 'and her swarm of professorial locusts' (*Face* 80), Alexie discerns a politics of exclusion that reinscribes the prophecies of that 'strange and cruel ceremony' (*War Dances*, 21). So, for Alexie, criticisms from Cook-Lynn, Gloria Bird (Spokane) and (to a lesser extent) Louis Owens function collectively as writings towards a contemporary Ghost Dance prophecy, which delineates appropriate political aims and aesthetic forms for the Indian intellectual, whilst evading the difficult realities of twentieth and twenty-first century urban Indian existence. Alexie's latest collection, *Face* (2009), conveys uncomfortably positive views of colonialism alongside negative assessments of his tribal upbringing. In 'Scarlet' he asks directly: 'Estranged from the tribe that offers protection, / What happens to the soul that hates its reflection?' (*Face* 64). His writing is often intensely personal, but the questions Alexie directs out to the reader

³⁰ It is likely that *War Dances* and *Face* were published after Tatonetti submitted her study, therefore it would be unreasonable to suggest their deliberate omission from Tatonetti's piece. Nevertheless, my analyses of works within these publications provides only further illustration of an argument about Alexie's politics that is primarily constructed with reference to works that were published within the timeframe of Tatonetti's survey (1991-2007).

are demonstrably anti-narcissistic, prompting reflection primarily upon the boundaries of an individual's moral and political responsibility.

The Ghost Dance of 'Distances'

'Distances', from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, is one of the texts circumvented by Tatonetti. Set in an apparently twentieth century post-apocalyptic North America, 'Distances' provides perhaps Alexie's boldest exploration of the exclusionary politics of a contemporary Ghost Dance. In an endnote, Tatonetti admits that the story 'reveals that Alexie's Wounded Knee and Ghost Dance images never entirely fit within a single argument', followed nevertheless by an attempt to explain away the setting for 'Distances' as 'what appears to be the aftermath of a nuclear war' (2010 24n16). This is despite an extended epigraph from Wovoka, the Paiute Ghost Dance Messiah, which appears almost incantatory in its foreshadowing, detailing as it does the physical consequences of the Ghost Dance, underscored immediately by the narrator's pervasive dread that 'maybe the Ghost Dance finally worked' (*The Lone Ranger...* 104). Although the inclusion of an epigraph is relatively commonplace in the American short story, often opening the work of nineteenth century writers such as Irving, Melville and Poe, the quotation from Wovoka is certainly unusual in its completeness. This is a decidedly functional epigraph in a story that has largely been overlooked, and as such deserves at least a brief critical reflection.

An epigraph typically guides the reader towards a thematic framework upon which to found an understanding of the subsequent narrative. Accordingly, the epigraph may also signal an acquiescence with or departure from the concerns of

precedent texts, whilst proclaiming the scholarly predilections (or pretensions) of the selective author. The epigraph of 'Distances' is unique in that it tells a complete story, providing in the form of prophecy a sort of imaginative, historical prequel to Alexie's present-day narrative. One is here reminded of the similarly lengthy epigraphs placed at the start of some post-apocalyptic science fiction novels, composed by fictional historians to swiftly describe the great disasters that precede the action of the narrative, so accounting for the differences (or distances) between the society of the assumed reader and that he or she encounters in the novel.

Nevertheless, hanging over the inclusion of any externally selected epigraph is often left unanswered the question of its primacy over the main text: did the author choose the quotation before or after beginning to write? In the case of 'Distances', however, we can be almost certain that the nineteenth century prophecy of Wovoka inspired and, with considerable force, directs the setting and events of the story. As with political speech, it is the rhetorical force of the prophecy, its power to convince and stir, which is the measure of its success. In choosing to root his dystopian tale in this quotation, Alexie emphasises the practical might of prophetic language, including its political function as a call to follow.

Wovoka's prophecy has three primary objectives through which it might appeal to the listener. First: the revival and restoration of '[a]ll dead Indians'; second, the deaths of 'all white people'; third, and most importantly at this moment, the physical atrophy and combustion of all 'Indians who don't dance, who don't believe in this word' (104). Restatement of this last point is perhaps necessary: even those Indians who have been saved by the performance of the Ghost Dance will not survive if they do not continue to perform and affirm their faith in the prophecy. The

lives of those ‘who don’t believe in this word’ are dogmatically excluded, minimised, and finally engulfed in flames, ceasing to be recognised as Indians. The Ghost Dance prophecy grants and takes life first on the basis of race, then on that of personal belief. Being recognised as worthy of existence becomes not simply a matter of holding the recognised genetics, but of embodying the required epistemology.

Of course, it must be understood that the historical Ghost Dance prophecy was a time-bound response to the oppression that threatened daily tribal survival. Alice Beck Kehoe explains that the 1890 movement, with its ‘hope for the future, consolation and assistance in the present, and honor to the Indians who had passed into the afterlife [...] was a marvellous message for people suffering, as the Indians of the West were in 1889, terrible epidemics; loss of their lands, their economic resources, and their political autonomy; malnourishment and wretched housing; and a campaign of cultural genocide aimed at eradicating their languages, their customs, and their beliefs’ (7). It is understandable that the socioeconomic conditions suffered by Indians of the late nineteenth century produced a movement that found a solution to exclusion in a form of counter-exclusion.³¹ Nevertheless, reproduced in contemporary fiction, for a contemporary audience, Wovoka’s prophecy looks more like ruthless segregation than cultural empowerment: Indian adherents gain exclusive cultural freedom, but there are appropriate modes of expressing that freedom, and a morbid compulsion to do so.

³¹ This is not to imply that many Indian communities do not face difficulties and prejudices that threaten their lives and cultures today. They do, and I believe one of Alexie’s most significant achievements is educating readers about the origins and extent of those problems.

On a metatextual level, this lengthy epigraph provides our first indication that Alexie wishes to set this story apart from the rest of the collection. The absence in 'Distances' of the various characters, events and settings so explicitly shared by the other stories furthers this sense of segregation, preventing the piece from participating in an established interplay of elements, so temporarily isolating the narrative and the reader from the surrounding community. This is an important aesthetic choice that introduces exclusion at a thematic level, and foreshadows the violent separatism practised by the story's authority figures. The withdrawal from the community of stories and characters shared by the rest of the collection also functions at the level of genre, as some form of staged split from the long-standing present day society is always necessary for the establishment of a dystopian (or indeed utopian) civilisation. Other characteristically dystopian features of 'Distances' include the oppressive governmental system, the apparently naïve yet dissenting protagonist, the forbidden relationship that threatens the social order, and the ominous lack of a clear resolution. Whilst much of Alexie's poetry and fiction deals explicitly with racial tensions, the epigraph of 'Distances' eliminates the possibility of such tensions before the main narrative begins, yet in doing so pushes the issue of intracultural segregation (that between urban and reservation Indians) to the fore. The inclusion of this epigraph does more than just highlight the distance between nineteenth and twentieth century Indian identities; it invites an important question for the reader to consider over the subsequent pages: is a pantribal movement still a relevant method of cultural empowerment when many urban Indians feel excluded from their tribes? The following reading of Alexie's exploration of the consequences of the Ghost Dance suggests that the message of the

prophecy is no longer quite so unequivocally marvellous, and that a strict separatist political agenda is likely to weaken the communities it purports to represent.

As we enter the action of 'Distances' then, it becomes clear that the Ghost Dance has in a sense fulfilled its spiritual function as a pantribal movement, and the prophecy is being realised. The whites have drowned, the structural remains of white culture are being systematically torched, and a Tribal Council governs the exclusively reservation Indian community, yet what follows is not hope or triumph, but desolation, disease and death. It is perhaps not surprising that Tatonetti refrains from addressing this difficult story, as the future it presents is decidedly bleak. Far from uniting Indians, this apocalypse has rendered unbridgeable the gaps (being another of the title's 'distances') between reservation and urban Indians; a division now fully activated at a cellular level, causing the atrophy and death of those with the 'sickness' brought on by living off the reservation. Here, as in much of Alexie's writing, we find evoked the social significance of blood and DNA, though there is no explicit indication that the 'Urbans' are any more or less biologically indigenous than the reservation 'Skins'. The practical implication of this post-dance commingling of the one-drop rule and blood quantum specifications is a simple and unremitting distillation of the original Ghost Dance message: belong or begone. The irony here is hardly subtle, the biological and cultural consequences of the contemporary Ghost Dance and the practices of the Tribal Council echoing in subversion the catastrophic diseases and violence brought by European settlers³², as well as the Americanization

³² The described violence (burning, drowning, dismemberment, rape) is notably reminiscent of that enacted upon the indigenous population by early Spanish settlers, as described by Bartolomé de Las Casas in his *Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies* (1542).

policies that legally deprived (and continue to deprive) indigenous peoples of lands, cultures, and lives.

Again, such anachronism is a central concern of 'Distances', the story enacting in the late twentieth century a political and spiritual rupture intended for the turn of the nineteenth. Indigenous and non-indigenous cultures have continued to co-exist and disperse for over a century since the originary Ghost Dances (the 'distance' of anachronism being the perceived discrepancy between present sign and past referent), and so for Alexie a return to a pre-contact indigenous existence is not only untenable, but potentially detrimental to indigenous cultures as they currently exist. The narrator's recurring nightmares about television (106, 108) testify to the pervasive influence of the culture that the Tribal Council has defined as 'white', even for a 'Skin' such as the narrator. White culture is represented by 'artifact[s]'; 'sin[s]' (109) that somehow remain undestroyed: a watch (retained by the tribal chairman), a transistor radio (concealed by the narrator), and a painting of Jesus (a survivor of council-sanctioned arson). The ineradicability of these oddly-treasured symbols of white dominance in history, media, and religion dramatises the internalisation of white culture, or rather, the impossibility of extracting a pre-contact indigenous existence from contemporary cross-cultural indigenous experience.

Each object is of particular interest to the narrator, and subject to some unusual description that points to the aforementioned impossibility. The punning query 'I want to know why [despite being white] Jesus isn't a flame' (107) is a confused reaction to the perseverance of this other, white Messiah into what is supposed to be the exclusively indigenous aftermath of the Paiute Ghost Dance

Messiah's fulfilled prophecy.³³ The portrait is a reminder that the origins of the Ghost Dance religion were syncretic, incorporating Christian elements into what remained a Native movement. At the same time, such a presence permits competing claims of divinity into an otherwise theologically stabilised community, and reminds the reader that despite his portrait, if Jesus did exist then he surely was not white. The watch is remembered as having measured time 'exactly, coldly', in opposition to the narrator's measuring of time 'with [his] breath, the sound of [his] hands across [his] skin' (109). This is a curious action that appears to indicate the narrator's suspicion that those mechanisms by which experience is regulated in a sense make subjects of those who abide by their divisions. The earlier description of the Urbans' disease as 'a wristwatch that has fallen between their ribs, slowing, stopping' (107) suggests that with their metaphorical absorption of 'white' culture, the Urbans have become both anachronisms and anapisms: out of time and out of place. The narrator is especially fascinated by the possibility of hidden 'mistakes' in the inner workings of the waterproof radio, otherwise finding 'no imperfection...evident by the smooth, hard plastic of the outside' (109). This flawless façade houses a complexity of destroyed circuitry, dead batteries, shorted wires and, perhaps most significantly, burst 'dams' (105). That the 'mistakes' on the inside jeopardise the smooth functioning of the whole seems a fairly clear metaphor for the diseased and the dissenters in the society of 'Distances', whose presence directly threatens the possibility of maintaining a unified, 'pan-Indian' society. Furthermore, the burst dams inside the radio allude to manmade boundaries or geographical borders yielding to forces of nature, or indeed social forces. As metaphor, these borders need

³³ The title of Messiah for Wovoka has been much protested, most emphatically by Wovoka himself, and its use by Alexie again evokes the syncretic origins of the Ghost Dance.

not be physical, and the transgression not noticeably natural. By way of example, one might consider the reality of reservation life expectancy as bursting the bubble of fighting fit 'Indian' sports mascot iconography, or conversely, the alleged support for such iconography from the majority of the American Indian population.³⁴

Turning back to the text, one might consider the love that persists between the narrator and 'Tremble Dancer', the story's representative 'Urban', as a force of nature that cannot be contained, despite the strict rulings of the Tribal Council against cross-cultural relationships.

Again, Alexie's presentation of the fulfilment of Ghost Dance prophecy not only seems impossible to maintain, but wholly undesirable. Whilst the narrator is geographically (therefore biologically and publicly) acceptable to the Tribal Council, he must permanently conceal the private anguish of his splintered cultural identity. The fulfilment of the Ghost Dance prophecy has stretched the narrator's loyalties to breaking point, as he longs for private contact with urban Indians and pre-dance contemporary culture, whilst being publicly restricted by the rule of the Tribal Council, all the while terrified of the 'Others', being the indigenous ancestors revived by the dance. The stability of the narrator's identity is further threatened by his love for Tremble Dancer, whose gradual, partial decomposition into the narrator's mouth again suggests the inevitable internalisation of mixed cultures, passing not only from white to Indian, but from Indian to Indian. Like the burst dams and 'mistakes' inside the radio, the continuity of personal cross-cultural attachments in

³⁴ Or at least those Indians with telephones. A 2003-2004 telephone survey by the University of Pennsylvania claims that ninety percent of American Indians interviewed are not 'bother[ed]' by the name of the Washington Redskins (NAES04, 1), though Carol Spindel's personal interviews with Indians in her *Dancing at Halftime: Sports and the Controversy Over American Indian Mascots* (2002) show considerable resistance to such iconography.

the story, be they emotional, spiritual, or material, hints at a future that threatens the permanence of this apocalyptic terminus.

Despite Alexie's dystopic presentation, the desire for segregation is presented as dominant, historical and far-reaching, with even the Tribal Council appearing relatively moderate when at the mercy of the Others, those giant, revived ancestors whose age and size again reiterate the historical and spatial distance between pre-contact and contemporary indigenous existence. Though the Others are a permanent reminder of history, they are of a pre-contact history, and so follow an anachronistic ideology all too similar to that of the Council, attempting to erase all signs of that five hundred year interim of colonial contact. In a violent act that closely resembles waterboarding, Noah Chirapkin is tortured and killed by the Others. As the only 'Skin' with experience of the urban destruction outside the reservation, Chirapkin represents an undesirable and potentially pernicious link to post-contact, pre-dance culture, and must be destroyed. The eventual rape of Tremble Dancer by the 'tallest Other' (108) provides perhaps the most immediately disturbing action of the narrative, and though the life that springs forth following her impregnation suggests the cultural nourishment that can result from interactions with the excluded, the fact that she is raped and dies indicates that such interactions carry with them the risk of severe exploitation. The domination of the indigenous by their ancestors is a further irony in the story, but also dramatises the power of the dominant discourses of history to control contemporary experience. For all its mysteriousness and surreality, 'Distances' testifies to the historical perpetuation of racial hatred and genocidal tendencies even beyond the bounds of documented colonial experience, affirming the disastrous potential of any society to assert its dominance via turmoil. When the

narrator hears ‘horses exploding’ and ‘the screams of children who are taken’ (108), and when the Others sing and shout over the voices of their progeny, there is a clear sense that the revived Ghost Dance is here imagined as a site of historical loss, rather than future possibility.

From the reading offered above it may seem that Cook-Lynn, Bird and Owens are justified in declaring Alexie’s artistic merit to be overwhelmed by his contribution to a literature of ‘deficit’, ‘disengagement’, ‘despair’, and ‘Doom’ (Cook-Lynn 1996a 68, 70; Bird 47; Owens 82). Speaking of *Reservation Blues*, Bird (who as a Spokane might best be situated to critique Alexie’s tribal representations) contends that the novel ‘omits the core of native community, and exists solely in the marginal realm of its characters who are all misfits: social and cultural anomalies. It is a partial portrait of a community wherein there is no evidence of Spokane culture or traditions, or anything uniquely Spokane’ (51). Cook-Lynn’s criticisms of Alexie (and other contemporary Native writing that does not directly indicate the importance of community) are various, concurring with Bird whilst adding more generally that ‘[t]he biography...is written by people who are no longer attached to their native national origins, people who want to exploit themselves, usually giving in to their deficit lives and pimping the stereotypes, with the main purpose to appeal to white audiences’ (1994, 73). This addresses Alexie’s self-professed tendency to explicitly work autobiographical and tribally biographical material into his fictional narratives, even when that material reflects poorly on his reservation upbringing and his characters mirror Indian stereotypes. Owens finds himself ‘in strong agreement with Bird’s and Cook-Lynn’s critiques’ (76), arguing that Alexie’s fiction ‘too often simply reinforces 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' (79). 'Distances' is notably light on stereotypes, though one can easily assess the overall tone as hopeless, so conforming to the colonist's placatory trope of the irrevocably vanishing indigenous race. More important at this point is the story's relation to a Native community, which is perhaps *the* decisive factor in much current Native literary criticism. A brief look at literary nationalism helps explain why this is so.

The Location of Community

The nationalist critical agenda of Simon J. Ortiz' 'Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism' (1981) provides the inspiration for Jace Weaver, Womack, and Robert Allan Warrior's *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, which currently resides at the forefront of Native literary scholarship. Here it is accepted that nationalism is 'a term that describes a phenomenon that has given rise, on the one hand, to modern democracy and the thirst for liberation of oppressed people around the world, and, on the other hand, some of the worst forms of political oppression and xenophobia in human history' (Weaver et. al., xv). The authors crucially address misconceptions about the approach, making it very clear that they 'do *not* believe that [literary nationalism] is the only possible approach to Native literature', welcoming the scholarship of 'both Natives and non-Native allies who support tribal national sovereignty and nationalist readings of Native literature' in 'the hope of [building] a literary nationalism that endorses *free expression* as much as uniformity of opinion' (Weaver et. al. xxi, emphasis in original). Briefly, the

innovation of nationalist readings of literature is that it is an author's tribal affiliation and/or his or her attempts to represent tribal culture(s) that form the foundation of the critic's interpretive framework. The text is assessed on the basis of its affirmation of distinct tribal identities (and the accuracy of their portrayal), its approach to the decolonisation of tribal nations, and its expounding of the specific responsibilities to be accepted by Natives and non-Natives in the advancement towards regaining fully recognised tribal sovereignty. As a nation is built from communities, so communities are responsible for the health of that nation. A literary work that successfully promotes the importance of tribal communities (and is enjoyable to read) is more likely to inspire a sense of national pride and/or respect for tribal nations than one that maintains an individualist stance. As mentioned in the introduction, in his *That the People Might Live*, Weaver discusses the 'communitist' trend in Native literatures, contending that 'the single thing that most defines Indian literatures relates to this sense of community and commitment to it' (43). So what is here considered the best American Indian literature is that which is aware of its responsibilities to American Indian individuals, communities and tribal nations. The primary responsibility is to encourage tribal identification amongst individuals, so building tribal communities, and furthering the causes of tribal nations.

What does this mean for 'Distances'? I admit that I am not equipped with the relevant tribal knowledge of Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian culture to attempt a fully tribal nationalist reading (indeed, for me it is not clear to which tribal culture the story refers), but hopefully a general reading of the story's sense of community will provide sufficient illumination by which to follow my broader argument. The central community of 'Distances' is identified as tribal, but does not provide comfort or

‘coherence’ for its members, who freeze at night and are burned by the sun (or on funeral pyres) during the day. The neglected older members of the community choose to ‘drown in their own water rather than die of thirst’ (106-7), the implication being that they commit suicide by inhaling their own urine. By the end of the story, there is little indication that the narrator will not suffer the same fate, and so again it seems we are in the realm of despair. Yet embedded at the centre of the story there exists the glimmer of a potentially restorative community. The narrator manages only brief communications with Tremble Dancer and Noah Chirapkin, but in doing so establishes an inclusive sense of personal and social responsibility that is desirable in tribal communities yet absent from that ruled over by the Tribal Council. In his interactions with Tremble Dancer, the narrator discovers memories, love, responsibility for others, and an understanding of his reproductive powers. Noah Chirapkin’s survey of the land, empty but for ‘a single plant, a black flower’ (106) provides the narrator with a sense of place and the possibility of regeneration on reclaimed land. These capacities (to recount or begin a personal history and geography, make emotional connections with others, claim land and generate life) carry with them always the possibility of barbarism, but are tempered by the narrator’s appreciation of human fallibility, gained from his reflections on ‘mistakes’ inspired by the radio and the watch. Though oppressed by his peers and continually faced with death, the narrator’s struggle to establish some sense of autonomy seems to anticipate Warrior’s discussion of sovereignty:

If our struggle is anything, it is the struggle for sovereignty, and if sovereignty is anything, it is a way of life. That way of life is not a matter of defining a political ideology or having a detached discussion about the unifying structures and essences of American Indian traditions. It is a decision – a decision we make in our minds, in our hearts, and in our bodies – to be sovereign and to find out what that means in the process...the

struggle for sovereignty is not a struggle to be free from the influence of anything outside ourselves, but a process of asserting the power we possess as communities and individuals to make decisions that affect our lives (124).

Despite this (admittedly precious) location of community in the story, there remains the problem that this is not the desired *type* of community, as it stems directly from a relative individualism that defies the political prerequisites of the Tribal Council. The successful Ghost Dance of ‘Distances’ does more than simply reverse the colonial power dynamic through which such a politics previously functioned; it reinvigorates latent intracultural tensions, so marking urban Indians as fresh pariahs. In her investigation of British judicial responses to the Amritsar massacre of 1919, Helen Fein discusses a society’s ‘universe of obligation’, which in its establishment includes those people who ‘must be taken into account, to whom obligations are due, by whom we can be held responsible for our actions’ (7), so creating in relief conditions by which those excluded may be ignored or persecuted. The concept is common in the philosophical discussion of monist and utilitarian ethics, with Peter Singer devoting an entire study to what W.H. Lecky termed ‘the expanding circle’ (Singer, xiii). Wovoka’s prophecy established a pan-Indian universe of obligation that forcibly excluded whites, whilst also operating within Indian culture to remove all traces of colonial influence. The exclusion of urban Indians in the story is an attempt to dramatise the anxieties felt by urban Indians regarding their tribal identity. The majority of American Indians are now urban Indians, yet many, like Alexie, feel cast as betrayers of their tribe because of their engagement with urban America, an environment that tends to prioritise the immediate needs of the individual over the achievement of a sense of community.

As Alexie's fiction moves further from the reservation, so his concerns about the status of urban Indians become more focussed, though they are revealed by circumstances no less harrowing. The contemporary Ghost Dances of *Indian Killer* (1996) and *Flight* (2007) occur amidst principally urban scenes of homelessness, violence, racism, and childhood sexual abuse, and cause further division between Indians. When Tatonetti reads the Ghost Dance performed by the killer of *Indian Killer* as being 'the central metaphor for Native resistance in the novel' (2010 17) she echoes the deconstructivist assessments of anthropologist-turned-literature professor Dr. Clarence Mather, who interprets the killer as 'a revolutionary construct' whose actions are 'a metaphor for the Indian condition' (*Indian Killer*, 246). Mather's ideologically suspect 'Native American Literature' course is subject to continued challenges from Marie Polatkin, who I contend is that novel's decidedly non-metaphorical agent of indigenous resistance to racial injustices. Her lucid protests against the cultural appropriation of Jack Wilson's best-selling, heavily exoticised 'Indian' mysteries and Mather's poor scholarship, her support of and participation in urban Indian cultural activity, and her voluntary work for the homeless Indians of Seattle surely posit Marie in the role of righteous indigenous citizen. The testimony from Marie³⁵ that Tatonetti (again echoing Mather) cites apparently in support of the killer's 'revolutionary potential' (2010 19), that "Indians are dancing now, and I don't think they're going to stop" (*Indian Killer* 418) can easily be read as supporting the creative potential of Indians in a culturally mixed society (specifically referring to Marie's promotion of university powwows), rather than any motivation to destroy that society's dominant demographic. The

³⁵ Here I am identifying Marie Polatkin by her first name simply in order to avoid confusion with her cousin, Reggie Polatkin.

contemporary message of indigenous resistance must not be that divisive, final ‘message of the knife’ (*Indian Killer* 192) perpetrated by the vengeful killer, whose actions divide Seattle’s Indian communities into those who ‘believed it was all just racist paranoia’ and those ‘few [who] felt a strange combination of relief and fear, as if an apocalyptic prophecy was just beginning to come true’ (185). So the actions of the killer threaten not only the lives of the novel’s white population, but the integrity of the novel’s Indian communities. Instead, it is in Marie’s conscientious, measured approach to tackling the difficult realities of urban Indian living that we might find the potential for revolution. Marie’s indigenous pride no longer resides with the reservation of her tribal community (by whom she was bullied for her studiousness) and though she is often suspicious of her white peers, her commitment to nurturing Indian communities within an oppressive urban environment is partially driven by her personal experiences of exclusion at a tribal level.

Yet the novel acknowledges that there must be limits to the inclusivity of any coherent community, and Marie’s criticisms of Wilson and Mather help to plot these limits in *Indian Killer*. It is telling that Alexie chooses to approach the politics of exclusion here in the manner of his critics, through observations on literature and literary criticism. According to Marie, Wilson’s ‘books are killing Indian books’ (68), in that Wilson’s exploitative representations of ‘that shaman thing... talking animals, sacred vortexes’ (162-3) and other such sensationalised ‘Indian’ tropes become the dominant way of writing and reading about Indian cultures, overshadowing the writing of Indian authors who wish to engage with the often difficult realities of a supposed post-colonial existence. As mentioned, Mather is subject to sustained criticism from Marie (until he ejects her from his class), beginning with her

observation that on the reading list for his Native American Literature course ‘there are only three Indian [authors], and their books were really written by white guys’ (59). Like Wilson, Mather purports to be interested in promoting cross-cultural understanding, yet in order to maintain his authority and reputation he must maintain the ignorance of his audience to the everyday realities of contemporary Indian nations, communities and individuals. Both Mather and Wilson believe that they belong to Indian communities, Wilson falsely claiming Shilshomish heritage and Mather proudly proclaiming his ‘adopt[ion] into a Lakota Sioux family’ (61).

Whatever value these assertions might hold for the individual claimants, they fail as claims to any form of culturally indigenous interiority simply because the characters proclaim their Indian associations only for personal gain, neglecting the communities they are alleged to represent. For Alexie then, being a responsible indigenous citizen does not necessarily involve a fine appreciation of one’s tribal nation, nor even a sense of belonging to that tribe, rather it requires attention to the need for healthy indigenous communities wherever indigenous peoples might reside, and at the same time an ability to recognise the potential communal advantages of individual progress, again, wherever indigenous peoples might reside.

The contemporary Ghost Dance of *Flight* is again hostile and divisive, taking the form of an indiscriminate attack upon those queuing at a city bank by Zits, a traumatised and delusional fifteen-year-old victim of sexual abuse. This is no metaphor for righteous indigenous resistance: it is another extreme act of aggression against the urban community. Zits performs this Ghost Dance according to the instructions of an hallucinated character called Justice, who convinces him that killing white people will resurrect his dead Irish mother and return his absent Indian

father. Thematically this is all rather familiar, dramatising the dangers of endorsing excessive exclusion in the name of achieving inclusion, nevertheless, our understanding of this sequence allows for a constructive reading of the crisis of origins that exacerbates Zits' psychological symptoms, and leads him to apparent sociopathy. Although Zits claims not to be 'Irish *or* Indian', describing himself as 'a blank sky, a human solar eclipse' (*Flight 4*), he plainly chooses to identify with his Indian heritage, primarily due to his physical features. The desire to explore this aspect of his cultural identity is initially a positive one, though as his Indian heritage is neither tribally specific nor legally recognised, sporadic interactions with homeless and alcoholic 'street Indians' provide his only sense of participation in an Indian community (*Flight 7*). At the same time, Zits understands that in interacting with this debilitated community he removes himself from the potentially recuperative regard of those 'rich and educated Indians' who see '*[t]he drunken Indian [as] just a racist cartoon...[t]he lonely Indian [as] just a ghost in a ghost story*' (*Flight 6 italics in original*). The only Indian community Zits knows is that with which direct association prevents him from recognition as a decent Indian citizen. In order to better understand and align himself with the traditional values of more acceptable Indian communities, thus improving his chances of some form of positive cultural recognition, Zits attempts to research 'how real Indians used to live and how they're supposed to live now' (*Flight 12*). Sadly, the principal resources available to Zits are the negative portrayals of Indians in the historical conflicts he sees simulated on television, and so his understanding of Indian cultural values is overwhelmed by representations of hostility towards non-Indians. Zits' ethical development is directed not only by his experiences of abuse at the hands of family members and various

foster parents, but also by the impossibility of his locating an acceptable Indian community through which to explore his cultural heritage. Unable to find a sense of belonging in his current social location, Zits conceives his performance of a contemporary Ghost Dance as a means of establishing his Indian ancestry and restoring his tribal identity.³⁶

As we have seen, Alexie (amongst others) is criticised for the lack of tribal community in his writing, but it seems that any such aesthetic lack is an expression in fiction of a real, felt distance from the tribal community with whom he is assumed to identify. Affiliation with one's tribal nation provides little support when one feels excluded by the members of that tribe. In 'Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers' Alexie baldly explains this reality:

My tribe tried to murder me –
And I don't mean metaphorically.
I've been to dozens of funerals and wakes;
I've poured dirt into one hundred graves;

And if you study what separates me,
The survivor, from the dead and car-wrecked,
Then you'll learn that my literacy
Saved my ass (*Face* 80).

Put simply, how does the nationalist agenda account for urban Indians who no longer identify with their tribal communities? Alexie here asserts that the nationalist emphasis on the importance of identifying with a tribal community may further exclude those Indians who find a sense of kinship in non-tribal or pan-tribal communities. The study of 'what separates [him]' from his tribe, being a subversion of the work of the separatist, reveals the necessity of a tribally-specific reading only

³⁶ Although *Flight* is another text that has been largely overlooked by critics, a fuller examination of the ways in which Zits' time-travelling misadventures and oddly blissful domestic payoff function as part of Alexie's political agenda is taken up in chapter five.

insofar as the tribe might be held accountable for the treatment of its members.

Alexie's concern is that literary nationalism might restrict access to or acceptance of non-tribal and/or urban Indian artistry, and so minimise the sort of engagement with world literatures that allowed Alexie to escape poverty. It is certainly worth considering the writer's position in all of this, given the largely self-reflexive nature of Alexie's writing, and his status as a successful urban Indian. In a recent interview, Alexie notes that:

Indians are celebrated for questioning the dominant power structure, the white power structure. But we're not very good at questioning our own power systems, our own political systems, our own leadership. So I think that I am individually and tribally critical. It is not just about figuring out my own identity and figuring out who I am, but figuring out Indians' place in the world and the way Indians treat each other, the good and bad of us. [...] I think all too often Indian art only seeks to celebrate Indians, to validate Indians, rather than presenting us in more complex ways.

(Alexie, interviewed by Kathy Wise)

It is with this in mind that Alexie 'call[s] bullshit' on the 'ugly fundamentalism' of Cook-Lynn, in the aforementioned 'hybrid sonnet sequence' (*Face* 80-81), proclaiming that '[i]t was all those goddamn texts / By all those damn dead white male and female writers / That first taught me how to be a fighter' (*Face* 80). Alexie's problem with authority is not simply a problem with white authority, it is with the reach of authority figures in general. Alexie's reference to Cook-Lynn's 'swarm of professorial locusts' (*Face* 80) is likely a conflation of the relatively inclusive aims of literary nationalists such as Weaver, Womack, and Warrior with Cook-Lynn's rather more disturbing separatist assertions, for example that 'individual works are comprehensible only within the context of the economic, behavioural, and political forces of the culture from which they emerge' (1996b 77).

It seems inevitable that certain people will be granted over others the right to decide upon what is correctly 'Indian' and what is not; but to exclude work by Indian artists that responsibly considers non-tribal, urban matters is to exclude a major Indian demographic that also desperately requires support. The report issued by the Urban Indian Health Commission in 2007 found that '[d]ecades of neglect have placed urban Indians at greater risk of unnecessary death and disability [than the general population]' and that 'although the United States continues to work to address racial and ethnic disparities in health care, American Indians and Alaska Natives living in this country's cities have been mostly invisible' (3-4). Regarding demographics, the Commission notes that '[a]lthough federal Indian policy favors resources for Indian tribes and those living on Indian reservations, shifts in populations and findings from health disparities research confirm that public and private sector efforts to improve health care quality and reduce disparities must assist and recognise Indians living in cities' (4). Alexie's writing alone is unlikely to cure depression, diabetes or heart disease, but his commitment to representing the complexities of urban Indian existence forms a vital contribution to contemporary Indian cultures, and as such deserves the attention of those aiming to foster national pride.

As mentioned above, 'Distances' occupies an unusual place at the centre of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, being the only story not to explicitly share characters, settings or events with any other in the collection. These common elements otherwise create connections amidst the various perspectives of the surrounding stories, so forming a nexus of interrelated personal and social histories that supports a distinct sense of community through the collection, albeit a

community in need. That this community is struggling does not necessarily imply a lack of core values, indeed, individual responses to the consistently perceived deficit of ‘tribal ties [and] sense of community’ (74) tend to affirm the crucial function of the ‘tribal imagination’ in ensuring the survival of the tribe (141).³⁷ This ‘tribal imagination’ is that which fuels and is fuelled by storytelling, an act conceived in this collection as both individual and communal, in that the stories recounted by individual narrators together provide histories of the local community. The absence of these shared elements in ‘Distances’ places the story at a remove from this community of stories and their storytellers, and in doing so invokes at a metatextual level the potential for those with a separatist agenda to weaken those communities they might claim to empower. As in much dystopian fiction, the significance of this glimpse of a potential future lies in its establishment of a perspective from which to assess the present. This critical distance allows for a reflection upon the wider social and political implications of community-building, here suggesting that indigenous and federal governments should be open to the potentially mutual benefits of nurturing the social links that exist between urban, reservation and rural communities. By distancing both the narrative and the reader from the immediate community established by the rest of the collection, Alexie forces an evaluation of the means by which that community has come to exist, and the ways in which it might continue to do so, even when all seems lost. Due to its relative peculiarities, Alexie’s ‘Distances’ succinctly dramatises specific emotional, social and historical difficulties potentially encountered by contemporary reservation, rural and urban

³⁷ Examples include Victor’s promise to listen respectfully to one of Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s stories in ‘This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona’ and Junior’s ‘good story’ in ‘A Good Story’. These narratives establish the positive bonds between individuals necessary for a sustainable community.

Indian communities, invoking the exclusionary politics of the Ghost Dance to reveal the tensions that exist within and between those communities. An understanding of these tensions is not only crucial to any reading of this collection and Alexie's later writing, but to an appreciation of any artwork that attempts to represent a contemporary urban Indian experience.

This chapter has demonstrated Alexie's concerns about the separatist and nationalist projects, and discovered a subtle engagement with the difficulties faced by urban Indian peoples, even within the early 'reservation realis[t]' (*The Lone Ranger...* xxi) stage of his career. The following chapter finds these difficulties explicitly dramatised by the story of Coyote Springs in *Reservation Blues*, which I read as illuminating the restrictive crises of identity encountered by Indian peoples trying to succeed in the city.

Chapter Two
**‘that thin line “between art and exploitation”’: Agency and Authenticity
 in *Reservation Blues***

‘The spring is vain that flows not from the soul.’
 - *Faust*: Part One 50

‘[W]hat if we get rich and eat too much? We’ll all get fat and disgusting.’
 - *Reservation Blues* 72

It is challenging to choose a single narrative upon which to focus in Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*, which tells so many stories of past and present, yet it is the formation and dissolution of the band/character Coyote Springs that incorporates and dominates those many other disparate narrative threads, and articulates the central development of the novel, being the search for agency and authenticity in the city. Alexie chooses the Faustian pact as the thematic impetus for the story of Coyote Springs, expounding upon that conflict of greed versus integrity, and evoking the conditions of contemporary consumer culture, in order to illuminate the restrictive crises of identity encountered by Indian peoples trying to succeed in the city. I understand this as a commentary on the reception of Indian literatures according to preconceived aesthetic standards, which Alexie dismantles by employing the ‘trickster’ tradition, to paradoxically initiate the move beyond the traditional limitations of the reservation aesthetic, towards the opportunities and threats of the city.

Determining Agency

Human agency can be broadly understood as the capacity of the individual to act freely, a capacity which is constrained or liberated according to the emphasis placed on the influence of certain social structures.³⁸ By way of analogy, we might consider my decision to make some toast limited by my access to the necessary resources, e.g. artisanal bread, a roaring open fire, suitably understanding smoke detectors. This access is further limited by the fact that my economic status might not place me in a position to be able to afford any of these resources. These limitations on my economic status might be the result of certain sociopolitical structures that afford these resources to those who, perhaps, aggressively accumulate capital, instead of those who, perhaps, spend a lot of time reading books. The choice I have made to spend a lot of time reading books may also be limited by my parents' encouragement to read as a child, which may have been directed by the marketing of books to them as a method, proven within accepted structures of scientific discourse, of increasing my chances of progressing towards the successes indicated by the uninhibited enjoyment of premium toast. In *Reservation Blues*, Victor Joseph continues to choose clothes from his 'closet full of silk shirts and polyester pants' that are 'tattered and barely h[o]ld to his body' because he 'had never had any money since then to buy anything new' (12). Alexie is here alluding to the diminution of Victor's agency by the social structures that have led to many Indian peoples living in poverty on reservations. The novel continues to describe the structural limitations placed upon Alexie's urban Indian characters as they seek success in the city, and in

³⁸ See Emirbayer and Mische (1998) for an extended analysis, critique, and revision of the notion of agency in social thought.

doing so highlights the specific problems Indian peoples often face regarding the perception of their authenticity.

It is perhaps unsurprising that considerations of freedom and constraint abound in a novel that takes its title from the blues, features a Native American reservation as its primary setting, and incorporates historical narratives of racist violence into a non-linear plot resting upon a 'deal with the devil'. The two images that most frequently come to symbolically represent the limitation or fulfillment of human agency in the novel are those of hands and horses. Although we are concentrating primarily on the story of Coyote Springs, this narrative is initiated by the arrival of the 1930s Mississippi Delta bluesman Robert Johnson and his guitar, and it is through his description that we are introduced to the power of hands to control or be controlled, to accept or resist.

Looking 'scared and tired', Johnson initially keeps 'his hands at his sides, out of view, hidden', explaining that he is "'careful with [his] hands'" because if he uses them then he might be heard by "'The Gentleman'". We hear that "'The Gentleman [...] gets into the strings'" of his guitar; that following "'a bad deal years ago'" '[t]he Gentleman [holds] the majority of stock in Robert Johnson's soul', and has 'chased Robert Johnson for decades [...] narrowly miss[ing] him at every stop.' Describing his predicament as "'a sickness [he] can't get rid of'"; Johnson tells Thomas Builds-the-Fire that on his guitar he "'can't play nothing...[n]ot ever'", before revealing his '[b]urned, scarred' palms to a 'frightened Thomas' (4-6). The source of Johnson's fame is at the same time the source of his pain; the guitar-playing that in reality turned him from a harmonica player into one of the greatest blues guitarists of all time is inextricably linked to 'sickness' and a loss of 'soul'. As 'soul' is rather an

occlusive, mystical idea, this is later clarified in the details of the trade as being for Johnson's 'freedom' (264). The Gentleman possesses Johnson through his association with the guitar, controlling his performance and steering Johnson towards a particular, falsified musical role emulating his hero Son House.

Johnson's freedom then, is refigured in terms of worth, and the novel's retelling of this legendary exchange provides a mythic, prototypical basis for the late twentieth-century concept of the artist 'selling out', that is, the act of compromising or relinquishing one's artistic ambitions and ideals in order to align oneself with current or foreseen market trends, with the specifically avaricious aims of making money and achieving widespread fame. Such an exchange finds its own morphological origins in the infamous pact made with Mephistopheles by the eponymous protagonist of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1832). My point here is that the association of injuries to the hands with the sacrifice of creative freedom³⁹ marks the hands as symbols of human agency, this being the capacity for each and every human to make decisions and, crucially, with these decisions to change their situation in the world. Damage to hands in the novel limits one's freedom to create, to impose decisions upon the world, and to resist the decisions of others.⁴⁰ This presents us with an important question: what does the Gentleman gain from possession of Robert Johnson's soul? Before answering this we must first consider the mysterious character of the Gentleman.

In the legend of Robert Johnson, the being with whom he made the 'deal', and who subsequently inhabits, controls or tunes his guitar, facilitating his sudden

³⁹ Further examples: Thomas feels pain as he plays the guitar on pages 9 and 73, Victor on pages 28, 33 and 225, and more expansively, '[a]ll the guitar players cut their fingers to shreds' on page 209.

⁴⁰ See also David Treuer's *Little* (1997), featuring a boy with fused fingers who is only able to say 'you'.

skill, is usually referred to as Satan, or less specifically as the Devil. Yet ‘The Gentleman’ figure in *Reservation Blues* is never referred to as such, and to read him as a manifestation of evil as opposed to good is to seriously misunderstand and project otherwise absent dualistic overtones upon the novel. He is never described as inherently good or bad, and is *certainly* not the ‘insurmountable [and] not ultimately productive’ ‘white devil’ that critic Scott Andrews extracts in order to lambaste Alexie’s alleged ‘demonizing’ of whites (150). Andrews is here guilty of some rather embarrassing presumptions about Sherman Alexie’s attitudes towards miscegenation, the evidence for which he finds by extracting allegedly ‘separatist, essentialising notions’ (150) from arguably polemical contexts, to which we shall again later return.

Clara Sue Kidwell and Alan Velie tell us that due to a distinctly ‘personal’ ‘relationship with spiritual forces’, Native Americans ‘[do] not traditionally view spiritual forces as either inherently benevolent or malign, as Christians do’ (32). Whilst ‘The Gentleman’ is indeed a ‘handsome white man’, his long fingernails and ‘lupine eyes’ (264) quickly betray his anthropomorphism and reveal him to be a manifestation of Coyote, the trickster, described by Kidwell and Velie as ‘the ultimate figure of mutability and changeability in the world’ (33). Further evidence of this can be found in Johnson’s figuration of ‘The Gentleman’ as ‘just a ghost, just a small animal dashing across the road’ (173), a clear reference to a Coyote-like trickster figure, an ethereal being that exists infinitely yet appears momentarily, or imaginatively, between states, characterised, or rather, un-characterised by ambiguity. Coyote as the trickster is considered further by Kidwell and Velie to be ‘a creative force [that] defines people’s complex relationship with the world around

them', whilst being 'ultimately selfish, a creature of enormous physical appetites...greedy for what others have [and] constantly on the move...seldom part of a settled community' (32-33). Coyote wants Johnson's soul/freedom because it grants him the agency to assume a popular form (the guitarist/guitar) and become an adored, legendary performer, permeating an otherwise unknowable human discourse (the blues). Yet this greed, his character, is part of something bigger, something that does indeed 'define people's complex relationship with the world around them', in the form of the trickster tale. This adoption of the trickster tale is of considerable metafictional interest, as I argue later that Alexie uses this apparently traditional format in order to protest the use of such tropes elsewhere.

As both the guitar and 'The Gentleman' are aspects of Coyote the trickster figure, so the novel, or at least the story of 'Coyote Springs', can be read on one level as a contemporary trickster tale. The trickster tale seeks to educate as well as entertain the reader (or listener), though this education takes what might be called a passive form; the trickster figure responds to the situations he encounters and affects in often extreme, morally ambivalent and/or taboo-breaking ways, in order for the reader (or listener) to draw his or her own conclusions. This usually leaves the narrative with little sense of finality and no unambiguous moral resolution, granting the audience the freedom to consider the meaning of the story relative to them and their particular context. The purpose of this particular trickster tale is to educate the reader as to the methods implicitly employed by the dominant culture to remove the human agency of the individual. This is achieved by exposing the dynamics and mechanics of contemporary Indian exploitation, and depicting the resistance and participation of several characters with regards to these strategies. While Coyote's

immediate function in the story is to manipulate first Johnson, then Coyote Springs, his overall role is to present the reader with a tangible manifestation of greed and its ultimate limitations.

Originally an accompanist, Johnson's avaricious decision at the crossroads to shift his priorities and sacrifice his personal integrity for performing centre stage is indicative of one at the mercy of Coyote. In the form of his creative freedom, his human agency is snatched and transformed, so Johnson becomes merely the trickster's simulated performance of an archetypal bluesman; he is little more than a full body mouthpiece for the selfish, though creative forces of Coyote. Johnson soon achieves fame and fortune, but finds no personal satisfaction in being the entertaining marionette of an external source, and realises only the total suffocation of his creative freedom. Johnson's decision to fake his own death can be seen as an unsuccessful attempt to free himself from the restrictions of his own legend; if he does not play the guitar then he is not 'the best damn guitar player' that ever lived (266), and if he is not the best guitar player that ever lived then he can mentally transgress the terms of the original exchange, and regain some of the creative freedom and human agency that he originally relinquished.

In order to continue to elude the trickster, and so retain some freedom, Johnson must be 'careful' with his hands, the source of his performative abilities (4), working only 'the minimum jobs, washing dishes, sweeping floors, delivering pizzas, because he could never play music for money. Never again' (174). Though he can run from Coyote, the temptation of success with the trickster remains with him psychologically, and manifests itself physically as visible and audible restraints upon Johnson; he looks 'bowed, bent' whilst 'his words [sound] like stones in his mouth

and coals in his stomach' (4-6). Until Johnson can rediscover his sense of creativity and freedom he will remain the static bluesman simulation, possessed and performed by the Gentleman; he is a legend distinct from its human component, so, dehumanized, his wounds cannot heal nor his speech enlighten. In an attempt to recover a sense of his humanity, of who he was before being taken over by greed and Coyote, Johnson escapes to Big Mom. The trickster guitar happily moves on to find a new conduit for its greed in the hands of Victor Joseph, an alcoholic bully and 'the reservation John Travolta' (12), his identity already skewed. Even so, in keeping with traditional tales, Coyote's avarice and selfishness will lead eventually to his self-defeat.

Johnson seeking guidance from Big Mom brings us to horses, our second dramatic symbol of human agency, for it is she who 'taught all of her [Spokane Indian] horses to sing', and it is through Big Mom that we first hear the horses screaming (9). Big Mom bears witness to the all too factual massacre of around 700 Spokane Indian horses by Colonel George Wright in 1858, perceiving in the fall of the final horse the disastrous consequences for the future existence of Spokane Indians, the 'colt [falling] to the grass of the clearing, to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern, to the cold, hard coroner's table in a Veterans Hospital' (10). Her perceptions foreshadow the fates of Victor and Junior respectively, the former spiraling into alcoholism, the latter 'choosing' suicide. According to *The Spokane Indians* (2006), a history of the tribe by Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown, at the time Wright's decision was motivated by a single thought: "Without the horses the Indians are powerless" (136). In *Exploring Washington's Past: A Road Guide to History* (1995), Ruth Kirk and Carmela Alexander describe the slaughter as lasting

for ‘two gory days’, after which the horses’ ‘[s]keletons lay in place for decades, and the site was referred to as the Bone Yard’ (10). The massacre of their horses was indeed an effective physical restraint on the ability of Spokane Indians to actively resist opposing forces, and is representative of the psychological constraints upon the capacities of all Native Americans for progress, beyond the ideological limitations imposed by a dominant culture. The ‘pained and tortured’ sound of the horses screaming as they are rounded up to be shot becomes an important motif as the novel progresses, occurring when the power of the individual or individuals to resist is severely threatened. This in turn signals a blow to human agency, and alerts the reader to an imbalance of power.

Coyote Springs, then, is conceived by Johnson’s possessed guitar, and it is necessary to expound upon the bizarre, apparently autonomous characteristics of this instrument in order to appreciate fully its trickster influence in the novel. It is with Johnson’s guitar that Thomas quite suddenly decides he can ‘change the world’ (13); Johnson’s guitar that tells Thomas that he ‘need[s] to play songs for [his] people’; and it is the music of Johnson’s guitar playing itself which ‘work[s] its way into [the] skins’ (23) of Victor and Junior and brings them to form a band with Thomas. As we read of the music entering the dreams of Victor and Junior, the powerful omnipresence of the guitar is emphasised by a markedly biblical tone:

the guitar played itself and the music did rise into the clouds. It did rain down on the reservation, which arched its back and drank deeply. It did fall on the roof of the water truck, disturbing Junior and Victor’s sleep. The music talked to them in their dreams, talking so loudly that neither could sleep (25).

Though initially they ‘both dreamed of their families’, after hearing the powerful voice of the guitar in their heads, Victor and Junior seem momentarily to lose grasp on reality, or to imagine themselves elevated in a false one. Victor sees

himself ‘on the cover of Rolling Stone’ (28) while Junior experiences the same vision, arriving at Thomas’ with the unpalatable peanut butter and onion sandwiches ‘that tasted so great in his dreams’ (18). Such rhetoric draws a distinct link between performative power and indoctrination, and continues the novel’s constant juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane; the music of Johnson’s guitar is soon after denounced as “‘the devil’s”” (33). The association of performance and indoctrination is continued with the introduction of Father Arnold, the reservation priest, who likens being a priest to his former role as lead singer in a rock band: ‘As a lead singer, as a priest, he could change the shape of the world just by changing the shape of a phrase’ (36). His re-presentations of the word of God are powerful in effect as a result of being fragile in fixed meaning. The word of God is thus separated from the congregation by at least two degrees, first passing through his interpretation or phrase ‘shap[ing]’, then subject to the interpretations of the listeners in ‘the world’. Here then, the performance is as important as its textual content in creating meaning.⁴¹

Such a notion of performance is put forward by John L. Austin’s lectures at Harvard University in 1955, later published in *How to do Things with Words* (1962), in which he describes ‘performative utterances’ (6). Such utterances perform the act of which they speak in being spoken; as Austin puts it, ‘the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something’ (6-7). So Father Arnold, in performing a marriage ceremony, for example, would pronounce a couple as married, and so they are married. This gained contemporary theoretical currency through its elaboration by Judith Butler. Butler’s notion of

⁴¹ For an extended discussion of performance and ritual, see chapter four.

‘performativity’ in her *Gender Trouble* (1990) sets out to demonstrate the ways in which individuals perform preconceived notions of masculinity and femininity, and point to ways in which such conventions might be subverted and resisted.

Johnson’s guitar infects the minds of Thomas, Junior and Victor with that same rapacious ‘sickness’ of which Johnson is trying to cure himself: a lack of freedom based on the performance of a preconceived role. The performance of the guitar thus creates the structures by which the band will be formed, and according to which they will perform. Johnson’s ‘sickness’ is initially equated with the ‘disease’ of Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s talent and passion for storytelling (6). The difference between these conditions is that while Johnson’s sickness is a consequence of his pact with Coyote, Builds-the-Fire feels that he was born with his ‘disease’. Rather than alluding to a curable ailment, Thomas’ ‘disease’ is perhaps more of a dis-ease with his particular restricted position by birth as an Indian on a reservation. His storytelling provides a way for him to continuously and creatively assert and reassert his identity in an environment (the reservation) and political climate that constantly threatens to fix this identity. In this way, Thomas too has traded freedom for original artistry, the difference being his lack of desirous, *conscious* participation in the exchange. As previously discussed, Johnson’s sickness is the appropriation and erasure by greedy Coyote of his performative power, suppressing his ability to express himself as a free agent. Johnson being concealed by Big Mom, Coyote seizes his fresh opportunity at fame and fortune, and as Victor takes the ill-fated guitar, so the band is formed.

With Victor’s guitar-playing under the masterful control of Coyote, the as-yet-unnamed ‘all-Indian rock and blues band’ quickly gains both a fan base and a

protest group. Performing '[i]n emulation of all their rock heroes', Victor and Junior decide to trash their accommodation, declare themselves the new Beatles and attempt to bed some groupies (41-3). These groupies, named Betty and Veronica, are 'New Age' white women obsessed with and deluded by their own imagined, romanticised *indian* stereotypes, Veronica blindly proclaiming that as "'an Indian and a guitar player'", Victor cannot fail to be her ideal man. Victor does his sexually aggressive best to shatter Veronica's illusions of his inherent nobility, though the pair persists, taking time off from their ownership of the suggestively-named bookshop 'Doppelgangers' to travel with the band as roadies, and sing their own thematically suspect songs about invented 'Indian boy[s]' (42-4). Adhering to and motivated by anachronistic, cartoonish notions of *indian* wisdom, at best inconsistent and at worst oppressively stereotypical, Betty and Veronica have no independent sense of identity, instead constructing their identities from the subjective depictions and interpretations of others. They are the 'doppelgangers' (literally translated as 'double-goers') of Chess and Checkers, two female Flathead Indians who see Coyote Springs and later join the band. Like their 'Archie' comic sources, they are two-dimensional stock characters, yet their inclusion here is significant. They represent an important and dangerous part of the oppression of Indian peoples, in that their actions indiscriminately appropriate, digest and regurgitate false notions about *indian* identity. Homi K. Bhabha describes this aspect of colonial discourse in *The Location of Culture* (1994) as the paradoxical impulse towards 'fixity' (66), though which the coloniser requires the stasis of the colonial subject, in order to assert and contain the stereotype, at the same time as requiring the 'disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition' of the colonised, in order to be variously attracted to and repulsed by this

stereotype (66). Despite their explicitly postmodern appearance in the novel, Betty and Checkers's attraction to *indian* stereotypes may be understood as indicative of 'the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both colonizer and colonized, [being] the scene of...a fantasy and defence – the desire for originality which is again threatened by the differences of race, colour, and culture' (Bhabha 75). The entry of Betty and Checkers sets off an avalanche of simulations and the novel's concentration on authenticity proper.

Imagining Authenticity

As 'gossip about the band spread from reservation to reservation' (44), the band takes the next step towards widespread fame by deciding upon a name. An important distinction must be made as regards the band before it is named and after, as it is only after the band receives its name that it gains autonomy as a character in itself. Searching for a suitable signifier, the band first rejects "Bloodthirsty Savages", and then "Coyote Springs", the latter declared "too damn Indian", as Victor boldly exclaims "Fuck Coyote" (44-5). Coyote angrily makes his presence known, forcing the band to accept the name, and so 'prov[ing] his strength' in directing the fate of the group. The naming of the band is significant because it imposes upon the individuals a monolithic, defining stasis; it conflates the unique characteristics of each member into one ideologically coherent and saleable referent, allowing the band to better achieve fame. As Coyote directs, their sole shared characteristic is a collective greed, with only 'promises of money and magazine covers' (44-5) temporarily silencing their constant arguments.

Coyote Springs' first paying gig is uncannily realised the instant Thomas has written some original material, and it is on the way to this gig that the band is first asked the question: "[w]ho's the lead singer?" (50). The repetition of this attempt to extract a single representative (typical) voice from a recently homogenized group of individuals alludes to the significance of the question, and the performativity of the utterance. The question imposes uneasy definitions and enforces an unanticipated hierarchy upon the individuals who comprise the band, as well as potentially facilitating the creation of some collective, false ideology. Thomas is technically the lead singer, but this does not and must not imply that he speaks for, or commands, or is any more important than the other members of the group. It is Coyote's greed that continues to shape and motivate the band, forcing Victor against his will to deliver a guitar solo that coerces the assimilation into Coyote Springs of Chess and Checkers, the female Flathead Indians mentioned above. After they "sign up" to become 'the latest incarnation of Coyote Springs', the band 'meld[s] faster than any garage band in history' (78-9). As the individual members of the band disappear further into the collective identity of Coyote Springs, so the appeal of the band widens with a successful 'nonreservation gig' (87) that subverts the negative, violent expectations of the audience of 'cowboys' (89).

The analogy here is with the impulse of the dominant culture to discern, popularise and perpetuate what it considers to be the representative characteristics of any ethnic group. By constructing 'authentic' representatives and ignoring any potentially resistant individuality, the dominant culture can more easily maintain the dualism of 'us' and 'them', and so retain the powers of exclusion or inclusion by recourse to this cultural 'authenticity'. Louis Owens has written extensively on the

problems of authenticity as faced by contemporary Native Americans, explaining that stereotypical images of the ‘Indian’ as either ‘noble and pitiable (shaman-warrior/drunken)’ or the ‘disturbing and threatening [...] (warrior/blood-thirsty obstacle to expansion)’ have become so widespread and internalised that ‘[i]n order to be recognized, to claim authenticity in the world – *in order to be seen at all* – the Indian must conform to an identity imposed from outside’ (1998 12-13). Similarly, as mentioned in the introduction, Vizenor draws on Baudrillard’s discussions of simulation and the hyperreal to shape his ideas of ‘manifest manners’, being ‘the simulations of dominance; the notions and misnomers that are read as the authentic and sustained as representations of Native American Indians’ (1999 5-6). Vizenor sees the proliferation of both negative and ‘positive’ stereotypes of Native Americans as so profound that stereotyping becomes complicit (alongside the always-already governmentally mediated reality of reservation life) in the way living Indian peoples believe they are able to live their lives. Of course, all stereotypes are ultimately negative in that they impose limitations upon the individual, thus inhibiting (at least) psychological freedom, being the ability to consider oneself able to achieve realistic personal goals. So these baseless stereotypes are perpetuated, and many Indian peoples are confined to a particular, disastrous cycle of existence.⁴²

Listening to Hank Williams on the radio on their return from the gig, Thomas and Chess witness the music rising ‘past [a] hitchhiker up into the sky, bang[ing] into the Big Dipper, and bounc[ing] off the bright moon’ (91). If the reader doubts the magic realist mode, the narration assures us that ‘[t]hat’s exactly what happened. The music howled back into the blue van, kept howling until Coyote Springs became

⁴² See chapter six for further discussion of this idea of internal colonialism.

echoes. That's exactly what happened' (91). In becoming individual 'echoes', the band members seem to be released once more into plurality, though in fact they are further blended into abstraction. The movement of the performance from radio to atmosphere and back represents the aforementioned cycle of stereotypical representation; the representative of *indian* culture is broadcast, distorted and reflected back as something no longer human, yet which might be mistaken as such: the Coyote's howl.

This cycle is a (perhaps complicated) example of Baudrillard's third-order simulation; the 'hyperreal', being 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality' (1994 1). The idea is more explicitly expressed several times during *Reservation Blues*, usually with reference to depictions of *indians* in the visual arts. We find that 'Junior based all of his decisions on his dreams and visions' because '[a]ll the Indians on television had visions that told them exactly what to do' (18). The aggressive overreactions of Victor and Michael White Hawk to Big Mom's teachings lead to the statement that 'Indian men have started to believe their own publicity and run around acting like the Indians in movies' (208); a stereotype earlier articulated as 'some twentieth-century warrior, alternating between blind rage and feigned disinterest' (4). The narrowness and inaccuracy of 'Indian' representation combined with its uncritical acceptance leads to dangerously prohibitive distillations and misguided applications of a fictitious ethnic essence. If one is somehow 'acting like [an] Indian' then one is involved in a performance, removed from engagement with reality. Whilst Baudrillard's concern that this 'third-order simulation' is becoming the dominant basis for our everyday interactions finds an example in Disneyland, here it is the reservation itself that can now be considered 'hyperreal'.

Yet whilst this helps inform us about what is certainly *not* authentic, it seems to disperse even further what it might mean to be ‘authentic’.

For Vizenor, it is the ‘postindian warrior’ who sees these simulations for what they are; breaking free from the hyperreal cycle of internalised simulations by resisting ‘the absence of the real in the simulations of dominance’ (1999 5), and acknowledging and dismantling stereotypes in order to remove culturally ingrained limitations and assert the freedom and progressive agency of the individual against these structures. In his often decidedly antirealist fiction, Vizenor’s depictions of, for instance, masturbating bears and transsexual Indians continually challenge any attempt to establish claims to objectivity. Owens writes that

Vizenor’s art is nearly always difficult, disturbing, disorienting, and disquieting, but it is never dishonest. It skewers all of us at one time or another, making us uncomfortably aware of the instability of our own terminal grounds and forcing us to question and re-question all creeds and narratives. (1997 1-2)

Authenticity is thus understood as a contextually variable category of contextually variable criteria constructed by those wishing to divide and suppress for their own (contextually variable!) gain. One such real world example of such criteria that is tackled in *Reservation Blues* is that of ‘blood quantum’.

In order to be recognised as a Native American by the U.S. government one must possess a card that specifies enrolment in a recognised tribe. The most influential factor in enrolment is the degree of one’s blood that is considered ‘Native American’. This varies from tribe to tribe, some tribes requiring no Native American ancestry, others a quarter ‘Native American blood’, with a minority requiring more. Ultimately it is to the dominant culture (the U.S. government) that one must provide

proof of one's heritage and racial 'authenticity' in order to be accepted.⁴³ The original purpose of defining the 'authentic' Native American was to ensure the legal inferiority of indigenous peoples to the European colonisers, and though the government now asserts that it is the appropriate *allocation* of resources that necessitates 'blood quantum', many interpret the continuation and expansion of these laws to be a form of institutionalised racism. The unique position of Indian peoples means that many consider the reverence of racial authenticity to be a regressive and paradoxical sentiment, the dangers of which are articulated in the novel during several exchanges between Chess and Thomas Builds-the-Fire.

Chess first declares that by "“running off with white women...Junior and Victor are betraying their DNA”" (82), while Thomas '[wonders] if people should celebrate love wherever it's found, since it is so rare' (82). His observation that the 'half-breed kids at the reservation school suffered through worse beatings than [he, a full-blood] ever did' (82) lead him to the conclusion that being 'a half-breed kid...must be weird' (82). After hearing Chess' story about racial disillusionment, Thomas tells a story about the possibility that "“drums make everyone feel like an Indian”" (82-3). Thomas considers the ways in which the individual acts and reacts to be more important than racial classifications of skin colour, blood quantum or card carrying. His celebration of love is significant, as this is a specifically human trait that separates humans as a species, yet which can of course be experienced without reference to race or culture. Chess' later proposition to 'have lots of brown babies' (284) with Thomas is read by Scott Andrews as indicative of her decision 'to produce fewer...mixed-blood children', which he suggests exhibits the novel's

⁴³ See Treuer 2011.

tendency to view ‘culture or biological mixture as... a curse’ (149). Yet Thomas’ assertions about the dangers of purely racial classification, and Chess’ earlier statement that her heritage is in fact “‘a little bit white’” (82) complicate this reading. Indeed, ‘lots of brown babies’ are not ‘black babies’ or ‘red babies’ or ‘white babies’ or ‘yellow babies’; they are of mixed race, so confusing generic racial ‘colour’ classifications. Chess wishes to see ‘lots of brown babies’ to avoid alienation; this is that same dehumanising estrangement felt by Robert Johnson and Thomas.

An understanding of authenticity then, even as it is constructed in order to dominate, and deconstructed in order to liberate, remains important to the study of Indian literatures. Further, Jane Sequoya notes the broader political ramifications of being branded ‘inauthentic’:

The question of who and how is an Indian is... a contest in many ways emblematic of global struggles to contain and control difference in modern societies. At stake are social, political, and economic conditions of possibility for Indian identity within the encompassing national context. Who, what, where, and when can that Indian be, which the founding narratives of the North American nation construed as either absent – the empty land scenario – or inauthentic. Inauthentic, that is, by comparison with the imagined “Original” Indian, whether of the Golden Age or demonic variety; inauthentic because rather than vanishing, American Indians in all our diversity are still here, alive and kicking against the odds. (453).

Like Vizenor, Sequoya thus articulates an understanding of being Indian that is based on survival through inauthenticity, or what Vizenor calls ‘survivance’, being a combination of survival and resistance (1999 11). There are parallels here with Georg Simmel’s ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ (1903), in which he contends that ‘[t]he deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life’ (Simmel 11). The ‘external culture and technique of

life' can be understood as the structures that may diminish human agency, or, as the notions of authenticity that threaten the survival of living Indian peoples. For Simmel, the individual is subject to the most extreme threats and opportunities when he or she enters the city. The determination to avoid being collapsed into prescribed simulations of authenticity, so retaining some notion of individuality and personal agency, is tested throughout *Reservation Blues*. Coyote Springs is subjected to the toughest of these tests when arriving in the city, and the pressures of the city are specifically those of the marketplace.

Coyote Springs' entrance to the market place is symbolised as exactly that: the first place they go after being refused accommodation is Pike Place Market, a public farmer's market in Seattle. Here they encounter the novel's first 'Urban Indian[s]' (150), and soon become 'entranced' (151) by the market. The possibility to make some money is made immediately apparent to Victor by Coyote's presence as the guitar of an old Indian man with 'bandaged and bloody' hands (153). Coyote coerces Victor into playing for him, and '[t]ourists and office workers...who usually ignored street people' become immediately enamoured by this performance by 'this ragged Indian version of Simon and Garfunkel' (152). Set amidst stall-owners selling flowers, fish, clothes, and books, this performance becomes an exchange of an insincere (even if enjoyable) display of authenticity, constructed specifically to appeal to a wealthy audience. The old man is simply a slave to Coyote, whose determination to teach the band a lesson is at its most powerful here. Even Thomas is gripped by the performance, and when he finally recovers his agency and snatches the guitar, his hand is again 'burned' (153).

Kent Grayson and Radan Martinec discuss the variability of authenticity as it relates to the market, noting that '[t]o one consumer, a Native American necklace is genuine only if it made by a Native American craftsman, while, to another consumer, the necklace must have particular colors and designs, regardless of who made it' (297). In either instance though, 'the authentic object is the one that is believed to have particularly valued or important physical encounters with the world' (298). Grayson and Martinec's research into the criteria by which consumers assess the authenticity of a product or event finds a general 'bias against new-looking things', but otherwise finds notions of authenticity to be consistently inconsistent, based on context and, crucially, imagination. The research shows a 'blurring of imagination and belief' that is explained with reference to Baudrillard's 'hyperreality' (Grayson and Martinec 307). The consumer only has to imagine that what they are witnessing is authentic in order to believe it. Authenticity then, is performed through imagination in a manner comparable to that of the performative being enacted through utterance. Without the idea of marriage, the pronouncing of two people as married has no power, and without the idea of authenticity, no sense of authenticity can be performed or tested. Paradoxically then, the power of authenticity relies upon its ability to be imagined in different ways by different people at different times. That which has been perceived as being quantifiable by objective means is thus refigured as subject to that last refuge of human agency: the imagination.

Using 'a guitar made of a 1965 Malibu and the blood of a child killed at Wounded Knee' (206), Big Mom teaches Coyote Springs that expressing an inauthentic self, that is, one not guided by saleable notions of authenticity, requires an acceptance of the multiplicity of influences that constitute that self at any given

moment. In turn, by relinquishing their attachments to the *indian* identity that Coyote has constructed and had them perform in his name, the band will discover a renewed sense of communal identity that incorporates their individual skills. Following their rehearsals with Big Mom then, ‘Coyote Springs played an entirely original set of music... Thomas still wrote most of the lyrics, but the whole band shaped the songs’ (213). Nevertheless, Coyote is still in control, as their fate is likened to the end of a stickgame, in which the player must choose the hand holding the coloured bone. Again, hands symbolise agency, as ‘Coyote Springs had only one dream, one chance to choose the correct hand’ (220), and though the correct hand is that which would keep them from flying to New York, Coyote’s motives require them to transgress the boundaries of the reservation in order to more spectacularly fail in the city.

Breaking, with tradition: Coyote, Roadrunner

Coyote is a complex figure, whose depiction in the novel works on several levels, my reading of which requires some explanation. Coyote’s influence as a traditional trickster figure is depicted as affecting multiple tribes, both on the reservation and in the city. In this capacity, Coyote is thus a pan-tribal Indian trope, whose multiplicitous presence in literature has been explained by anthropologists and literary scholars as a marker of Indian cultural authenticity. Once defined as authentic, Coyote, or any other trickster figure, can be employed as a trope in the same way that Betty and Veronica employ him, speaking about ‘Coyote this and Coyote that’ whilst sporting ‘Indian jewelry and junk’ (158) as a measure of their association with *indian* culture. Their subsequent repackaging as Indians, singing lyrics such as ‘Don’t listen to what they say / You can be Indian in your bones’ with

'beautiful voices' over 'standard Indian soundtrack stuff' (295-6), parodies the capacity of fiction about Indians by non-Indians to be both beautiful and, in Alexie's view, 'colonial' (Olin, pag.). Coyote wishes to preserve the dominant Indian images so that he might maintain his symbolic power, and is largely successful in doing so, by causing the failure of Coyote Springs. Junior commits suicide, sustaining the trope of the vanishing Indian; Victor returns to unemployment and alcoholism; even Checkers descends into stereotype by stealing Father Arnold's Communion wine (286). Remarkably then, Alexie depicts Coyote performing as the expected trickster figure, whilst simultaneously exposing the dangers of employing preconceived Indian tropes.

As an extension of his role in maintaining tradition, Coyote also functions as the guardian of the reservation, both in terms of its population and its ideological function. Coyote's principal aim is to keep reservation Indians from working towards potential success in the city, so that federal authority, that which can overturn any other, remains with non-Indians. Coyote has the band fail with considerable hubris, and according to the negative assumptions of the representatives of the tribe, so that future migration is emphatically figured as impossible, even for the apparently talented. This supports Martin Padgett's reading of 'a certain kind of cultural conservatism perceived to be at work within the reservation community' (Padgett 54). By turning to Big Mom, the reclusive representative of an inclusive history that has seen her interact with various non-Indian historical figures, Coyote Springs develop an aesthetic that challenges the accepted version of authenticity, and so they must be seen to fail. Crucially though, Coyote is forced to jeopardise the recording, as the new music that they play initially satisfies the record company. This points both to

the potential for success for Indians in the city, as well as to the unfortunate capacity of purveyors of *indian* culture to portray anything and everything as authentically *indian*.

The broader tension that Alexie alludes to is that between the majority of Indian and non-Indian writers whose work concerns only Indians who exclusively identify with a reservation community, or view the reservation as their inevitable home, and those very few Indian and non-Indian writers who attempt to represent the often markedly different lives of urban Indians. A year after the publication of this novel, Alexie writes more explicitly about this tension in *Old Shirts & New Skins* of recognising in ‘that thin line “between art and exploitation,” / [...]the need to prove blood against blood’ (45). The closing lines of this poem: ‘I am an American / Indian and have learned / hunger becomes madness easily’ (45) both render as a line break the split between the narrator’s understanding of what it means to be American and Indian, and suggests that the ongoing colonial oppression of the reservation has been internalised and ‘learned’ as authentic. For Alexie, the deprivation of the reservation can here be seen to initiate a certain type of madness, namely that which leads Indian peoples to protect as authentic the structures that work to limit their agency.

Yet contrary to the gloomy assessments of Bird, Cook-Lynn and Owens detailed in the previous chapter,⁴⁴ *Reservation Blues* concludes with Thomas, Checkers and Chess leaving the reservation permanently, with a significant financial donation from the Spokane Tribe, and traveling to Spokane, which although a relatively small city, is imagined by Thomas to present the same threats and

⁴⁴ Of particular relevance here is Bird’s contention that ‘[i]n *Reservation Blues*, alluding to popular culture as a literary strategy does not serve as either a parody or as a serious interrogation of popular culture’ (47), which I have demonstrated to be a misreading.

opportunities as Seattle. Even as it is tempered by trepidation, this is a notably positive experience. Running alongside the van in which they escape are ‘shadow horses’ (305), those symbols of agency, no longer screaming at the limitations of the reservation but ‘following, leading Indians toward the city’ (306). As Padget notes, these ghosts of massacred horses suggest ‘that even as the pain of past events is acknowledged so the Spokanes persist through the capacity of their collective memory to revive the spirits of tribal members’ (Padget 56). So Alexie concludes the novel with a symbol of the possible freedom of Indian peoples from colonial structures, based on historical events that remind the reader of the violent atrocities committed in order to maintain those structures, and the moral obligation to prevent their reoccurrence.

Strictly speaking, the novel cannot be considered urban Indian literature, in that most of the action takes place on the reservation, which still exerts a remarkable power over the main characters. However, Alexie does address distinctly urban concerns through the novel, as Coyote Springs learn their harshest but most important lessons in attempting to understand the identities that they are supposed to perform as they shift between reservations and cities. Padget writes that ‘Thomas’s departure from the reservation suggests the uneasy relationship which has developed between himself and his fellow Spokanes will be the starting point of any future fiction that might feature the same characters’ (Padget. 54). In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate that, even without these characters, ‘uneasy relationship[s]’ become a defining characteristic of Alexie’s fiction as it moves into the city. The next chapter looks at *Indian Killer*, Alexie’s first novel to be based almost exclusively in

the city of Seattle, and explores the violent physical manifestations of essentialist discourse.

Chapter Three

'How It Happened': The (Dis)Solution of *Indian Killer*

'Mystery is part of each life, and maybe it is healthier to uphold it than to spend a lifetime in search of half-made answers.

Still, as humans, we want truth. Our stories, our courthouses, our lives, contemporary anxieties and depressions are all searches full with this desire. Humans want truth the way water desires to be sea level and moves across the continent for the greater ocean.'

- Linda Hogan, *The Woman Who Watches Over The World*, 15

"How many is multiple?" asked Paul Too. "How do they say things like that? What do they do? Count them up and measure them? Well, this is a bunch of stab wounds, and this is a lot. But Jesus, this is multiple. I don't much care for it, you hear?"

- *Indian Killer* 102

Sherman Alexie's second novel *Indian Killer* (1996) seems to be something of an anomaly in his literary output; his adoption of the mystery thriller genre works apparently in direct and deliberate opposition to what he calls the 'reservation realism' of his earlier works. The plot sees a series of apparently racially-motivated murders of several white residents of Seattle inciting retaliatory attacks upon Indian citizens, placing all of the characters under suspicion. It seems almost plausible that Alexie, greedy as Coyote Springs' Victor for success, here sells out, simply choosing to write the type of novel that will appeal to the most readers, so sell the most copies. In his book-length assessment of the umbrella genre, *Thrillers*, Jerry Palmer plainly asserts that '[t]hrillers are a commercial product, made to be marketed' (69). Yet those commercial models upon which the short-chaptered, cinematic aesthetic of *Indian Killer* is apparently based are directly referenced during the novel; characters read bestsellers by Tom Clancy, John Grisham and Tony Hillerman (347, 328, 299),

whilst one character, Jack Wilson, writes his own ‘Indian Killer’ mystery thriller based on the events of the novel as he perceives them. A metafictional approach is decidedly untypical of the thriller genre, and familiarity with Alexie’s sarcastic yet earnest approach to the portrayal of Indians suggests that the novel is intended to engage with its audience on a level more politically subversive than commercially thrilling.

Alexie has openly criticised the esoteric writings of Vizenor, claiming that their relative inaccessibility serves only to alienate those Indian readers at which his texts are supposedly (or should be) aimed. In a conversation with John Purdy, Alexie dismisses Vizenor’s writing as ‘obtuse...word masturbation, essentially, that results in nothing’, seeing little merit in ‘Indian literature [that] can’t be read by the average 12-year-old kid living on the reservation’ (7). *Indian Killer* might then be seen as a response to this occlusion, signalling a step onto a more accessible platform, whilst not necessarily a dilution of ideas. Krupat considers the novel a ‘frightening’ but necessary articulation of Indian ‘rage’ that is ‘committed to a hostile separatism’ (2011 103, 125). Comparisons are drawn with *négritude* and the novel is judged to be the defining example of ‘*rougetude*’, being the cathartic ‘rage stage’ of Indian literary output (2011 115). Similarly, James R Giles contends that the novel is ‘concerned most of all with depicting an unresolved sacrificial crisis residing at the very heart of American culture’, its ‘metaphoric’ conclusion delivering a ‘prophecy of vengeance against white people’ that ‘the powerlessness of Indian culture prevents...from being enacted’ (142-3). Krupat’s assessment is an insightful (if pessimistic) engagement with the overall tone of *Indian Killer*, but does not address the curiousness of its genre. Though Giles does briefly discuss Alexie’s

‘deconstruct[ion of] the detective novel form’ (143), referring to *Indian Killer* as ‘an anti-detective novel’ (142), the reading is principally driven by his (overall interesting) book-length plotting of a ‘continuum’ of violence, and too easily accepts the novel as a vague polemic through which Alexie angrily vents his ‘cultural’ frustrations.

Strictly speaking the novel finally fails as a thriller, as it fails to reveal the name of the killer. Rather than provide the reader piece by piece with a verified solution to the puzzle, the various conclusions reached by the end of the novel serve precisely as the *dissolution* of the mystery into its narrative parts, confounding those assumptions made by the reader in her initial interpretive constructions. This chapter demonstrates that the success of *Indian Killer* lies not only in its refusal to explicitly fix the identity of the killer, but also in its constant disruption and subversion of the generic conventions of the mystery thriller; it is again a move towards dissolution rather than solution, or perhaps more finely, dissolution *as* solution. It is precisely the dissolution of the traditional genre conventions that distinguishes *Indian Killer*, and that helps to recuperate the novel within the context of Alexie’s political fictions.

Indian Killer is Alexie’s first novel in which the action is situated predominantly in the city, and it is significant that his first sustained representation of urban Indian lives is overwhelmed by the extremes of racism there encountered. The novel’s confounding of assumptions and rebuttal of fixed identity is a manifestation of Alexie’s continued concerns with essentialist discourse, revealing the dangerous mythologies surrounding *indian* stereotyping as sustained in the city, and dramatising the racial violence (both ideological and physical) there performed by essentialist notions of ‘Indian-ness’. On a metatextual level, the disruption of

traditional conventions ultimately exposes the potential of a genre dealing in surfaces, essentialisms and extremisms to numb the imaginations of its significant commercial audience to the diversities, subtleties and fragilities of what it might mean to be an Indian, in all its social and historical plurality.

Taxing taxonomies

Alexie's use of the conventions of genre fiction is not limited to *Indian Killer*. As mentioned previously, he considers his work to be 'reservation realism', though his first novel *Reservation Blues* blends an allegedly 'magic realist' rock narrative⁴⁵ with a bildungsroman and aspects of the sports novel, whilst his latest adult novel *Flight* (2007) is again hybrid: a synthesis of bildungsroman, science fiction, and the historical novel.⁴⁶ However, these are clearly less explicit deployments of genre than that found in *Indian Killer*; as such Alexie's fiction has never been more wholly shaped by its genre, so his engagement with the conventions of the mystery thriller demands special attention. In order to situate Alexie's engagement with this tradition it is first necessary to discuss the mystery thriller's generic formulations.

The thriller is a multifarious genre, relating the 'sensationalist' fiction of Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in White* [1860], *The Moonstone* [1868]) to the seedy

⁴⁵ See Janine Richardson 1997, and Wendy Belcher 2007. Alan Velie notes that Vizenor uses the term 'mythic verism' to more accurately describe the Native parallel to magic realism (Vizenor 1989 129).

⁴⁶ Alexie's collection of short stories *Ten Little Indians* (2003) obviously takes its title satirically from Septimus Winner's 1868 song 'Ten Little Niggers', later altered to 'Ten Little Indians,' and may also be a reference to Agatha Christie's murder mystery *Ten Little Niggers* (1939), later altered to *Ten Little Indians* so as to apparently lessen racial offence. Alexie's titular joke addresses the concept of the 'vanishing Indian' as narrated in the song, but in acknowledging the revised title suggests that realistically *any* instance of the terminology of racial classification might be used pejoratively; that like beauty, offence too lies in the eye of the beholder.

anarchical circles of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), through John Le Carré's *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* (1963), and on to the manic, masculine slideshows of sex and violence that fill Lee Child's hugely popular Jack Reacher novels (1997-present). However, Palmer suggests that despite '[t]he term "thrillers" [being] a cataloguing device' still 'all thrillers have something in common' (69). These common conventions are 'specifically the recommendation of competitive individualism, and the presentation of society as somewhere that is, in the normal run of events, devoid of conflict' (66).

One of the key problems here, of course, is that 'normality' for one person or established group of people requires adherence to an ideology that might not represent 'normality' for any other, and to prescribe one set of 'normal' conditions will inevitably lead to the suppression of those conditions considered 'abnormal'. In order to create the 'normal', the thriller must explicitly maintain a static, efficient conception of language and its relation to the material world. Anne Longmuir explains that 'the thriller's attitude to language and the nature of reality is...[f]ounded on traditional hermeneutic modes of interpretation, which assume the dialectics of essence and appearance, word and thing[:] the thriller believes in the fixed relationship of sign and referent' (131). This fixed relationship establishes a narrative baseline of 'normality' that must be perverted by the antagonists in order to be re-established by the protagonist. Without this relationship, there lies the possibility of moral ambiguity, so the guarantee of a satisfactory resolution to the novel is removed. If the mystery is not completely solved, the reader will expect a sequel in which it is.

An approach that ‘assume[s] the dialectics of essence and appearance’ more often than not requires the thriller to be conspicuously ethnocentric. As its protagonists, its champions of the norm, are typically white, ruggedly handsome men, so its villains, in order to threaten, must represent their opposite, the imagined Other; usually non-white men, often disfigured or monstrous. When Umberto Eco notes that Bond villains are predominantly ‘non-Anglo-Saxon halfbreed[s]’ (155), Palmer attempts to excuse author Ian Fleming, explaining that ‘by every device at his disposal the writer wants to convince us the villain is revolting, and that we should be on the side of the hero’ (22). Leaving ‘revolting’ aside, the problematic terms here are ‘us’ and ‘we’, invoking the oppositional binaries of us/them and we/they. Both author and commentator apparently consider this exclusion of a non-white readership a necessary means to a thrilling end. The position of the hero is purified and privileged, and as he defends the dominant, ‘normal’ culture, so it is assumed that the villains could not reach such diabolical levels of criminality as part of that dominant culture, as a pure part of ‘us’. In order to evoke fear, the antagonists must somehow represent the unknown (but not unknowable), and a stark, surface level presentation of miscegenation provides an instant threat to the (assumed) comfortable wholeness of racial purity. Just as the reader instantly recognises an attractive female ‘character’ as a sexual target, so the similarly objectified ‘foreigner’ is automatically a suspect. This method of auto-characterisation is obviously driven by stereotypes, but is also complicit in their continuation. Presenting a stereotype in a context arguably intended to limit linguistic and epistemological ambiguity serves to confirm and naturalise misconceptions about identity, suggesting that there *is* some defining, essential truth that can be accessed through appearance alone. This process is, of

course, analogous with that of the racial essentialism and suppression implicit in colonialism, by which the coloniser establishes his or her ‘normality’; formalising or ‘naturalising’ an imagined superiority by defining, objectifying and suppressing the ‘normalities’ (the ‘essences’) of the colonised natives, through physical and/or ideological violence.⁴⁷ Once the natives are categorised and conflated into a generic, known type, then the freedom of the individual native to assert his or her unique human agency is greatly reduced. When cultural definitions (those ‘essences’ again) are fixed by an established authority, and that authority is (or claims to be) monocultural, then that which proceeds beyond these definitions can only be accounted for, and so subsumed, by being designated a perverse rebellion against the authority.

One possible disruption of the ethnocentricity of the thriller comes with the relatively recent introduction of the ‘ethnic detective’ in ‘postcolonial’ crime fiction. In their introductory chapter to *Postcolonial Postmortems*, Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen assert ‘the recurrent importance of the [crime] genre’ to postcolonial studies:

because it is so well equipped to debate the relationships between crime domestic and crimes colonial and also – and most importantly – because it conveys those debates and those tensions, indeed those crimes, in morally and emotively legible personal terms. Many authors around the world have used the immense popularity and the crime-revealing structure of the genre to deliver, unostentatiously, affectively, and so all the more effectively, the potentially postcolonial meaning of crime fiction (33).

This ‘potentially postcolonial meaning’ manifests itself in the destabilisation of the power of the dominant culture, enacted by the cultural multiplicity of the ‘ethnic detective’. Crucially, that convention of ‘competitive individualism,’ which

⁴⁷ See chapter six for a discussion of types of violence.

in 'classic' crime fiction worked to *support* ethnocentricity, in postcolonial crime fiction allows the decentring authorial shift necessary to establish the 'ethnic detective' in relation to a dominant culture. In order to solve the crime, the 'ethnic detective' is necessarily involved in negotiating (at least) two epistemological systems, that of the dominant culture and that of his or her ethnic group. Note that postcolonial crime fiction often directly addresses the masculinity of the genre and permits female protagonists. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller state that '[s]ometimes the "ethnic plot," frequently dealing with aspects of the traditional way of life of the community from which the detective derives, also seems to diminish the importance of the detective plot' (12). This might be so, but even with depictions of traditions outside those of the dominant culture, the diffusion of 'normality', and insights into 'ethnic' communities, for the most part the language of the postcolonial mystery aims ultimately to fix meanings, whilst the plot and characters of novels such as Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) and Mike Phillips's *Blood Rights* (1989) sustain the conventional conclusion: mystery solved.

Whether or not the crime fiction is 'postcolonial' in that it sensitively portrays cultural multiplicity, and/or features an 'ethnic detective', the problem lies in the construction of the mystery and the teleological manner of detection, that the mystery *can* at some point be pieced together and solved, and *is* pieced together and solved. Whatever it is that is 'postcolonial' about the postcolonial mystery simply *becomes* part of the tradition of the mystery thriller. This is not to downplay the importance of postcolonial crime fictions in establishing voices for those people(s) or cultures 'marginalised' by colonial powers, rather it is to suggest that the unique positions of Indians in the United States demands more than 'ethnic' representations

utilising generic conventions; it demands a reconsideration of the suitability of these traditions to adequately present issues of Indian identity, if indeed this can ever be done at all.

One variation on the mystery theme that explicitly subverts traditional generic conventions, and to which it seems *Indian Killer* owes far more than that of the ‘ethnic detective’, is the ‘metaphysical detective story.’ Patricia Merivale, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney and their gathered critics chart the history of this particular subgenre in their *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (1999). For Merivale and Sweeney, the metaphysical detective story ‘parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader – with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot’ (2). This seems an obvious connection with my claim that *Indian Killer* is a narrative concerned with the dissolution of generic constraints, and such a definition does provide an indication of the ontological questions that Alexie wishes to tackle, but, like the texts they investigate, many studies of the metaphysical detective story prove desperately inconclusive.

Establishing the traditional conventions of the mystery (and its variants) helps us to understand *Indian Killer*’s refractory relation to them, however, the novel does not simply reject these features; rather they are subsumed and surmounted as part of a politically progressive aesthetic strategy. Yet this is a mystery after all, and like a knock-knock joke, the (dis)solution would be little fun without the investigation. Let the ratiocination begin.

De-monstrating 'red' herrings

'People classified in a certain way tend to conform to or grow into the ways that they are described; but they also evolve in their own ways, so that the classifications and descriptions have to be constantly revised. Multiple personality is an almost too perfect illustration of this feedback effect.'

'There will be a steady diet of thrillers and potboilers telling the latest version of the theory of multiple personality. In no other field of mental illness do fact, fiction, and fear play so relentlessly to each other... If real child abuse is the major key for the popular acceptance of the theme of multiple personality, then fantasy crime is its minor.'

- Ian Hacking. *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* 21, 50.

One convention to which it seems *Indian Killer* conforms is that which posits the identity (and motivation) of the killer as its central mystery. However, as noted, the novel not only refuses to reveal the name of the killer, it further dissolves and dilutes the reader's investigation with each character, until we are left with a veritable sea of red herrings.⁴⁸ Almost all of the characters have a motive for the murders, though since I agree with Krupat and Giles that the killer isn't any of the named characters, there is little point in repeating their concise dissections of these motives (Krupat 2011 99-101, Giles ch. 8). If one of them was the killer then Jack Wilson might sell more books, Truck Schultz might captivate a wider audience, and so on; but no character maintains such a precise and complex connection to the killer as that of John Smith. The peculiar thing about this particular relationship is that the conflation of the two characters is repeatedly encouraged throughout the novel, and despite the rush of contradictory evidence in the final chapters, John Smith is reasonably well established by the text (and certainly by the authorities) as the killer. In the rhetoric of the popular detective, John is framed. This conflation of identities is much more than just another red herring, as its eventual (dis)solution dramatises a

⁴⁸ Rhetorically speaking, and with pun intended.

crucial failure of aesthetic representation and a subversion of traditional generic constraints. Framing is a critical element of any narrative, and Alexie artfully and knowingly demonstrates the power of the frame to connect and contain perceptions, and so direct interpretation. So, how does Alexie make a monster of John?

The suggestion of narrative synchronicity is the most immediately apparent technique utilised by Alexie to establish a connection between these distinct characters. The chapters about John and those about the killer are intentionally placed to run together as one coterminous narrative, and this constructs a basic framework for the reader to fill with further ‘evidence’ of John’s guilt. Before the first murder we see John experiencing a slight altercation with a white man, whom he then follows through the University District. We are then led quite suddenly into John’s delusional utopian construction of reservation life, which suggests that he has quite suddenly lost touch with reality, immediately after which we are presented with the murder, which takes place in that same University District. After the brutal maiming of the victim, we next find John becoming suddenly conscious that ‘[h]e was not sure where he walked, or how he came to arrive at his apartment building’ (73). Purely circumstantial, says the reader, and indeed this is the case, nonetheless this early juxtaposition of location and action is intended to immediately engage the reader’s suspicions, and so not only successfully establishes a narrative connection between John and the killer, but establishes the decisive role of the reader in the mystery. The reader’s exclusive perspective places her tantalisingly close to events that the authorities can only attempt to reconstruct. Allowing the reader access to such privileged viewpoints situates her ‘above’ the local authorities, so seeming to grant her an advantage in ‘framing’ the killer and solving the mystery. Yet this

hierarchy, of course, is governed and mediated by the author; the perspectives are manipulated to place specific aesthetic connections and suspicions in the reader-detective's mind.

Narrative synchronicity immediately connects the locations and actions of the characters, and demands that the suspicious reader-detective find any potential congruity of motivation. Early on, as John considers '[w]hich white man was responsible for everything that had gone wrong', we are explicitly told that he 'needed to kill a white man' (25), and that he 'wanted to see fear in every pair of blue eyes' (30).⁴⁹ This murderous, anti-white sentiment is then echoed during the first 'How It Happened' (the chapter narrating the first murder) as the 'fear in the white man's blue eyes...inspire[s] the killer's confidence' (52). Again Alexie ostensibly grants the reader exclusive information, with the same rhetorical purpose of further confirming the reader's suspicions that the face of the killer is shared by John.

John's reactions to the murders also cast him into the reader-detective's frame of guilt, particularly when we note their similarities to the actions of the killer. John rants about achieving media notoriety for killing a white man (308), a sentiment echoed in the killer's wish to 'send a message that would terrify the world' (150) through direct contact with the media (192). When the killer experiences a profound rage in the viewing booth of a pornographic bookstore (326), our ratiocinative impulse hooks us back to John's adolescent method of dealing with his own anger: to 'lock himself inside a [school bathroom] stall' (19). These images of John and the

⁴⁹ This is later confused by Reggie, a blue-eyed Spokane Indian.

killer struggling in boxes not only visually frame and link the two (their bodies quite literally fitted into constructed boxes), but also serve to connect their angers.

The killer's outburst at seeing interracial pornography and being unable to understand 'how a white man fit himself inside a brown woman in such ways' (326) is then easily construed as being a symptom of John's seemingly inevitable rejection by white girls in high school, on the grounds of racist paternal disapproval (18). Here we find further metaphors of containment. As a teenager, John's self-entrapment is the physical manifestation of his being restricted psychologically by racism. When the father of the girl he befriends acts as an unchallenged, racist authority, it is John's future as well as that of the daughter that is secured. The possibility of romantic interracial interaction is cut off without question, and the father re-established as a containing force in his daughter's existence. John feels unable to direct his anger productively towards fighting the source of his frustrations, wishing only to 'control his emotions' so that he might 'be a real person' (19). Reality for John is explicitly linked to control, control over and set against righteous freedom of expression. If he loses control and communicates his anger, then he will not be the 'successfully integrated Indian boy' that 'nobody notice[s]', rather he will become the unfortunate but inevitable by-product of 'his people's history', ultimately motivated by a 'lack of God' (19). He cannot engage with or feel part of a reality that through racial prejudice has already taken from him full control of his past, present and future. According to Alexie's psychological clues, John's early powerlessness and emotional repression at the hands of racists provide convincing motives for the racially-motivated violence of the killer.

John Smith's behaviour later leads Officer Peone to the conclusion that he is '[p]robably a schizophrenic', a diagnosis reached 'through years of applied psychology lessons taken on the streets' (363). If this was correct, it might account for John's erratic behaviour, but the symptoms John displays seem to indicate a condition for which schizophrenia is often misdiagnosed: multiple personality.

Ian Hacking's study of multiple personalities and memory, *Rewriting the Soul* (1995), provides us with key symptoms that help diagnose one with multiple personalities, and a brief summary of these reads like a case study of John. We have already seen him experience 'missing time' (Hacking 25) after the altercation in the University District, which might well be an example of Hacking's further definition of a 'fugue episode', when one of the 'alter' 'personalities' takes over, and after which the patient 'would recover herself in a strange place with no idea how she got there' (Hacking 43) Though in the above example the place is not 'strange' to John, this 'strangeness' is certainly no condition for diagnosis. His mother sewing his apartment key into 'every pair of pants he owned' (201) is indicative of more long-term amnesia, a primary symptom of a 'multiple'. John also experiences auditory, visual, and even olfactory hallucinations; he hears voices, 'strange music' and noises 'in his head' (23), sees before him the aged, 'shaking' form of the vanished Father Duncan '[o]n a bright and cold Saturday morning...more clearly than he had ever seen him before' (125), and professes to smelling anger (200). These experiences certainly fit Hacking's descriptions of 'horrible hallucinations, neither dream nor fantasy...in the drowsy periods before the patient awakens' (26). Hacking also explains that 'a patient may complain of sharp and uncontrollable flashbacks, vivid and terrifying images of the past, of childhood' (26). John's 'images of the past',

though numerous, are significant, and curiously embedded in the narrative, ranging from brief episodes, apparently remembered from ‘reality’ (such as his childhood experiences with Father Duncan), to chapter-length fantasies of denial about his upbringing entitled ‘How He Imagines His Life on the Reservation’ (43-48, 287-292).

This imagined reservation utopia deserves some attention. By mentally relocating his upbringing, John attempts to anchor himself to a romantic identity that in his mind might have been but never was. His indulgence in this fantasy is a movement away from (yet an idealisation of) those limited stereotypical roles (or frames) that others have fashioned for him in ‘reality’, towards a self-governed composite fiction of control in which everything is fixed in place. John’s total lack of knowledge regarding his biological parents’ tribal affiliations results in constant, unfavourable comparisons with those he considers ‘real Indians’ (e.g. 24, 35, 39, 276), leaving him to imagine himself ‘Indian [only] in the most generic sense’ (31). This sense of displacement is amplified by the need Marie Polatkin and other ‘real Indians’ have to ‘test people’ who claim to be Indian (38). This suspicion is present largely because having ‘Indian blood’ is seen as attractive and romantic, as stereotyped by non-Indians. One who bogusly or flippantly claims ‘Indian’ heritage does so because she imagines herself then instantly connected to the geography of North America, with a ‘sacred’ permanence that extends mysteriously beyond textually recorded history. As a non-Native citizen of the U.S., claiming ‘Indian blood’ allows one a sense of doubled nativity, anchoring one to the land by birth *and* prehistorical descent. Marie speaks of the luxury of racial choice flaunted by such ‘pretend Indians’ (232), who might be white or Indian, ‘depending on the social or

business situation' (232). The 'pretend Indian' may also rid herself of any guilt and insecurity regarding the history of genocidal violence supporting European 'claims' to American land, replacing these with shallow indignation and a surface empathy of the 'plight' of the *indian*.

Verifiable origins are thus vital to the internal 'identity spectrum' used by Marie (and other Indians) to 'test people' (39); 'with the more traditional Indians to the left and the less traditional to the right' (39), and this spectrum is vital to her happiness. The more 'traditional' she is in comparison to other Indians, the more 'Indian' she feels, and the happier she feels (39). Yet Marie knows that she 'belong[s] somewhere in the middle of that spectrum' (39), and as one who always wanted to leave the reservation, it is likely that she would be decidedly *unhappy* with an entirely 'traditional' existence, if she even has one so sharply defined. It is not being more or less traditional, or more or less 'Indian' in comparison with others that really makes Marie happy here, but engaging with her context at each moment, and feeling confident in her social surroundings. Marie's conception of tradition is entirely reliant upon the individual's conception of him or herself, rather than the more usual sense of commonality or shared experience that plagues John. Even in 'reality', John attempts to realign his origins by creating and conforming to his particular tradition of pseudo-affiliation, claiming to be Sioux when asked by white people, 'because that was what they wanted him to be', and Navajo when asked by Indian people, 'because that was what he wanted to be' (32). It is likely that John claims Sioux ancestry because this tribe is arguably the most instantly recognisable amongst white people (famous Sioux include Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and Red Cloud), and that he wants to be Navajo amongst Indians because it is the largest

tribe, yet requires a (relatively high) blood quantum of a quarter for tribal enrolment, so combining wide acceptance with the ‘authentic’ heritage he so desires. Of course, it could just be that he has learned these answers through his limited social experiences, some pre-existing tradition of which I am unaware. Either way, we again find John being controlled by the prejudices of others: nobody should *want* him to be from a particular tribe, and he *should* be able to reveal his origins as he understands them, at his own discretion. Yet his approach is almost *too* successful, duping even Marie and later prompting a fight, suggesting that the ‘real’ importance and influence of tribal identity is as dependent on context as happiness. This is certainly not to dismiss tribal identity as unimportant to the novel, for most Indian characters are introduced with their tribal affiliation. At a surface level, these introductions (representing only a small number of tribes) demonstrate the vast oversimplification of calling someone ‘Indian’, dissolving this racial category, and in turn helping the reader to appreciate the potential multiplicity of John’s biological tribal affiliation(s). Knowing the differences broadly associated with various tribes allows for some mock-essentialist banter between Indians, such as at ‘Big Heart’s’ (278-9), which serves to give an idea of a person’s geographical origins and tribal history. In the novel’s urban setting, revealing tribal origins instantly creates an area for negotiation, whilst maintaining, at least symbolically, that it should be with their own personal narratives that individuals create a culture, rather than the culture creating the individual. When Reggie attacks John he does so because he is jealous of John’s success with Fawn, the girl Reggie desires, but it is John’s professed Navajo origins with which Reggie attempts to justify his violence. Though it seems his fake tribal affiliation here works against John, it is clearly Reggie’s insecurity

that actually prompts the attack. This is the violent absurdity of essentialist discourse on a micro scale; Reggie brands John 'Sheep Boy', telling him that because traditionally Navajos do not catch salmon, John 'ain't shit' (281). Of course, twentieth century urban Navajos do not rely on a single food source; neither do Spokanes, Coeur d'Alenes, or other urban Indians, and anyway, John is probably not Navajo. The tribal slur is here an excuse for violence. By delineating tribal affiliations, Alexie maps those points at which origins, 'real' or not, can be used to unite or divide. Though the reader may understand Reggie's motive, sadly John feels only that he is being punished by Indians for being Indian in an 'Indian bar', further intensifying his confusion, and need to be 'real'.

John's adoption by a white couple in Seattle leads him to believe that he has missed out on the upbringing of one of these 'real Indians', and so he tries to (re)capture this lost existence and belonging through the construction of a historical narrative. John must trick himself twofold with this revision. Not only must he create an entirely fictional place, complete with imaginary geography, community and history, he must recreate and reconfigure himself within that place, imagining happiness, family, traditions and love on the 'reservation'. Alexie here draws attention to narrative structure and the layers of fiction at work in the novel, when John describes an after dinner storytelling session. In his mind, John 'invents ancestors' to populate his embedded fictions, during which his imagined family 'laughs in the right places and cries when tears are due' (48). Unlike 'reality', John's fantasy finds him loved without condition, and secure in the expected responses of those around him. Only in this fantasy can he express emotion without risk of

judgement, in direct contrast with the limiting emotional ‘control’ required to negotiate ‘reality’.

Language plays an important part in John’s revision. As books about ‘real Indians’ replace lived experience and determine his and his adoptive parents’ bewildering third hand knowledge of being *indian*, so these same texts serve as foundations for his fantasies.⁵⁰ John imagines playing Scrabble with his ‘extended family’, reading books with his ‘mother’ (44), eventually ‘see[ing] the entire world in paragraphs’ (291). He constructs his ‘reservation’ from and upon text, yet John’s ‘real’ context as an urban Indian is always ready to invade and erode this imagined history. The Scrabble set is missing all the ‘e’ tiles, the most common letter in the English language.⁵¹ The family allows any other tile to be used as an ‘e’, which John considers ‘diplomatic’, as he can always play, even when finding the end of a game difficult. A further linguistic substitution occurs when John pretends that ‘big words with their amorphous ideas...are simpler and clearer’, and so a ‘word like democracy can become rain instead’ (44). This absence of closure and ambiguity of meaning indicates the presence of reality that threatens John’s constructed world. ‘Diplomacy’ and ‘democracy’, those two standards of political speech, are shown to be entirely reliant upon context: diplomacy between whom, and to whose advantage? Democracy across what scale, and constructed upon whose ideological foundations? At a metafictional level, John’s attempts to fill in the gaps of this history with simple,

⁵⁰ His mother, for instance, ‘read every book about Indians she could find’ (355). John was also taken to ‘Indian events’ as he was growing up (20). Though the implication might be that these events were spectacles, thus distortions of ‘real’ Indian experience comparable in their organisation to text, it is precisely when such ‘events’ do not maintain John’s sense of ‘real Indians’, when ‘[t]hey were nothing like the Indians he had read about’, that he feels ‘betrayed’ (23).

⁵¹ An intertextual reference to Georges Perec’s *La Disparition* (1969), a lipogrammatic parody of thriller fiction that contains no letter ‘e’, even in its English translation, *A Void*.

stabilising data mirror the reader-detective's impulse to solve the mystery, by adjusting and reconstructing the narrative to fit a traditional mystery thriller frame.

In the later fantasy, John attempts to devise an ancient tribal language through which he communicates with approving 'tribal elders' (288-9). Yet context reveals the construction of this pidgin language from English words and phonetics, and so even when attempting to innovate, John finds his expression determined by his experience. Language, of course, is an ongoing, accumulative process, and necessarily unfinished; much like a history can only tell the story of what has already happened, so a lexicon provides no indication of a linguistic future. John's reliance on language continues as he sees a paragraph as 'a fence that [holds] words', 'the United States [as] a paragraph within the world', and 'his tribe as a series of paragraphs that all ha[s] the same theme' (291). Despite his difficulties with the tribal language, John again misses the crucial variable with the potential to crumble his paragraph world: meaning itself. Employing essentialist discourse enacts in reality exactly what John projects in his paragraph fantasy, by containing individuals in a constructed narrative. What John is desperately trying to create here is a stable frame of reference; that 'fixed relationship of sign and referent' (Longmuir 131) that sees him, an 'Indian', extending from a perfectly established point of origin, his 'reservation'. Yet the presence of linguistic substitutions and ambiguities serve to reveal (to the reader at least) the impossibility of his fantasy constructions. Sadly for John, it is reality that becomes the intrusion, as his mental stability continues to deteriorate.

The most obvious symptom of John's mental condition, of course, is his switching between various 'alters': his multiple personalities. Though John Smith

does have certain schizophrenic characteristics, such as the paranoia that someone is trying to poison him (99, 100) and that '[e]verybody...know[s] that he was thinking about killing white men' (30), his sudden switching between alters is so complete and varied that in combination with his other symptoms, it is notably suggestive of multiple personality. Hacking notes that 'a dozen alters is a common configuration' (29), often including 'protector' and 'persecutor' alters, which act respectively to keep the 'original' personality from harm or place him in danger. It seems a sort of 'protector' emerges during John's hallucinations of white people as 'white flames' (251) as he helps an old Duwamish Indian woman fend off white attackers. He later switches to a 'persecutor' alter in the later donut shop scene, when he steps up onto the counter and begins ranting about killing white men, shouts racist abuse at his black friends, adopts 'a new strange singsong voice' in which to further rant, apologises, then suddenly accuses the same friends of potentially being 'the devil' (306-9). During the aforementioned altercation with the white man in the University District we suddenly find John feeling 'ancient', before claiming to be 'older than the hills' (41-2), indicative of a further alter taking over. Perhaps the most bizarre of John's alters is that which emerged when he was twenty years old, when he believed that he was pregnant. Again as if directly describing John, Hacking writes that a 'multiple' 'whose body is of one sex may, when an alter is in control, resolutely claim the opposite physiology, rejecting all evidence to the contrary' (29). We find John once so convinced of his pregnancy that he 'forced himself to throw up every morning to prove it' and was 'surprised by how little his belly had grown' (97). We might also consider Hacking's discussion of the visual aspect of multiplicity; that '[o]bservers have always reported a different "look" to different alters' (31). During

his later episode in the donut shop, Paul notices that ‘John’s face looked like he had just stepped out of a late Picasso’ (308); this is a severe outward manifestation of his inner conflict.

This slippery psychological profile allows the reader-detective to imagine John capable of performing the killer’s seemingly random acts of psychotic violence. Furthermore, John’s psychological multiplicity suggests quite forcefully that the killer is simply the most extreme of his alters. This also allows his mother Olivia’s depiction of him as a gentle boy who ‘wouldn’t even kill bugs’ (357) to serve as an illustration of the extent of his psychological fluctuations. So the reader-detective considers the potential for a criminal double in the tradition following Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which would also neatly explain the synchronicity of narratives. Thinking along this ‘traditional’ line, John’s experiences of ‘missing time’ are full-on ‘fugue episodes’, during which he switches to the killer alter. Indeed, the physical and psychological profile of John does find a mirror in that of the killer. The killer’s gender is never confirmed, and while this allows for a wider range of red herrings, the reader-detective might identify in this John’s gender confusion at twenty years old. The killer’s appearance is defined by its mutability; during the first murder ‘[t]hrough a trick of shadow and moonlight, or through some undefined magic, the killer’s face did change’ (52), and as he kidnaps Mark Jones, the killer’s face ‘shimmered and changed like a pond after a rock had been tossed into it’ (153). Again, this keeps the reader in suspense, but could represent another physical manifestation of John’s psychological multiplicity.

Though not fully apparent until early adulthood, John’s multiplicity has its roots in the trauma of his birth and adoption. The opening chapter describing his

birth is our first nightmarish glimpse into John's imagination, and though he imagines his mother to be beautiful 'even in the pains of labor', it is agony and confusion with which events are saturated. The anatomical bonds between mother and son are made painfully clear, with blood seeming to colour every surface, yet John is, of course, unable to identify psychologically with his mother. She is 'Navajo or Lakota...Apache or Seminole...Yakama or Spokane', her tribal identity dissolved to the extent that 'she is from the same tribe as the last Indian woman [John] has seen on television' (4). The physical and psychological severance is made explicit and disturbing through graphic, fragmented prose, a technique used to great effect in much thriller fiction. Amid the blood and dirty sheets we see 'sudden tearing', '[l]oose knots threatening to unravel', and hear John's mother 'tearing her vocal cords with the force of her screams' (4), all before the umbilical cord is cut.

The helicopter that flies John straight from birth to his adoptive family 'strafes the reservation with explosive shells' (6), severing any direct experiential connection John might have with his biological mother and her familial and tribal connections. The 'war' thus initiated finds its battlegrounds in John, whose eventual suicide is foreshadowed in his instant love for 'the distance between the helicopter and the ground' and a desire to 'fall from the helicopter', even as a newborn (7).

Of course, in reading *Indian Killer* we are engaging with fiction, not a medical case study, and this is literary criticism, not therapy. As such, there are definite aesthetic and political ideas in presenting such a character as John Smith, and to these we now must turn.

By presenting John Smith's multiple personalities, Alexie manages to create a very interesting and revealing process, where multiplicity forces reductionism. In her

desperate search for evidence towards a solution, the reader-detective extracts from John's multiplicity only those actions and characteristics sinister enough to indict him as the killer. Such a process demonstrates the impulse one might have to wrestle the errant or multiplicitous into existing paradigms, or at least establish a dualistic relationship with this errancy, in order that some truth or solution might be ascertained regarding its existence. This process (an arguably modernist trait) is obviously encouraged by 'traditional' thriller fiction, and is necessary for many mystery plots to function as intended. When this process is significantly disrupted, the thriller or mystery novel necessarily admits its construction.

Yet for all the evidence supporting John as the killer, there remains that stark physical evidence that confirms he is not: he has been framed. As Krupat notes, the primary examples of this evidence are the different knives wielded by the two characters, and conclusively, John's suicide against the killer's survival (Krupat 2011 101). Again, since we agree on this, there seems little purpose in repeating the textual details: we can be absolutely sure that John Smith is not the killer. A perilous claim, one might say, but to do so would only prove the efficacy of Alexie's aesthetic trickery. The reader is led to conflate the narratives of two separate characters and assume that the murderousness of one equates to the guilt of the other. As it is the most well supported of all possible solutions so it remains the most convincing (*convicting* for the legal authorities), yet no matter how voluminous, the evidence for John as the killer is entirely circumstantial, whilst the scant evidence that he is not is physical and verifiable, at least for the reader. No matter how elaborate the similarities, or how powerful the coincidences, the assumptions of the reader are confounded by physical evidence, and she must accept not only the artificiality of

her constructions, but her naïve complicity in accepting, and so laying, their foundations.

There is nothing revolutionary, or even particularly interesting, about proclaiming that the assumptions that the reader makes within a text will always affect her ongoing interpretation. There is also nothing especially revelatory about noticing the tendency of a mystery thriller to include misleading clues or red herrings. What is both interesting and crucial in this case is that Alexie's artfully placed clues and the novel's open ending encourage the reader towards the solution that John is the killer *even beyond evidence that he is not*.

The significance of this is well illustrated in chapter 17 of part 3 ('Catholicism'), when Officer Randy Peone is approached by Lester; 'a barefoot old Indian man' (361) who has lost his shoes whilst being beaten up by Aaron Rogers and Barry Church in one of their racially motivated attacks. Peone regards the homeless as 'the refuse of the world', and as such is unable to reconcile his cartoonish ideals about 'fighting bad guys' (363) with helping this victim of racially motivated violent crime. He assumes that Lester's claims about white attackers are simply 'delusional' (361) until he sees John Smith 'kneeling on the sidewalk...singing loudly...holding a pair of shoes that could barely be defined as shoes', and decides that '[t]hese two Indians were probably buddies and had fought over the last drink in the jug' (361). Peone's assumptions about Indian peoples and (just as tellingly) homelessness instantly project upon these individuals violent, alcoholic stereotypes, suggesting they stick to their own (race) yet blame the outside (white) world for any intraracial problems,⁵² yet there is no indication that the

⁵² Peone's use of 'chief' when referring to John (a word similarly used throughout the novel) is

decrepit shoes John holds have ever belonged to Lester. At best, Peone seems completely oblivious to the diversions that the narrative takes from the reductive path paved by his preconceptions: it is certainly possible that the shoes belong to John, who is by now ‘in an especially bad state’ (304), yet despite Lester asserting that he does not know John, and that it was white males who attacked him, Peone insists on giving Lester the shoes John held. At worst, Peone notes the aforementioned diversions and chooses to exclude them from or distort them into part of his narrative path. So despite initially noting that schizophrenics (as he considers John) ‘rarely hurt anybody except themselves’ (363), Peone quite suddenly backtracks and decides that John being ‘obviously sick and need[ing] help’ is another reason to believe John is guilty, even to consider that he ‘might be the Indian Killer’ (364). All evidence is excluded by the racist assumptions of the colonial authority, and these assumptions lead to John’s guilt. In Peone’s mind, whether or not the shoes fit, Lester will wear them.

The incident and chapter conclude with Peone wondering ‘how he would fill out the paperwork on this encounter’; this is a simple but loaded thought, for just how *will* he put together the pieces of the puzzle and narrate this ‘encounter’ (365)? Will Lester be cast as drunk and complicit in his assault? Will Peone ride in and solve the ‘Indian’ problem like the cavalryman that the confused John Smith imagines; ‘[b]lue sword, scabbard, white horse’ (363)? Like the reader, Peone needs to find a solution before he can move onto his next mystery, even if it means filling in the blanks with stereotypes and their linked motivations. Peone’s sense of finality and a job well done even finds him musing over potential nicknames that he might

placed by Alexie as a racial slur, albeit one that has yet to gain the pejorative currency of those used against other non-whites.

receive for being involved, based on some simple, essential, referential detail that will unambiguously anchor him to that narrative. Thankfully for Peone, he will no doubt be released from his nickname/narrative after he attaches a theme to his next 'encounter'. It is not so easy for Lester or John to escape the associations projected upon them as Peone's 'Indians'. Peone's recourse to stereotypes first diminishes the possibilities for Lester and John to narrate their individual stories, and then utterly consumes them.

This scene demonstrates the power of existing representations and rhetoric to control and direct assumptions about the past and the present, as well as predictions for the future. Again, the problem illustrated here arises when assumptions about culture and race are relied upon as essential, defining characteristics. In this situation, members of the culture or race about which these assumptions are made are only considered 'authentic' by external peoples when they conform to those assumptions. The most damaging result of accepting such assumptions is that the individuals that compose that culture or race begin to personally invest in those assumptions, and 'authenticity' equates to conformity. Though Alexie's subject is urban Indians, against whom the frequency of abuse is considerably higher than on the reservation, this cycle of essentialism has significant consequences for any and all considerations of gender and sexuality, as well as race and culture. Whoever manipulates the aesthetic representation of one of these 'categories' of identity has the potential power to manipulate the perceptions and (perhaps more importantly) assumptions of the majority, with regards to that 'category'.

There are three such manipulators of aesthetic representations of 'Indians' in the novel, a triumvirate of essentialist discourse: jazz turned conservative talk radio

DJ Truck Schultz, anthropologist turned literature professor Dr Clarence Mather, and cop turned mystery writer Jack Wilson. These characters are key nodes in the network of essentialism that pervades the novel, creating static versions of ‘Indian-ness’ that can only serve to divide and conquer. By attempting to define an essential ‘Indian’ identity, these three characters are complicit in, and a necessary part of the promulgation of the killer’s violently divisive ‘message of the knife’ (192).

The message of the knife, the word made flesh

‘Good Indians can always spot monsters.’
(*Indian Killer* 131)

The ‘message of the knife’, of course, is determined by how it is used, which in turn is determined by its user.⁵³ In the hands of the killer, the ‘message of the knife’ is one of violent indigenous revenge, determined by the ‘ritualistic’ manner of mutilation (scalping, organ removal), the ‘ethnicity’ of its victims (white), and the deathly ‘Indian’ symbolism of the killer’s owl feathers ‘signature’ (164-5). The killer’s ‘belief’ in the knife is a belief in conflict as life’s only constant. During our introduction to the killer, we are told that ‘[w]ith the knife, the killer became the single, dark center around which all other people revolved’ (49). The killer *wants* to exist as a hateful racial reference point for others, as the murderous representative of all ‘Indians’, so becoming *empowered* by essentialist discourse. In using the knife, the killer envisions a return to the violent physical segregation and conflict that has historically characterised relations between Natives and non-Natives. Yet it is not the crimes that will empower the killer and instigate its desired cycle of violent revenge,

⁵³ The killer’s selection of a ‘bowie knife’ is significant, in that this knife was allegedly designed by James Bowie, an early nineteenth century soldier who, it is said, killed many Indians during his life.

it is the announcement of their associated motivations. The killer may practice the ‘message of the knife’, but needs others to construct and disseminate its underlying theory, to give that message a meaning based on race. Though they might appear to represent opposite ‘sides’ in this racial conflict, the aforementioned triumvirate in fact function as co-conspirators with the killer, their discourse being equally anachronistic and politically regressive. As the three men use the actions of the killer to further their causes, so the killer, apparently unable to speak or write, uses their rhetoric to further its cause.

Schultz’ ‘Voice of Reason’ radio show broadcasts his unashamedly racist opinions to ‘a hundred thousand listeners’ (55), and his essentialist rants are laid so utterly bare that they need little analysis here. He believes that ‘Indians... are an angry, bitter people’ who ‘insist on their separation from normal society’, ‘want to take all of our money [and] corrupt our values’ (118). For Schultz, who is most likely a parody of Rush Limbaugh, ‘normal society’, money, and rights are for whites only. Schultz’ dialogue with callers is infrequent and perfunctory, his questions rhetorical, and his appeals to supposedly ‘historical’ injustices as fictional as they are scandalous, yet his incendiary broadcasts serve their purpose: to incite violent ‘revenge’ against non-whites. The killer chooses Schultz as its ‘messenger’ (192-3) because Schultz already believes in the ‘message’. Indeed, when Schultz receives the box of evidence from the killer, he is inspired to lie about the killer’s involvement in the disappearance of David Rogers, and embark upon a series of racist tirades that finally, explicitly characterise the killer as ‘the distillation of [Indian] rage’ (346). Schultz conflates the motives and actions of one contemporary, unknown figure with those of nameless Indian ‘savages’, and distils from this conflation an essence of

‘pure evil, pure violence, pure rage’ that characterises the entire Indian population of (at least) the U.S. (343-6). The divisive power of this definition of the ‘Indian’ incites a night of continuous racially motivated violence; the ‘message of the knife’ has found its audience.

Against and yet complicit in the manifestations of Schultz’ conservatism, Dr Clarence Mather’s ‘Introduction to Native American Literature’ class may be seen as a liberal attempt to define what it means to be ‘Indian’, with an emphasis on authenticity. As previously discussed in chapter one, the contentious choices on the course reading list are instantly addressed by Marie Polatkin, ‘the only Indian in the class’, who points out that ‘there are only three Indians on [the] list, and their books were really written by white guys’ (59). Marie’s continuous interruptions of Mather’s first lecture serve to structurally and theoretically disrupt his ‘envision[ing of the] course as a comprehensive one, viewing the Native American world from both the interior and exterior’ (60). This disruption is crucial, since any attempt to create a ‘comprehensive’ view of another culture or ‘world’ first assumes an advantageous perspective for the external ‘view[er]’, and the ‘comprehensi[on]’ of that ‘world’ necessarily imposes limitations on the possibilities of those considered a part of it. Since it is Mather who is defining the ‘Native American world’, he has rights of inclusion or exclusion; therefore he can decide what constitutes ‘interior and exterior.’ From his ‘turquoise bolo tie’ (58) to his ‘proud’ revelation that he has ‘been adopted into a Lakota Sioux family’ (61), it is clear that despite being white, he considers himself part of the interior. Mather’s later claim that he and Marie “are on the same side of [the] battle” (85) cements his assumptions of authoritative interiority, and casts suspicion over his already vague definitions of what precisely

constitutes the 'exterior'. Mather's dualistic approach is, of course, fallacious, as it ignores the fact that all contemporary Indians living within the continued colonialism of white America are situated on neither an 'interior' nor an 'exterior'. Indeed, the existences and mutual influences of these two oversimplified 'sides' have been entangled since the early stages of European invasion and colonial expansion.

Mather's essentialism is further exemplified by his references to 'the qualities of a true Spokane' (135, 139). Rather than accept Marie's criticism of his course materials, Mather dismisses her as simply 'rude and arrogant', and despite the fact that she *is* a Spokane Indian, he declares that she exhibits 'hardly the qualities of a true Spokane'. Indeed, he divines the same apparently false traits in Reggie Polatkin, '[a]s if [they] ran in the family like some disease,' as he 'also fail[s] to behave like a true Spokane' (135). Having compiled in his imagination an 'ideal' Spokane figure from some mental anthropological identikit, Mather has again attempted to fix sign ('Spokane') to referent (a living Spokane Indian), imagining himself access to the 'truth' about Spokane identity. His arrogance is so profound that he believes that 'he could teach [Marie and Reggie] a thing or two about being Indian' (135). Mather's idea of 'being Indian' is, of course, a simulation of completely fictitious and idealised caricatures that live an alarmingly three-dimensional existence in his mind. These caricatures are simulations of simulations, being thrown together from various already mediated anthropological studies of Indian peoples that Mather has undertaken, acknowledged or, in a particularly revealing episode, stolen. Indeed, it is in the stolen tapes '[r]ecorded by a forgotten anthropologist' that we discover Mather's model of a 'true Spokane', being 'the magical recording of a Spokane Indian elder telling a traditional story' (139). This attempt to recover a stable

historical referent of ‘Spokane-ness’ on the tapes is disrupted and thwarted by impenetrable layers of reproduction. Not only is the tape itself a reproduction; the story the woman tells is a reproduction of a story that, traditionally, and/or indeed practically, would be reproduced differently depending on the teller, the tale and the context in which it was told, and so there is no authoritative or final version of the story. Her ‘fractured English, which Mather could barely understand’ means that she is unable to express her own translation of the story with any clarity or confidence; so she relies upon the translation of ‘her fluent Spokane...by a Bureau of Indian Affairs Agent’ (139); this is certainly no detached, impartial translator, nor even the allegedly interested anthropologist. There then lies the possibility (and it is only a possibility) that the teller did indeed adapt the content of the story to her immediate context and, in telling a trickster tale, was in fact making the agent and the anthropologist the unwitting subject of the story, thus further invalidating any attempt to glean historical ‘truth’ from the recordings. In this case, the reception by the current audience is at least as important as the circumstances influencing the artefact’s original (re)production, for although Mather had not been looking for them, he attaches an apparently limitless significance to their existence, being ‘personally in love with the Indian elders’ voices’ (139). His desperate search for the *indian* overrides any possibility of academic detachment, and creates a further layer, this time of affectation, prohibiting access to any objective ‘truth’ or meaningful statement about Indian identities. There also remains the question of why exactly these tapes had initially been left ‘collecting dust in a storage room’ (136). Was the research somehow discredited and so abandoned? Simply, Mather has no way of validating the origins or contents of the recordings. When finally confronted, Mather

lies about the existence of the tapes, initially ‘because he believed he was protecting the recordings.’ It is quickly revealed that Mather had in fact ‘lied to preserve his idea of order’, that order securing his position as a cultural authority, so protecting his academic reputation and career. In pursuing cultural ‘authenticity’, Mather has uncovered only regressive layers of representation. These layers are explicitly added to by the description of Mather’s ‘[l]ayer after layer of lies’, building up to the point where he ‘could have dug into himself for years and not discovered the truth’ (138). Mather’s dangerous delusions about authenticity eventually convince Reggie Polatkin that ‘all white men [are] lying all the time’ (138), and frustrated and bewildered, Reggie punches Mather. This is one of the unforeseen consequences of the alleged ‘sympathy’ of anthropological study: in locating and delineating a particular cultural ‘authenticity’, one must alienate that or those which threaten the range of one’s conclusions: delineation necessitates alienation. This particular abandonment is for Reggie the final straw, and provides the motivation for his vicious attack upon Mr. Harris, whose sobs and confusion Reggie tellingly records on tape.

Yet Clarence Mather *insists* upon revelling in those layered fictions of identity. In disrupting and even mocking Mather’s attempts to locate and fix cultural authenticity, the novel asserts the potential for the individual to resist the determinations or judgements of the dominant culture, though these attempts are ultimately frustrated. This is not to applaud Reggie’s violent reaction, nor advocate hard cultural relativism; it is rather to condemn the subjection of one culture to the imagined, self-asserted superiority of another.

As the mystery continues, Mather begins to produce his own investigation into the story, reading and interpreting the killer's actions as he would a text. As Mather deconstructs the events for his class, the killer becomes 'an inevitable creation of capitalism', 'a twentieth century [manifestation] of the classic Indian warrior', and 'the kidnapping of Mark Jones... a bold, albeit cowardly, metaphor for the Indian condition' (246). Whilst on one level this is Alexie poking fun at the overzealous academic,⁵⁴ the pseudo-profundity of Mather's assessment has serious consequences. Mather is, after all, responsible for the education of university students, and as such becomes their respected authority on Indians. By proclaiming the Indian identity of the killer and asserting that his or her actions are implicitly tied to the colonial past, Mather extracts an image of the contemporary *indian* as vengeful, bloodthirsty and amoral, yet reduces the killer's actions to metaphor, excusing them as being symptomatic of an innate 'revolutionary' tendency, exhibited in some way by all 'authentic' Indians. Now a 'tenured professor', Mather's unwillingness to accept and engage meaningfully with Marie's challenges to his authority suggests that despite his interest in revolution, he has lost the crucial ability to be self-critical. This leads him to believe in his own infallibility, and again posits him as one who fixes meaning for others. When he defines the terms 'Native American', or 'Indian Killer', he does so in order to create instantly specific, timeless images in the mind of the listener. Marie continues to present her lived experience, contradicting Mather's stereotypes and anachronisms with contemporary reality. She is 'a twenty-first-century Indian', not his 'revolutionary construct', nor 'an Indian warrior chief [nor] some demure little Indian woman healer talking spider

⁵⁴ My disclaimer perhaps best illustrates Alexie's real-world commitment to this.

this, spider that' (247). Mather's academic security and moral superiority rely upon maintaining a particular distance from contemporary urban Indian peoples such as Marie, who threaten his romantic fantasies of the *indian* in the same way that urban reality threatens John Smith's reservation utopia. Neither illusion is more or less 'real' than the other. Mather's aim is not for his students to engage critically with contemporary issues surrounding Indian identity, but to acknowledge, validate and confirm with their work his authoritative understanding of 'the Native American world' as he articulates it.

In plotting 'the objective limits of objectivism', Bourdieu describes the problems of anthropology as exemplified by Mather, noting:

So long as he remains unaware of the limits inherent in his point of view on the object, the anthropologist is condemned to adopt unwittingly for his own use the representation of an action which is forced on agents of groups when they lack practical mastery of highly valued competence and have to provide themselves with an explicit and at least semi-formalized substitute for it in the form of a *repertoire of rules*, or of what sociologists consider, at best, as a "role", i.e. a predetermined set of discourses and actions appropriate to a particular "stage-part" (1995 2).

It is significant that Mather is an anthropology professor, teaching Native American literature as an aside. Amidst a whole canon of methodological concerns with anthropology as an academic practice lies the potential havoc caused by the misuse of anthropological findings. Like the character Jack Wilson, the non-Native author of *indian* inspired thriller novels, Mather is exploiting ethnicity to further his career, playing on the relative ignorance of Indian identities to gain swift academic recognition. In an interview in 2000, Alexie addressed these issues directly: 'I don't mind if a white person writes about Indians. It disturbs me when somebody like Tony Hillerman has made this whole career around writing about the Navajo because he

ends up being the person people turn to to learn about Navajos rather than the Navajos themselves. He becomes the substitute, the expert by proxy' (Oi n. pag.). Hillerman was a prolific writer of mystery thriller fiction, of which the principal characters are Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn, Navajo detectives whose implicit knowledge of an esoteric *indian* culture allows them to solve mysteries that white detectives cannot, despite the real-world author of these mysteries being white. Such writing, Alexie contends, is 'colonial literature': 'Everywhere else in the world, it is considered such. In South Africa when a white South African writes about black South Africans, it's defined as colonial literature. The only place in the world it's not called what it is is in the United States' (Oi n. pag.). In *Indian Killer*, the character Jack Wilson, whose thriller work features 'Aristotle Little Hawk, the very last Shilshomish Indian...a practicing medicine man and private detective' (162), is a barely disguised Hillerman figure, and Wilson and his writing form the third key node of the novel's network of essentialist discourse.

Like Mather, Wilson claims to 'kn[o]w about real Indians', a knowledge gained from books and meditation, and by surrounding himself with a 'confusing and complicated cornucopia of tribal influences' (178). He falsely claims Shilshomish Indian ancestry, thus positing himself as an 'authentic' source of 'Indian' knowledge, and gaining a place on Mather's reading list. It is implied that this desire for the doubled nativity so carefully scrutinised by Marie is an attempt by Wilson to make sense of his moving between foster families in childhood. Although he refuses to believe anything negative he encounters about *indians*, the idea that *indian* children were 'raised...communally', and could move 'freely between tepees, between families' (157) proves to be the initiatory moment of Wilson's *indian*

obsession. Wilson finds a symbolic precursor, rooted in seemingly untraceable myth, that explains his situation, and so ‘recreate[s] himself in the image’ (157) of the *indian*. The *indian*’s imagined nomadism stands metaphorically for the ease with which the *indian* is refigured towards the aims of various people in various contexts.

Wilson hangs onto these romantic *indian* simulations, and their later dissemination in his bestselling fiction both allows him to feel like a participant in the urban Indian community and eases his loneliness. Alexie’s concerns (as articulated in Oi) again find a voice in Marie Polatkin, who sees Wilson’s writing as a near murderous act: ‘[i]t’s like his books are killing Indian books’ (68). These concerns are formalised in ‘The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me’ (*One Stick Song* 13-25) as the narrator states the findings of his research on ‘all the books written about Indians’. These findings include that ‘[a] book written by a person who identifies as a mixed-blood will sell more copies than a book written by a person who identifies as strictly Indian’ and ‘[s]uccessful non-Indian writers are viewed as well-informed about Indian life. Successful mixed-blood writers are viewed as wonderful translators of Indian life. Successful Indian writers are viewed as traditional storytellers of Indian life’. This short exercise in literary history vilifies those writers who exemplify any of these findings, and of course, Alexie has created a fine example of what not to write in Wilson, whose essentialist fiction is what ‘[p]ublishers are looking for’, featuring ‘New Age stuff, after-death experiences, the healing arts, talking animals, sacred vortexes...plus a murder mystery’ (163).

Schultz, Mather, and Wilson function as the authority figures in Seattle’s various public and private spaces, with a collective influence that potentially reaches hundreds of thousands of citizens. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, only 0.6% of

Seattle's 608,660 residents are American Indian or Alaskan Native Alone ('About Seattle' n. pag.), and although there will surely be some variation to account for homeless Indians and those, like John Smith, who are not federally recognised, ideas about Indian peoples are clearly not being controlled by that demographic. The actions of the killer and its 'message of the knife' are designed to divide Indians from non-Indians as well as from Indians about whom they are unsure. This message is precisely what this essentialist triumvirate require to continue peddling their collective authority over Indian peoples.

Understanding the message of the knife helps determine the motivations of the killer. The killer's 'belief' in the knife is a belief in the reversal of racial dominance, a permanent severance of Native from non-Native akin to the projected consequences of Pauite prophet Wovoka's Ghost Dance Movement of the 1890s. As discussed in chapter one, Wovoka believed that performing the Ghost Dance would restore the land and its inhabitants, both human and animal, to the pre-contact state. If successful, the dance would raise from the dead those Indians killed by the whites who, through the same ceremony, would simultaneously be destroyed. Again, Alexie is alluding here to the problems he sees with the separatist account of Indian identity, which he describes elsewhere as the worshipping of 'nostalgia as [a] false idol', at the same time as 'dying of [that same] nostalgia' (*War Dances* 36-7). This preoccupation with an unrecoverable past of cultural purity, as opposed to an acceptance of the 'collision of cultures' (*Face* 80), drives the killer and his messengers Schultz, Mather, and Wilson, through different paths to the same conclusion: Indian identity must be separated and contained.

In order to adequately contain its target, the purveyors of essentialist discourse must themselves be dynamic, quick to take hold of any and every opportunity to further demonstrate their superiority and maintain dominance. This includes being able to swiftly ‘understand’ and ‘explain’ any variation from defined ‘authentic’ ‘essences’ as already ‘known’, or as temporary, inauthentic perversions of that already ‘known’ culture. It may seem that the power of essentialist discourse is here being overstated, that ideological dominance through language is not comparable with physical dominance through violence, that, perhaps, ‘words will never hurt me’. And perhaps physically they will not, but one of Alexie’s practical (and political) points is that, precisely applied, language *can* and *does* control and direct our perceptions of and assumptions about the world, with a subtlety that penetrates beyond the immediate physical shock of blood and violence, attacking instead the imagination of the individual. As the mystery thriller writer, Alexie has already demonstrated how he can manipulate our assumptions. By confounding these assumptions, Alexie reveals the framing techniques employed to direct the reader’s interpretations.

Of course, Alexie could perform this structural trick equally effectively by utilising and subverting other generic platforms, such as the romance or Western(!). However, these genres traditionally lack the monstrous violence of the thriller, along with the supernatural activity often incorporated to explain (at least temporarily) this violence. After all, the thriller is supposed to thrill the reader, and indeed *Indian Killer* does so, containing plentiful gore and a ghostlike murderer who flies around the city eating his victims’ organs. This killer, then, remains our central mystery, and

it is only by dissecting this creature that we might reveal the central villainy at work within the novel.

The killer

The killer is at once silent and invisible (152, 299), yet voracious (54), literally bloodthirsty (328), and unsure of Its own considerable strength (54).⁵⁵ It is not gendered; *is*, apparently, ‘Indian’ (420), and though we see the human face in Its ‘clear eyes, curve of cheek, and thin lips’ (49), It is able to ‘float’ (300), and is described by Its only witness as ‘a bird’ with ‘wings’ that ‘could fly’ (324). Though the killer indeed aspires to ‘behave like an owl, to kill without emotion’, this is frustrated by a perversely human ‘need’ for ‘trophies’, such as ‘the bloody scalp nailed to the wall’ (149).⁵⁶ This distinctly human desire to revel in one’s own perceived glory seems to mortalise the killer, grounding It in ‘reality’. If we are to give credit to the testimony of Mark Jones alongside the other evidence, then the killer is a confused, psychotic, sexless, chameleonic and shapeshifting bird-person.⁵⁷ This composite body seems constructed from some of the most famous 19th century European literary monsters and villains. From Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) the killer gains a seemingly insatiable thirst for blood, a bird-like aspect (compare *Dracula*’s ‘aquiline’ face [28]), the ability to transgress gender boundaries, and a disregard for gravity. Robert Louis Stevenson’s Hyde is arguably present in the killer’s indescribable expression and psychotic violence (see *The Strange Case of Dr.*

⁵⁵ In order to avoid confusion, ‘It’ refers to the killer.

⁵⁶ Janet Dean argues convincingly that these ‘trophies’ function as ‘a counterbalance to the many collections in the novel that are created by whites to define Native Americans’ (‘The Violence of Collection’ 32), in an article that seems to understand the essentialist motivations at work in the novel.

⁵⁷ Though this description contains elements of a trickster figure (and the message of the killer elements of Vizenor’s ‘trickster hermeneutics’), the killer is the deadly creation of essentialist discourse, rather than a Native figure. Of course, Alexie may intend the killer to be misread as a trickster.

Jekyll and Mr. Hyde [1886] 5, 9). The killer's disturbing combination of gentleness and murderous frustration finds a prototype in the behaviour of the monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The composition of Frankenstein's monster is also of physiological and ideological import, as the killer is similarly described as being made up of several different parts. According to a homeless Indian man that John Smith's father Daniel meets, the 'Indian Killer [has] got Crazy Horse's magic [,] Chief Joseph's brains [,] Geronimo's heart [and] Wovoka's vision' (219). In order to simplify her task, the reader-detective ignores the supernatural and assumes that a person, one of the human characters, is responsible for the murders, yet from the information gathered it becomes uncomfortably clear that the killer is no human being, rather It is a monster. The killer is 'all those badass Indians rolled into one' (219), he is 'the single, dark center around which all other people revolved' (48). Though clues of Its monstrosity might come from parallels with famous European literary monsters, it is the killer's embodiment of *indians* that is crucial.

Judith Halberstam tells us that monsters are 'meaning machines' that 'can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body' (*Skin Shows*, 22). So Dracula might be seen to represent the perceived threat of immigration; Hyde ostensibly repressed homosexual desire. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the (monster) killer of *Indian Killer* represents *indians*, but does so in a very specific and unexpected way. The central problem of electing a single representative for a particular race is that one cannot adequately represent the many, due to the necessity of unacceptable reductionism and generalisation. Yet the killer *is* that representative, being a composite re-presentation of representations of non-specific *indians*. This is obviously a contentious statement that requires clarification. Race is most useful as a

unifying construct to those who wish to categorise and dominate individuals. We have mentioned how Alexie's observations of tribal specificities serve to complicate, and so dissolve, the racial category of 'Indians'. There is no such thing as a 'typical' or 'authentic' Indian, just as there is no such thing as a 'typical' Scot or an 'authentic' American; to speak in these terms ignores variation, and is essentialist. Yet the killer takes as Its substance, Its very being, those stereotypes and aesthetic representations of the *indian*; It could not exist without essentialist discourse, because It *is* the physical manifestation, the result, of essentialist discourse. The killer is a confused bundle of fictions, anachronisms, signifiers and, above all else, fears, a composite body formed from and fuelled by those distilled essences that control and direct assumptions about what it means to be an 'authentic' *indian*. This idea also features in 'Assimilation', in which race is seen as 'the Frankenstein monster that has grown beyond our control...that monster [recognizable] in the faces of whites and Indians and in their eyes' (*The Toughest Indian...* 14).

The killer's existence is circular and spiralling: in order to survive It must continue to generate the essentialist discourse of Its creation. The most effective way to do this is through fear, and so the killer must kill. The killer exists as an extension of violence; it is only '[w]ith the knife' that the killer becomes 'the single, dark center around which all other people revolved' (49). So the killer draws attention to Its being *indian* through symbols: turquoise inlays in the handle of the knife, scalping, ritual mutilation, leaving on Its victims an *indian* calling card: bloody owl feathers, a generic, anachronistic, *indian* symbol of death (54-56). The killer finds form and strength in the work of our triumvirate. Each character uses his medium to disseminate essentialist discourse, so contributing to the composite figure of the

killer, and so each shares responsibility for the killings and kidnapping. By attempting to define *indian* identity, these three characters fix only the identity of the killer. Each contributes certain elements alongside general *indian* fantasies. Wilson contributes the mystery to the killer, the sense of esoteric wisdom and faux-spirituality. Schultz contributes the violence, the ignorance, the monstrosity, the subnormal, and the incendiary rage. Mather contributes the interpretation, the symbolism, and the need to assert or take trophies.

Though each is responsible for the creation of the monster, it is Jack Wilson who is singled out for revenge by John Smith. That the writer is targeted asserts Alexie's belief in the power of writing over the imagination, and the legitimising power of the printed word. When Olivia Smith reads Wilson's novels, she truly believes that he 'really get[s] it right' (355), despite the fact that his knowledge is second or third hand. Olivia's praise demonstrates the closed system of information that leads to the naturalisation of stereotypes. The texts about *indians* that she has read are the same texts that Wilson used for his research, and so Wilson's writing reaffirms the accessible inaccessibility of *indian*. By 'accessible inaccessibility' I mean that sacredness, mystery and inexplicability are defining traits of the *indian* aesthetic purveyed by essentialist literature. Having established the source of the killer in essentialist discourse, I now reflect briefly on resistance to anti-essentialism.

In *After Theory* (2004 [2003]), Terry Eagleton asserts that those writing against essentialist discourse are engaged in straw man arguments, as no critical thinker has actually put forward the strongest essentialist view that anti-essentialist writing works to dismantle. Although there are essential properties of things like copper and sheep, he writes, the latter at least displays genetic variety, which does

not deny its essential properties. Since '[c]ultural phenomena can [similarly] have certain properties without which they would be something else', so '[a]nti-essentialism is largely the product of philosophical amateurism and ignorance' (121). This may appear as an oversimplification of his argument, but as is often the case with the always entertaining contemporary writing style of Eagleton, it would be difficult to simplify any further than he has. Unfortunately, it is Eagleton who here creates the straw man to knock down. It is not philosophers with whom anti-essentialist writers like Alexie take issue, rather it is with the huge variety of ways in which people try to reduce the complexities of society towards asserting control over certain groups. That this happens does not need to be proven here: a simple walk in many big cities will reveal instances of racism, sexism, homophobia, all of which are based on the description of inherent, immutable properties according to the anxieties of the describer. This chapter has shown that Alexie's Seattle in *Indian Killer* is rife with such anxieties and their associated hatred and fear. By employing and subverting generic conventions, and tackling the ways in which essentialist discourse is used to divide and control urban Indian communities, Alexie creates a mystery thriller that works to confound assumptions about the fixed nature of identity.

Alexie's employment of generic conventions in his first book-length representation of urban Indians is a notable departure from the poetic stylistics of his previous works, but whilst this marked shift in style is only temporary, the accompanying shift in primary focus from the reservation to the urban setting is of permanent importance to the analysis of his subsequent publications. In the next chapter I look at Alexie's decidedly less grisly representations of grief and death

through the lens of 'conduct' literature, discerning an ethical stance against prescriptive modes of mourning.

Chapter Four

‘After great pain a formal feeling comes’: Alexie’s urban ethics of grief

The matter is not a simple one, for, if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note. It is already the unburied, if not the unburi-able.
- Butler 2004 34

My father haunts every basketball game.
- Alexie, ‘Net Profit’.

In *Grief and Genre in American Literature, 1790 to 1870* (2011), Desirée Henderson explores the implications of the publication in 1836 of *The Mourner’s Book* by ‘A Lady’ which, ‘designed to address every possible aspect of the mourning experience’ represented ‘the idea that the excesses and agonies of grief can be corralled by...designating certain behaviours, beliefs, and literary texts as those the grief-stricken should cling to’ (Henderson 127). The preface to this anthology of hymns, poetry, essays, prayers, letters and aphorisms presupposes the Christian faith of the reader and his or her community, and seeks ‘[t]o aid in the proper use and application of seasons of adversity’ (‘Lady’ iv). The book thus attempts to account for grief and mourning as playing a functional and conventional role in the grand plan of ‘the Great Physician’ (‘Lady’ iv). As Henderson notes, this notion of propriety in times of mourning is common to ‘a body of writing’ of the nineteenth century, that Ann Douglas has called ‘consolation literature’ (127). Henderson takes issue with this term, writing that ‘the word “consolation” has a palliative or soothing quality that does not capture how these texts actively sought to establish authority over loss by directing the feelings and actions of the mourner along clearly defined paths of approved behaviour’ (127). Thus Henderson prefers to redefine these texts

on mourning as ‘conduct literature’, going on to demonstrate the often experimental methods by which such works ‘define correct and incorrect responses to loss’ under the guise of ‘creat[ing] a sense of sympathetic identification’ (128). The primary encouragement pressed upon the mourner was ‘to disregard the individuality of his/her loss and accept that grief is a universal experience...subject to a single model of appropriate behavior’ (134). Of course, Indian tribal nations have similarly prescriptive traditional modes of grieving and mourning, which are the topic of a considerable body of ethnographic literature.⁵⁸ Part of the argument of this chapter is that the specific isolation from tribal communities faced or preferred by Alexie’s urban Indian characters prevents their cultural inheritance of tribal traditions. As such, one of the challenges for Indians living in cities lies in the discovery or creation of personal and communal ways to negotiate urban experiences of death, grieving, and mourning.

‘Conduct literature’ finds its twentieth and twenty-first century counterparts in the form of studies that attempt to categorise stages of grief. The most famous of these is the Kübler-Ross model, formulated by the late Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying* (1969), which posits the five stages of grieving as ‘denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance’ (2005 7). Kübler-Ross later denied that the universal applicability of the model to a rigid chronological structure was ever asserted, writing with David Kessler that the stages ‘are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling...not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order’ (2005 7). Despite this implied flexibility, the model has gained both cultural and clinical currency

⁵⁸ See for example Hackett 2005, Walker and Balk 2007, Walker and Thompson 2009.

precisely due to its perceived universal applicability. A survey in 1997 designed to ‘identify and describe the availability of death education, including teaching and methods’ found that ‘[d]espite recent criticisms of Kübler-Ross’s model of grieving, the majority of programs reported using her theory most frequently’ (Downe-Wamboldt & Tamlyn 177). A decade later, the first empirical study of the model found that ‘[c]ounter to stage theory, disbelief was not the initial, dominant grief indicator. Acceptance was the most frequently endorsed item’ (Maciejewski et. al. 716). Does this mean that the stages were never valid? Or is it simply that twenty-first century grieverers are somehow better equipped to accept the realities of death than those of the 1960s? One might argue that the enhanced resolution, frequency, and speeds at which images of death are now circulated via social networks, accompanied by a steady decline in religious beliefs, has led to a mass acceptance that death is simply an existential inevitability. This argument is formulated and defended with particular relevance elsewhere.⁵⁹ The important point to be expressed at this juncture is that, despite efforts to assert otherwise, there is no single universally applicable model of the processes of grieving and mourning. And yet the Kübler-Ross model continues to exert influence over personal and professional responses. The 1997 study confirms this, and the fact that it was felt necessary to publish a debunking of the model as late as 2007 suggests that notions of the right and wrong way to mourn have retained cultural relevance.

In this chapter I argue that the responses of Alexie’s urban Indian characters to death counter this notion of model mourning. In lacking communally-inherited

⁵⁹ As Henderson notes in her ‘Afterword’, pointing to Seltzer 1998, and Goldstein 1998. See also Duncum 2006, and Kurt Vonnegut’s essay ‘Cold Turkey’, in which he writes: ‘One of the few good things about modern times: If you die horribly on television, you will not have died in vain. You will have entertained us’ (Vonnegut 2004 n. pag.).

grieving and mourning practices, Alexie's urban Indians find it necessary to invent specifically urban traditions and rituals, so personalising the grieving and mourning processes in various ways. In depicting this inventiveness, Alexie asserts a phenomenological ethics of grief and mourning that values personal responses to death over adherence to accepted models. By granting control to the individual respondent, Alexie's urban Indian literature alludes to the injustices enacted by the official apology speech which, disguised as reparation, seeks to preclude the individual mourning process and so terminate further discussion of colonial violence.

Grief, death, and ritual

'[t]here are just certain poems and novels and stories that resonate forever and ever. You know, poems I always return to...Emily Dickinson: "Because I could not stop for Death, that kindly stopped for me."'

- Alexie, 'Big Think Interview' 2009.

Before embarking on this analysis of the emotions surrounding death, it is useful to make a distinction between grief and mourning. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, and are typically part of the same overall sequence of events, for the purposes of this chapter I define them in chronological terms, as respectively representing the before and after of the experience of death. Grief is the emotional state associated with the knowledge of impending death, or immediately following death, and mourning is the process or processes by which an individual or community comes to terms with the actual occurrence of death. By 'coming to terms' I mean being able to articulate one's experience of the death of another, and so integrate that absence into one's ongoing personal (or communal) history. In such an

abstraction, this process has certain parallels with the proscribed approaches to recovery from trauma, a full discussion of which takes place in chapter five.

This chronology is that which models of grief and mourning attempt to negotiate through externally imposed divisions, into recognisable and achievable stages, and which (non-conduct) fiction and poetry, such as that of Alexie, tends to represent as variable and individual. Such representations of time as mediated through the altered senses of the respondent attest to the subjective experience of grief and mourning, so asserting the legitimacy of the individual response. In her *Critical Companion*, Sharon Leiter describes Emily Dickinson as ‘an anatomist of pain’, noting that she ‘used the word in no less than 50 poems, and its variants – agony, despair, grief, hurt, and suffering – countless times’ (31). Dickinson’s influence on Alexie is both professed by the author in the quotation that opens this section, and repeatedly affirmed by his frequent references to her poetry. In order to situate Alexie’s representations of grief within the context of their literary precursors, I offer here a brief reading of a Dickinson poem that is referenced in Alexie’s ‘Sugar Town’ (*One Stick Song* 85-91).

Eschewing the tendency to read her verses as lyric poetry⁶⁰, and so indicative of the poet’s thoughts on inner emotions, Henderson finds that several of Dickinson’s poems adopt ‘the posture of authoritative advice’ (147) that characterises conduct literature. Dickinson’s ‘After great pain, a formal feeling comes – ‘ (1862) initially seems to adopt such a stance on mourning, yet my reading finds in the poem a critical engagement with tradition, which relocates authority within the individual

⁶⁰ See Cody 1971 for an extended psychoanalytic reading of Dickinson’s poetry. Examples of Dickinson being understood as a lyric poet can be found at 14, 378, 379 of this volume.

response to that ‘great pain’. It is both simpler and more useful to quote the poem in its entirety prior to my reading:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
 The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
 And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
 A Wooden way
 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
 Regardless grown,
 A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
 Remembered, if outlived,
 As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
 First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –
 (Dickinson 170)

By incorporating the subjective experience of mourning, the poem complicates the assumed teleology of the procession from painful event to acceptance. The physical body of the mourning subject negotiates the expected formalities of mourning, a process represented as ‘mechanical’, ‘Wooden’, and that which ‘Ought’ to happen. Yet these socially accepted ceremonies are distinguished from the unpredictability of subjective human responses as being ‘Of Ground, or Air’, and ‘Regardless grown’, that is both external, and cultivated socially, lacking the interpretive ‘regard’ or perspective of the individual. Such impersonal abstractions lead to ‘A Quartz contentment’, suggesting a socially valuable outward appearance of acceptance, that reduces the experience of mourning to a prefabricated, compressed process of exchanging precisely what is expected of the mourner, for the mere satisfaction of those who expect it. Yet, against the socially determined movements imposed upon the mourner’s physical conduct, the poem

alludes to the subjective experience of the mourner, whose inner processes cannot be externally regulated. So the mourner's experience of time is stretched and squashed through the act of remembering, that through its fallibility and subjectivity destabilises even the chronological and material rigidity of 'the Hour of Lead'. Again, the recollection of 'Snow' cannot recall the sensation of 'Freezing' for individual 'persons'. This play on remembrance and memorial as formalised processes of mourning the dead suggests that such practices actually serve to hinder individual response to mourning which, in this reading, is prioritised as *the* crucial response. The questions "'was it He, that bore," / And "Yesterday or Centuries before"?' , whilst alluding to the history and doctrine to which each mourning process can be related, asks for the specifics of *this* experience from *this* mourning subject. Only when the subject has processed the 'great pain' according to his or her experience of that pain and what follows, can there be any hope of 'letting go - '. The indeterminacy of this closing line suggests that there may be no sense of closure or acceptance to this process, so challenging the goal-oriented structure of formalised mourning. Dickinson's poem thus claims for the individual the right to mourn according to no fixed schedule, and without the necessity of acceptance and 'moving on' demanded by conduct literature.

The idea that one cannot claim prior, objective knowledge of another's responses to death is also central to Alexie's fiction and poetry. In 'Sugar Town' we find the lines 'in moments of great pain / the general becomes particular' (*One Stick Song* 87), a clear distillation of Dickinson's poem into a revision of its opening line. Alexie's poem addresses the amputation of the narrator's diabetic father's foot, and the narrator's subsequent reevaluation of mortality and his relationship to his

children, as a father who will soon cease to be a son. The poem thus captures the grief that anticipates mourning and, with considerable morbidity stretches this anticipation to the fate of the narrator and his children. The revision of Dickinson comes at the midpoint of a revealing sequence in which the narrator shifts focus precisely from the general to the particular. The sequence begins with the folksy claim that '[w]e pay / attention to what / is missing / only after it / goes away', followed by the swift denial: 'No. Too abstract', that is repeated following the revision of Dickinson mentioned above. That even this statement is '[s]till too abstract' for the narrator drives him towards the very particular and highly subjective assertion that '[w]hen your father loses his foot / you begin to notice other people who have lost their feet'. This is then further particularised, when the narrator elaborates: 'Of course, I am not / talking about my son / particularly'. The dissatisfaction with both Dickinson's and his own abstractions that leads to these revisions and clarifications indicates the subjectivity of the individual experience of grief, as the narrator feels unable to communicate '[w]hat I mean'.⁶¹

The filtering of the experience of grief through the narrator's recollections, predictions, and interactions with his infant son that seem to interrupt the poem's composition, challenges any prescribed limits of grieving and mourning. As in Dickinson, the significance of time and space is emphasised and distorted through phrases like 'the first time in decades', 'I had not eaten in twenty-four hours', and the thought of his father // with his feet bloodied from the hundreds of miles / he has walked to come here'. The effect of this series of impressions (playfully initiated by the narrator's opening comparison of his father to Van Gogh) is a sense of gaining

⁶¹ The use of the first person has been maintained in this quotation to emphasise the personal perspective of the narrator.

unmitigated access to the narrator's intimate thoughts and fears, yet his frustration at not being able to convey these feelings with enough precision reminds us of the impossibility of transposing one's pain onto another through language. Unlike Dickinson's poem, this work veers quite unexpectedly into humour. The lines 'I carry my father's name / as I will someday carry his coffin' are followed immediately by a scene in which that father requests 'an eye patch / a parrot, and a peg leg', in order to recontextualise his impending amputation. The reader is then immediately brought back to the mortal source and defensive capacity of this sense of humour, described as the 'inherited / ... inability to remain serious / between and among injuries'. Coulombe argues that 'Alexie's use of humor encourages readers to think anew by creating a space of shared inquiry and reciprocal empathy' (118), and although I find this reading to express something of a truism (humour that doesn't do this surely isn't humour), there is a sense in which these glimpses of humour create at least a brief broadening of perspective, in which the reader might imagine his or her laughter. In the context of this poem though, these moments only serve to emphasise the exclusivity of the rest of the poem, which I read as asserting a position against the imposition of proper ways to grieve.

Death, grief, and ethics

In his essay on the 'Psychiatric Aspects of Death in America', Vivian M. Rakoff notes the 'complex network of relatedness which requires dissolution through the processes of mourning', describing mourning as 'essentially a process of unlearning the expected presence of the deceased' (Mack 159). Rakoff asserts the psychological utility of an approach to death that 'emphasize[s] the necessity of

mourning rituals and the expression of grief for disentanglement from the deceased so that life can continue unencumbered by unresolved relationship' (Mack 159). This creation of rituals as mechanisms for dealing with mourning is thus figured as 'a necessary process of normative psychological functioning' against 'the disservice that the funeral parlor's denial of death does to surviving families' (Mack 159-160). Like Dickinson and Alexie, Rakoff thus denounces the prescriptive forms of mourning, claiming that 'the rightness of expressing grief in passionate form [should be] encouraged', but laments that 'neither individuals nor communities can readily create myth or ritual voluntarily. The best that can be achieved is a syncretic *bricollage* [sic] of previously elaborated mythology which may or may not be successful' (Mack 159-160).⁶²

The eponymous protagonist of Alexie's 'What Ever Happened To Frank Snake Church?' both expresses his grief passionately and is readily able to imagine new, urban rituals. Unfortunately, these rituals function as a denial of his parents' deaths, and leave Frank struggling to recover the self that existed before this loss. Whilst appearing to suffer a heart attack⁶³, Frank⁶⁴ experiences a vision of his father, Harrison, that convinces Frank that his father is 'lying dead on the kitchen floor' (*Ten Little Indians* 197). Whilst he is immediately able to compose a eulogy on the rush to his father's house, where Harrison is alive and well, Frank's actual experience of his father's funeral a year later is utterly overwhelming. Even with the eulogy in hand, Frank's '[g]rief turned him into an illiterate...into a mute...into a

⁶² An unusual and successful version of such a bricolage is described by Alexie in his poem 'In the Mood' (Face 74-77), in which Peter Sellers controls the mourners at his funeral by requesting 'In the Mood' by Glen Miller. The mythology of Miller's death is incorporated into that of Sellers', in order to simultaneously 'cause more grief' and institute his 'last comic gesture'.

⁶³ Snake Church describes it as a heart attack, though the 'electrical charge[s]', vomiting, and paralysis suggests this might be a stroke.

⁶⁴ I refer to Frank Snake Church by his first name to avoid confusion with his parents.

stranger in his own tribe', with his simple statement 'I love my father' seen as a failure to perform by his mother's aunt, the only person he is able to recognise (201-2). As a teenager, Frank honored the death of his mother, Helen, by giving up playing basketball, in order that he might 'bury her with one of his most important treasures' (202). This deeply personal and creative mourning ritual allows Frank to gradually incorporate his mother's death into his daily life, the 'acute pain' slowly fading to 'the phantom itch of an amputated limb, and then it was gone', but also robs him of a university education and his identity as a 'star basketball player' (203). These absences leave him with 'a quiet sickness, a sort of emotional tumor that ever grew or diminished but prevented him living a full and messy life' (205). The conventions of his father's funeral require the adult Frank to assert his position as primary spokesperson for the gathered 'tribe', and in doing so express his grief according to their expectations. Thus the conditions of the prescribed ritual also assert their authority over Frank, who is barely able even to go through the motions.

These events set up a series of failed attempts by Frank to establish new rituals through which he might honour his father's death. These rituals fail because Frank's aim is to deny rather than accept their death: '[h]e wanted both of them to rise from the dead' (204). The series begins with his gathering and eating of his father's stray hairs, with denial expressed through his screaming of 'the only prayer he knew: *Come back, Daddy. Come back, Daddy. Come back, Daddy*' (204). Frank returns to basketball, quits his job, becomes addicted to exercise, reads a book a day, shuns all contact with family and friends, and all the while plays basketball to the point of exhaustion. This stems directly from Harrison's reaction to Helen's death, which was to stay 'active like a shark: *Don't stop moving or you die*' (199). Frank's

compulsion to remain active indicates his inability to confront the inevitable presence of ‘Mr. Death’ (197), or in Dickinson’s terms, his inability to ‘stop for Death’. Indeed, Alexie’s favourite poem shows its thematic influence in this story, as Frank, like the protagonist of ‘Because I could not stop for death’ (Dickinson 219-20), denies death by withdrawing from the pursuit of a meaningful existence. As Frank replaces life with a ‘disappear[ance] into the ritual’ (210), so Dickinson’s Death escorts the protagonist past the life time from which she withdrew in her refusal to acknowledge Death.

Preacher’s blunt honesty about Frank’s descent into denial takes the form of an attack on his ‘dying of terminal nostalgia’, also described as ‘a cancer [that] will fill your heart up with tumors’ (228). As the ‘thump, thump, thump’ of the basketball reminds him of the cardiac fibrillation that first allowed ‘Mr. Death’ to ‘[enter his] house and [rearrange] the furniture’, Preacher repeatedly mocks Frank’s age, and so he is confronted with the past, present, and future truth that ‘everybody’s going to catch [death]’ (226, 197, 228). Although Frank’s subsequent hunger strike is designed to hasten death, this is simply another withdrawal from the possibility of honouring his parents’ past with a meaningful future. Frank eventually manages to engage with the present after therapy and enrolment at a community college, but still needs to sustain a severe injury playing basketball before he can sing ‘good-bye’ to his parents (243).⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Frank’s withdrawal into grief bears a striking resemblance to Daniel Heath Justice’s articulation of the psychological effects of colonialism: Empires can’t survive by acknowledging complexity, so whatever complications they can’t destroy are, if possible, commodified, co-opted, and turned back against themselves. The struggle to uproot imperialism then too often becomes myopic, as the colonized in many cases too often seek to find expedient, simplistic solutions to their many difficulties. (Critics Collective 155-6)

Despite his seemingly subjective experiences of grief and mourning, Frank represents a retreat from the confrontation with death that the story implies is necessary for him to imagine his future. 'Do Not Go Gentle' depicts a very different approach to grief, modelled upon the Dylan Thomas poem evoked by the title. Both texts immediately confront the reader with death, and both of their narrators understand the anger and frustration that can accompany impending death. The perspective of Thomas' poem, which famously features a man's passionate address to his dying father, is shifted in Alexie's story, which is narrated by a man witnessing the near death of his baby boy. Thomas' poem justifies the deaths of wise, good, wild, and grave men, in order to argue that the rage and emotional ferocity that characterises the father should surely initiate his revival. The son's affirmation of bonds is motivated by that which the poem suggests were unwelcome paternal characteristics, and we can find a similarly unexpected moment of understanding from Alexie's narrator, when he overhears two men with terminally ill children commenting on the ugliness of a 'fat mom' (98). Despite wanting 'to scream at them for being as shallow and dirty as a dog dish', the narrator reflects on their dying children, and understands that '[a] father with a sick child is like an angry god' (99). Echoing Thomas' narrator's justifications for the deaths of other men, grief overwhelms these men to the point at which 'it feels good to hurt somebody else' (97).

The narrator's approach to defeating Mr. Grief, the story's personification of death, is one of the most striking and memorable images in Alexie's body of work. Wielding a 'miracle vibrator' called 'Chocolate Thunder, which is 'dark brown and fifteen inches long and needed a nine-volt battery', the narrator and his wife engage

the entire fourth floor of the hospital in ‘laughing and hooting...casting spells’ and singing songs (100). This submission of the living to the artificial is prefigured by the infant’s preservation by medical equipment; the expected somatic effect of the vibrator is certainly more instantly available than that of those machines and wires surrounding the hospital bed. The vibrator, a symbol of purely sexual satisfaction and individual choice, becomes a totemistic extension of the father’s need for agency within this apparently uncontrollable situation. This shift in the meaning of the vibrator, or rather, a shift of meaning onto the vibrator, allows the object to become excessive not only in size, but in function. The vibrator is not meaningful because it represents sexuality, but because it is seen as a symbol of the pursuit of happiness. The rhythm of the vibrator pounded on the drum is an attempt to create some order from the chaos of grief and machinery that surrounds the parents. The vibrator is a symbol of excesses, of life, of sex, against grief, being the excess of death. Grief is here shown to occur most powerfully when death is in excess, when death appears to contradict reproductive norms, or rather, norms of vitality, of living prior to dying. In this case, in the hospital area devoted to dying children, there lies an absolute excess of death, so Mr. Grief is omnipresent. In the case of one who had lived a normal lifespan, grief may be tempered by the knowledge that the dead, at least, lived; that the dead, whilst living, experienced joy, sadness, pleasure, pain, in other words, those aspects of living that might make one aware of life and mortality. When death interrupts a life still unable to reflect upon those experiences, this is when grief is depicted at its peak: ‘my wife and I were all the way grieving’ (97). The battle against Mr. Grief is here depicted in contrast to Thomas’ poem and the story of

Frank, being a creative and communal experience that forms multiple bonds where they are needed most.

These stories depict approaches to grief that are directly informed by the characters' positions as Indians in the city. Frank's rush to a personal trainer and sourcing of multiple basketball games per week are only possible in a highly populated area with a significant population of health-conscious individuals. The city is here presented as a place of threats and anonymity that nearly engulfs Frank, yet it's also a place of education, jobs, community events and savings. The dying children of 'Do Not Go Gentle' are 'hooked up to a million dollars' worth of machines' in Seattle's Children's Hospital, which is directly contrasted with the extreme poverty of the narrator's wife's extended family (96). The narrator's wife's employment in the city is seen as a direct fight against the death of their child, suggesting the importance of finding a job to survival. The songs they create are, of course, inspired and accompanied by the vibrator that the narrator finds after he ends up at a sex shop. The implication of the sex shop, or even of the kids' toy store that the narrator imagines it to be, is increased leisure time and disposable income. The engagement of the hand drum by the vibrator, and of the entire intensive care unit by the wife's singing 'like ten thousand Indian grandmothers', are symbols, possibly 'blasphemous', of the possibilities for Indian people to maintain and advance their individual and communal identities in the city. This may be as far removed from the prescriptions of *The Mourner's Book* so as to be anti-conduct literature, advocating creative expression of grief in a community of grieverers behaving freely as they face death in its most personally destructive form.

This emphasis on the subjectivity of both individual experiences of grief and knowledge about those experiences in others can be described as a phenomenological explanation of responses to grief and mourning. Phenomenology as a philosophy is primarily articulated through the early twentieth century writings of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger⁶⁶, and can be broadly characterised as investigations into the relationships between objects and their meanings. The suggestion, again broadly, is that the meaning of objects is a product of human experience, in that the object becomes ‘objectivated’, and thereby gains meaning, through the intuitions of human ‘regard’. Husserl writes that ‘[a]ny possible object – logically speaking, “*any subject of possible true predications*” - has, prior to all predicative thinking, precisely *its* modes of becoming the object of an objectivating, an intuiting regard which perhaps reaches it in its “personal selfhood,” which “seizes upon” it’ (Husserl 10). Husserl thus describes the findings of phenomenology as affirming the embedded nature of human experience, which places individual perceptions of objects within a nexus of similarly perceptive subjectivities. This claim against objectivity can be seen as a precursor to late twentieth century theories that pointed out the narrative and perspectival elements of those writings about nature and human society that are typically taken to present unbiased, objective truth. Hayden White’s assessment in *Metahistory* (1973) of nineteenth-century historical writing as typically conforming to a ‘verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes’ (3), and Jean-François Lyotard’s famous definition of postmodernism as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Lyotard xxiv), which takes as subjective those principles of

⁶⁶ Husserl 1983[1913] and Heidegger 1996 [1927].

social organisation such as Christianity, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, are two such examples.

Writing on phenomenology is appropriately dense, and it can be quite a challenge, particularly in the work of Heidegger, to find standalone definitions. Again, this is appropriate for studies that assert embeddedness as a defining condition of human experience, and whilst it is hoped that these general articulations will suffice, I find it helpful in a literary context to consider phenomenology in relation both to the above ideas, characteristic of postmodernist thought, and that of reader-response theory, as articulated by Stanley Fish in his *Is There a Text in this Class?* (1980). According to his articulation of this theory of linguistic interpretation, ‘the objectivity of the text is an illusion’ (Fish 43), in the sense that a single reading of a text cannot claim to be more true than another, providing both readings are sufficiently backed by argumentation and textual examples. Fish goes on to claim that ‘the reader’s activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded not as leading to meaning but as *having* meaning’ (158). The act of reading is so thoroughly mediated by the unique character of the individual reader that it becomes an investment of meaning from the reader into the text. For example, my interpretation of Dickinson’s poem above can be seen as my investment of a particular meaning into the poem that simply serves the purposes of this chapter. Whether or not you choose to accept this reading as meaningful depends on your participation or rejection of what Fish calls an ‘interpretive community’ (338), being a limited constituency of readers that share certain interpretive strategies in order (at least temporarily) to stabilise meaning. To relate this back to phenomenology, I suggest that this prioritisation of the reader’s response is broadly analogous to the

phenomenological prioritisation of the human subject as necessarily creating meaning for an object simply through perception of that object. There are certainly problems with this order of philosophies, the most common being that in denying objectivity they effectively refute their own authoritative position. A further problem regards relativism, in that accepting the subjectivity of meaning and knowledge destabilises the foundations upon which several arguably universally welcome human rights have been established, such as the right not to be murdered, or the right to freedom of speech. At this point, an understanding of phenomenology is useful insofar as it asserts the crucial role of the subject in making (or applying) meaning to his or her perceptions of events.

Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1996 [1927]) derives an ethical stance from phenomenology by asserting that to exist as a human is to exist temporarily, that is, as always already subject to death, which he calls 'being-toward-death' (234). He is particularly critical of what he sees as '*tranquillization about death*' in society, which averts the individual perspective 'away from death' and 'at the same time justifies itself and makes itself respectable by silently ordering the way in which *one* is supposed to behave toward death in general' (235). This '*flight from death*' may also be discerned in any acts or opinions that obscure 'what is peculiar to the certainty of death, *that it is possible in every moment*' (235, 238). For Heidegger then, the 'authentic' approach to 'being-toward-death' (240) is to confront death as the inevitable end of individual temporalities, and as the constant presence that each individual must uniquely anticipate (and by which each individual is uniquely anticipated). When we confront our individual mortality with a sense of positivity and possibility, we thus seek to live freely and ethically in anticipation of death.

Again, without extended quotation it is difficult to convey the layers of Heidegger's argument, but the important idea to be taken from this is that the subjective experience that is so valuable to phenomenology here finds its complete, ethical expression in the acceptance of death, and that models of grieving and conduct literature represent denials of death that suppress the urgency of individual responsibility to others.

In light of this phenomenological approach to death, we can find further affirmation of the wrongheadedness of Frank's solipsistic death-denying approach to the deaths of his parents, and the approval of the creative death-confronting approach taken by the father in 'Do Not Go Gentle'. Vivian M. Rakoff contends that the 'degree of American denial [of death] may be greater than that in other societies' (Mack 160), explaining that

America has its own death myths, its own way of coping with the terror. While the stereotype lacks universal applicability, there is a dominant eschatology. There are still individuals and communities who mourn and memorialize as in Middle Europe or in the mainland China of the past, and who share the patterns of fear of death and belief in a possible afterlife of traditional societies; but America conjured into its superficial stereotype is a country of the eternal now, of the young, face lifting, good teeth into the seventies, old ladies in Bermuda shorts, hair coloured at will, endless euphemisms for chronic disease, affliction and death. (Mack 150)

Alexie's urban Indian fiction refuses to allow the denial of death, exposing the moral redundancy of death myths such as that of Frank Snake Church with unashamed bluntness. The unnamed female Spokane Indian protagonist of 'Can I Get A Witness?' claims that one such death myth was initiated by the public perception and media coverage of the events of September 11th, 2001 (hereafter referred to as 9/11). The woman survives a suicide bombing of the restaurant in Seattle at which she is having lunch, and is helped by the unnamed white male

protagonist back to his apartment. Their discussion of the death mythology of 9/11 is prefigured by the expectation following the explosion that ‘skyscrapers [would] come crashing down’ and ‘airplanes... fall out of the sky and catch the city on fire’ (*Ten Little Indians* 73). Despite his apparent charity, the man is depicted as cowardly and personally invested in the conservative media’s coverage of 9/11, thinking that the woman’s ‘long black hair and brown skin and brown eyes’ might indicate that ‘she was Iraqi or Saudi Arabian or Afghani... a Muslim terrorist who’d exploded the restaurant and was using him to make her escape’ (77). As they relate to each other via their activities on 9/11, the woman states that she doesn’t ‘think everybody who died in the tower was innocent’, and that ‘[m]aybe they did deserve to die’ (89). Her reasoning is sound and brutal: ‘[d]on’t you think, somewhere in the towers, there was an evil bastard who sneaked into his daughter’s bedroom at night and raped her in the ass?’ (89). Challenging the myth of innocence attributed to the dead, she imagines ‘the wife and kids...praying to God he died. That he burned to death or jumped out a window or was running down the stairs when the tower fell’ (92-3). Alexie here confronts the reader with the layers of emotionally exploitative media coverage of these events that constitute a ritual denial of human subjectivity, being in this case the capacity of the individual to invest events with meaning according to his or her particular perspective. The woman’s admission that she’d hoped to walk away from the earlier bombing towards a new life as an innocent victim, presumed dead, finds hope and the possibility of renewal in violence and death, and again points to the sheer variety of responses that were precluded by media coverage of 9/11.⁶⁷ This story recalls both Ward Churchill’s controversial response, which relates the 9/11

⁶⁷ See Faludi 2007 for a critical discussion of the media coverage, which I look at briefly in chapter five.

attacks to increasingly violent U.S. foreign policy and describes those killed in the World Trade Center as ‘little Eichmanns’ whose ‘penalty [was] befitting’ (2001 n. pag.), and Alexie’s less controversial but similarly demythologising speech on October 10th 2001, in which he states that ‘the world is not any better or worse since September 11th...the only difference is, now we know what the rest of the world feels like’.⁶⁸ Alexie’s reflections on ‘different ideas of death...from culture to culture’ are extraordinarily moving and particularly relevant to this discussion of the subjective experience of death. He concludes his speech by urging his audience to ‘go find somebody you disagree with and go hang out’. The multitude of responses to death represented in the Seattle of *Ten Little Indians* place the reader in the position to do exactly that.

Judith Butler describes the political ramifications of the ways in which the U.S. mediates and reflects upon on death as follows:

There are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be. If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition. ... I think we have to ask, again and again, how the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which life becomes noteworthy. The matter is not a simple one, for, if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note. It is already the unburied, if not the unburiable. (2004 34)

Butler’s emphasises the shared aspects of grief in order to argue for an ethics derived from the commonality of vulnerability, and her notion of the un-grievable life as ‘not quite a life’ implies a personal responsibility to make one’s life worthy of grief. At the same time, Butler’s ‘icon for national self-recognition’ is not necessarily

⁶⁸ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WUA8vL1L5Q>

a positive conception, as the excessive publicising of 9/11 deaths in the name of U.S. innocence conflated the individual lives and perspectives of the dead into a collective obituary with a presupposed response. From the televised outpourings of suspiciously patriotic grief lampooned in Alexie's 9/11 speech, to the obituary pages of a local newspaper,⁶⁹ the public representations of a life after death in mass media can thus be seen as further encouragements towards standardised, accepted, and even nationalistic modes of preemptive mourning. Butler does not mention the oppressive strategies of the U.S. towards Indian peoples, despite the contemporary role of performances of official grief in attempting to bury the atrocities committed on domestic soil. Pauline Wakeham argues that the 'War on Terror' that was justified by such public displays implying the innocence of U.S. victims is 'intimately interconnected' with the 'age of apologies', being 'the rise of a worldwide phenomenon of reconciliation and apology' in recent years (1). With reference to case studies from New Zealand and Canada that highlight the use of anti-terrorist rhetoric and legislation in oppressing indigenous peoples, Wakeham demonstrates that

[a]lthough reconciliation initiatives could hold radically transformative potential, dominant formulations – as articulated by a range of actors, including settler states and mainstream media – have tended to foreclose alternative meanings and co-opt apologies as a strategy of containment, thereby seeking to manage Indigenous calls for social change by substituting rhetorical gestures of atonement for more radical processes of redistributive justice or political power sharing. (2)

The official apology thus functions as an end to dialogue, prescribing the terms in which the affected parties will mourn. That this takes place in public ensures

⁶⁹ See 'Salt' in *War Dances*, the story of a young male who writes the obituary for the obituaries editor.

an appearance of openness and reconciliation, and so casts negative responses to the apology as bitter and ungrateful. Wakeham also points to the possibility that if the affected parties do not mourn in the prescribed fashion, then their cultural authenticity may be questioned.

‘The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire’ dramatises the official response to grief as a cynical, commercial appropriation of Spokane history. Following Thomas’s moving story of Qualchan, hanged by Colonel Wright along with six other innocent Indians, the judge asks him ‘what point’ he is trying to make (*The Lone Ranger...* 99-9). Thomas states that ‘The City of Spokane is now building a golf course named after me, Qualchan, located in that valley where I was hanged’ (*The Lone Ranger...* 99). The courtroom ‘burst[s] into motion and emotion’, and the judge forces the protesters out of the court. The Native presence silenced, Thomas asks if this is ‘real justice or the idea of justice’ (100-1), again suggesting the subjectivity of official, public responses to grief.

This chapter read Alexie’s urban Indian various stories of grief and mourning in dialogue with prescriptive conduct literature and celebrated poetic descriptions of dying. By representing the varied responses of his Indian characters to death, Alexie asserts the right of the individual to grieve and mourn in the manner that they deem appropriate, whilst alluding to the subjective nature of all expressions of grief, from public mourning to official apology. Although these representations appear to leave the reader with an ethics of relativism, the aesthetic impact of the grief and mourning depicted in these stories activates an ethical response to mortality in the reader, towards a consideration of his or her place in relation to others. Indeed, despite the importance placed here on grieving as you wish, acceptance only arrives for Alexie’s

urban Indian characters with community, which can be difficult to find and accept as an Indian in the city.

Chapter five focusses on *Flight*, Alexie's most recent adult novel, discerning an antiwar politics in its representations of time travel and trauma.

Chapter Five

“You keep your sorrow to yourself” – Time and Trauma in *Flight*

During the final pages of Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* (2007), the troubled urban Indian protagonist and narrator, Zits, renounces his criminal past, finds the perfect foster family, and declares his real name. After an idealised re-enactment of the disastrous opening chapter, this rebirth is symbolically and climactically completed when Zits’ beautiful new mother figure, Mary, helps apply skin treatments that will make him ‘brand-new’; an act of maternal kindness that leaves Zits helpless and crying as a newborn in Mary’s arms, begging her forgiveness, and pleading that she call him ‘Michael’ (180). Now warmly ensconced in loving domesticity, Michael has finally filled the voids left by his absent biological parents, and so his narrative is poignantly concluded. Yet following the novel’s nauseating onslaught of time travel, torturous executions and political terrorism, even Alexie admits that the appearance of this ideal family is something of a *deus ex machine*, a sudden and unconvincing artifice resulting from his professed choice of ‘politics over art’. Indeed, Alexie claims to have written first a ‘tragic ending’ that he considers ‘superior artistically’, but which was not ‘socially responsible’ given his ‘influence and power...in the native world’ (Giese, cbc.ca).

It’s a dilemma that makes Alexie ‘squirm’, a choice that he ‘regret[s]’, and an admission that raises several questions faced by even a twenty-first century ethnic writer. Is it ‘socially responsible’ to produce artistically inferior fictional work in order to promulgate a particular political message to a specific, presupposed readership? Does a ‘tragic ending’ necessarily weaken a political message? Can the ethnic writer legitimately assume the transmission and receipt of an intended

interpretation of his fictional work amongst the readers of his culture? We hardly need delve deep into Derrida to respond to each with a swift and emphatic no. The novel is not a treatise, and (at the very least in this case) the wilful damaging of its artistic integrity in an attempt to make it into one will only serve to confuse and weaken any potential political message, which might gain fullness and impact from a consistent aesthetic.⁷⁰ Indeed, many would consider the ‘tragic ending’ of a novel, when consistent with the preceding content, to have a greater political impact upon the reader than a happier one, in that the former aesthetic might, for example, vividly and emotively dramatise the dreadful consequences of adherence to a perceived ideology, deemed untenable by the author, at whatever remove from the socio-political context of the text’s production, inviting rather than enacting resolution. Even with this in mind, unless the author of fiction is specifically working under the influence of a patron or patrons, which I am (perhaps naïvely) certain Alexie is not, then any assumptions regarding the reception of one particular political message as valid run fatally into the various interpretive problems presented by that most heterogeneous and unpredictable of imagined groups: the audience.

The notion then, that Alexie here chooses ‘politics over art’ is highly contentious, as this late interpolation of an uplifting message (that with the right care even the disenfranchised can be metaphorically reborn to function in a society established as normal) in fact serves to lessen the impact of the consistent antiwar politics already entangled in and revealed through the traumatic aesthetic he so boldly and compellingly creates. Furthermore, the decision to provide a ‘socially

⁷⁰ Of course, a novel might be consistently inconsistent with itself in its genre, or its politics, but as we shall see, *Flight* is not such a novel.

responsible' conclusion for 'the native world' could conceivably prove just the opposite, frustrating and alienating those who, in reality, cannot expect the sudden imposition of good fortune, wealth, and familial love. The possibility of resolution is not the problem here; rather it is the sudden, glamorous falsity of that resolution as it masks a brutal narrative of personal trauma.

We shall return to this end, but in order to adequately understand the reasons for its apparent demerits, it is crucial to assess *Flight* for its aesthetic and political promise. It is my contention that the novel's largest and most urgent ethical claims may be found not in a reading of the text as a morality tale through which Michael is redeemed and reborn, but rather as a trauma narrative that deconstructs the fallacious personal and social reasoning at the root of Zits' victimisation and psychosis, and at the same time exposes such conflation of purpose as the source of mass cultural conflicts, i.e. war. It is in this way that the chosen aesthetic form of *Flight* in fact reveals a consistent antiwar politics.

War, of course, is in turn the catastrophic source of traumas severe and multifarious, and as Cathy Caruth notes, provides 'the central and recurring image' by which we might define 'trauma', being '[t]he experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him... who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in nightmares' (1991 181). To be clear, the experience of 'sudden and massive death' is the trauma or traumatic event, whilst the repeated 'nightmares' are the latent responses to that event: the traumatic symptoms. So Caruth gives a 'general definition' of trauma, which 'describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations

and other intrusive phenomena' (1991 181). Freud's psychoanalytical approach to overcoming these symptoms (which he termed 'Nachträglichkeit') consisted, typically, of the talking cure, to return to and narrate those experiences, lost to an unprepared consciousness at the moment of impact, so reintegrating traumatic experience into a fuller, more comprehensible personal history. Without this therapy, be it in the form of direct or indirect discussion, the traumatic event will continually (and compulsively) disrupt the present of the victim, in the form of dreams and memory fragments.

Psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman similarly asserts the importance of narration to this temporal disturbance and realignment, explaining that '[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims' (1). Whilst an individual (or indeed a 'social order') may seek comfort in denial, such strategic avoidance allows 'terrible events' to dominate the existence from an almost mythic past beyond ethical engagement, responsibility and action. Herman explains that '[t]he ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness', marking them as 'unspeakable' (1), yet the relegation of traumatic experiences to the realm of the unspeakable necessarily affords those 'atrocities' the power to silence and ostracise the sufferer. The act of narrating a traumatic past exposes the often horrifying reality of human fallibility and ethical failure, though in doing so renders coherent the traumatic effects of that past upon the present, and establishes grounds against which to work recursively in the future.

The writer of the trauma narrative has a clear but unconventional aesthetic task in mind, as (s)he attempts to represent the psychological effects of what

Dominick LaCapra defines as the 'disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence' (2001 41). Canonical examples of twentieth century fictional trauma narratives include Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1969), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1993). The novels on this short list together tackle the physical and psychological trauma of war, slavery, domestic violence and sexual abuse. Though the fiction may be very close to fact, the imaginative devices of creative writing (allusion, symbol, idiom etc.) and often non-linear narrative structuring not only grant the reader aesthetic access to traumatic events, but also to the effects of those events upon the human psyche. The basic function of the trauma narrative is as a form of therapy: to revisit and speak the unspeakable, so reintegrating the traumatic past into the present, yet unlike personal therapy, the aesthetic task is often clearly driven by broader, political motivations. Laurie Vickroy explains that as '[t]rauma can be a powerful indicator of oppressive cultural institutions and practices', so '[t]rauma narratives are often concerned with human-made traumatic situations and are implicit critiques of the ways social, economic, and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma' (4). Though Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) is a non-fictional study of personal traumas, it similarly (and continually) asserts the importance of the narration of traumatic experience to recovery, whilst making the wider claim that 'the study of psychological trauma is an inherently political enterprise because it calls attention to the experience of oppressed people' (237). Herman's study is of particular importance to a reading of *Flight*, as it deals specifically with the repercussions of

childhood sexual abuse and the difficulties (both psychological and political) in recovering from such trauma. No matter its version of social justice, the representation of trauma (fictional or factual) typically works to remind the reader that ‘unspeakable’ acts are still performed, and their indicted perpetrators must be condemned.

In *Flight*, those perpetrators are everywhere. Alexie’s shortest novel still finds time for graphic depictions of warfare, genital mutilation and fatal infant neglect. To make matters worse, these scenes are all witnessed by an orphaned fifteen year old boy, whose personal history of continually unsuccessful urban fostering is scarred by drugs, alcohol, violence and sexual abuse. At the point of committing mass murder, so creating trauma afresh, the novel has Zits travel through time, in order that he (and we) might bear witness to the effects of historical hatred and violence of which he has become a perpetrator in his wretched present. These time-travelling misadventures may best be understood as hallucinations, the most extreme psychological symptoms of Zits’ severe childhood trauma, namely his being raped (at least) twice by those responsible for his care.

From the opening of the novel, Zits’ breakdown into insanity is rapid, as he struggles with what Herman calls the ‘central dialectic of trauma’, being ‘[t]he conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud’ (1). Zits tells us that he is ‘dying from ninety-nine kinds of shame’ (4) yet wants ‘everybody to pay attention to [him]’ (7), though the causes of his desolation are repressed and generalised to absent parents, lost heritage, and being ‘partially raised by too many people’ (6). Herman explains that traumatic events may ‘shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others...and cast

the victim into a state of existential crisis' (51). Indeed, Zits imagines his life as a meaningless 'series of cruel bastards and airplane crashes' in which he is the 'flaming jet, crashing into each new foster family' (11). Zits' 'existential crisis' is perhaps overstated during his introduction, as he confesses that he '[doesn't] understand human beings' (12), and only defines himself explicitly as negative space: 'a blank sky, a human solar eclipse' (5), yet this does emphasise that whilst the social effects of his traumatic history might be painfully clear, the full range of causes remains abstracted. Zits believes that not having his parents there to teach him 'how to be Irish or Indian' (5) leaves him without purpose, yet 'ashamed of everything' (8). These confused inferences continue as he wonders, whilst counting the spots that seem to construct and arrange his facial features, whether it is 'loneliness' or 'being Indian' that 'causes acne' (4). It is, of course, neither, but Zits' accounting for personal difficulties by subsuming them to wider, potentially social causes, though perhaps humorously typical of a teenager, masks a refusal to consider the psychological wounds that are the deeper cause of his loneliness.

It is the notion of being *indian* onto which Zits grasps in his attempts to achieve some semblance of identity and social function, though such attempts are misguided and unsuccessful. His research on 'famous chiefs, broken treaties, the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Indian wars of the nineteenth century' is entirely 'learned from television', and undertaken 'because it makes [him] feel more like a real Indian' (12). This obsession is clearly an unsatisfactory substitution of anachronistic, conflict-ridden history for contemporary, lived experience, and though Zits sees media representations of 'how [Indians] are supposed to live now' (12), these constructions are far removed from his life as an

urban ‘drunk’ amongst the ‘homeless Indians’ (7). Zits’ crisis of origins is compounded by a need to somehow identify with the ‘real Indians’ he sees on television, who are likely to be *indians*, whilst creating an unhappy place for himself amongst ‘the only [Indians] who pay attention to [him]’ (7). Alongside Zits’ claim that he ‘could easily beat 99 percent of the world in a Native American version of Trivial Pursuits’ (12), this testifies to his desperation for a history with which he might identify, at the expense of forming the meaningful ‘real-life’ personal relationships required to establish dialogue, autonomy and ‘the restoration of a sense of personal worth’ (Herman 63), so necessary for recovery from his trauma.

Zits maintains an apparently impenetrable barrier against those familial connections allocated to him in the city; manifested verbally in his universal, mantra-like retort: ‘Whatever’ (13, 14). Prior to his ‘flight’ through time, this instant recalcitrance becomes a meta-narrative for Zits, against and through which his every interaction is tested. The only reprieve from this guiding, filtering principle is granted to ‘[g]ood cops’, whom Zits sees as ‘lifeguards on the shores of Lake Fucked’ that ‘want to create order in the world’ (18). Zits craves the moral stability represented by law enforcement, perceiving in the police an externally fixed understanding of what is right and wrong, appearing to stand firm against the distrust and depravity that has thus far destroyed for him any sense of security. Zits seeks to test this order by committing crimes, as doing so establishes personal connections, alongside a kind of foundation, against which he might understand his place in the world.

Yet blocking these relationships remain the repressed memories of the trauma that makes *Flight* particularly harrowing: again, Zits is almost certainly raped twice

during his childhood; first by his aunt's boyfriend, immediately following his mother's death (161); later by one of his twenty-one foster fathers (75). Zits is unable to account for his feelings of shame and loneliness without first '[r]emembering and telling the truth about' the sexual abuse (1), and the recovery and narration of these repressed memories forms the victim-specific 'purpose' of the novel. Despite his withdrawal from all other relationships, Zits' utter desperation for the security of a meaningful, unsanctioned relationship leads him to create his first explicitly delusional coping fiction, being the character of 'Justice'. This character, a psychological symptom of repression that encourages violence, provides a fine example of the novel's antiwar politics being woven into its aesthetic of trauma.

Herman explains that '[t]he pathological environment of childhood abuse forces the development of extraordinary capacities, both creative and destructive. It fosters the development of abnormal states of consciousness in which the ordinary relations of body and mind, reality and imagination, knowledge and memory, no longer hold' (98).⁷¹ 'Justice' (perhaps a little too blatantly) is the personification of a warped sense of justice as imagined by Zits, and appears as a white boy whom he claims to meet in 'kid jail' (19). Since 'Justice' is created as a coping mechanism, this manifestation treats Zits with '[r]eal kindness' (21), listens to him, and almost immediately instils in him a sense of calm. 'Justice' is imagined by Zits as an older, wiser protector, comforting him with the tranquil certainties that are apparently the results of a higher understanding of human nature. 'Justice' is a composite figment, a non-character rendered vague by his 'translucent', androgynous appearance (21), his constant recourse to aphorisms, and his continuous self-contradiction. Though

⁷¹ A comparable manifestation of trauma symptoms can be found in Pecola Breedlove's dialogue with her imaginary companion in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

‘Justice’ claims to be seventeen, to Zits he is ageless, a ‘grandfather’ who ‘seems like he’s lived for two thousand years’ (23-24). The inconsistency (and inconstancy) of Zits’ creation is certainly understandable. ‘Justice’ is constructed and compiled by a traumatised boy who learns facts without dialogue or context; ‘science, history, geography, and politics from the TV’; who is ‘living a new life without new books’ (12). Earlier, Zits states that ‘there has never been a human being or a television show, no matter how great, that could measure up to a great book’ (12), and indeed ‘Justice’ is more book than human, personal opinion being replaced by philosophical and historical quotation. Zits’ attachment to his creation is such that he ‘fall[s] in love with him’, and believes ‘[‘Justice’] could save the whole world from being lonely’ (24). Zits’ disconnection from society is so severe that he sees world salvation in simple companionship.

In order to repress the painful memories of his sexual abuse, Zits uses this imaginary figure to explain the anger and confusion of his existence without reference to the sexual violence of his past, which allows him to remain in denial whilst acting against directly unrelated injustices. Herman tells us that ‘[f]eelings of rage and murderous revenge fantasies are normal responses to abusive treatment’, as is the tendency to ‘displace...anger far from its dangerous source and to discharge it unfairly on those who did not provoke it’ (104). So the function of ‘Justice’ is to identify alternative perpetrators to whom Zits might apportion blame, under whose vaguely articulated evil Zits might understand his victimhood. Zits feels that only then will he be able to comprehend his negative attitude and actions as symptomatic of this newly centralised problem, so purging himself of the need to recover memories of his sexual abuse. Since Zits is unable to narrate his being raped, he

finds through 'Justice' a broader instance of injustice to blame for his inability to engage with others: his professed 'loneliness' and 'shame' (4). So the United States is envisioned as 'evil', and the blame is transferred from those specific abusers to a diffuse notion of the 'white evil' (25) that has suppressed and continues to oppress Zits' Indian identity.

'Justice' here is in a sense an agent of what Jeffrey C. Alexander calls 'cultural trauma', an accumulative sense of trauma felt by a social group who are not necessarily the direct victims of the traumatic experience. Such an agent is crucial to the adherence of this indirect trauma, as (s)he 'broadcast[s] symbolic characterisations of ongoing social events, past, present, and future' as part of 'a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution' (11). This 'trauma process can be likened...to a speech act' in which the 'goal of the speaker is persuasively to project the trauma claim to the audience-public...mak[ing] use of the particularities of the historical situation, the symbolic resources at hand, and the constraints and opportunities provided by institutional structures' (Alexander 11-12). As a figment of Zits' traumatised imagination, 'Justice' performs exactly these functions. Having established the current relevance of the historical injustices carried out against American Indians, 'Justice' ensures that Zits carries out an horrendous and preposterous contemporary reworking of the Ghost Dance (discussed earlier in chapter one), convincing him that by indiscriminately killing white people he will locate and restore contact with his father and bring his mother back from the dead. So 'Justice' appeals to Zits' crisis of native identity, the yearning for his absent

parents, and his mostly misplaced anger towards the non-specific individuals and institutions that have destroyed his childhood. Whilst Alexander's contention is that the dissemination of cultural trauma is a positive step, ultimately making it possible for 'collectivities to define new forms of moral responsibility and to redirect the course of political action' (27), this assumes that that cultural trauma is being absorbed by a social group, who are able to collectively mediate and process that trauma. When 'Justice' professes to Zits his particular cultural trauma however, it is received by one already traumatised, existing in the resulting vacuum of social exclusion. Here then, cultural trauma functions in collusion with Zits' inability to articulate his personal trauma, registers trauma upon the traumatised, and in this twofold manifestation can only function as a destructive force.

Of course, this is not to suggest that American Indians have *not* been and are not *still* subjected to continued, inexcusable social and political oppression, nor to suggest that Zits has not been personally oppressed on account of his Indian heritage, but rather to note the ways in which these broader cultural issues are used by Zits to justify negative emotions and aggression, which are in fact caused by the repression of traumatic memories. Certainly Alexie is here asserting the crucial role of the listener in recovery from trauma (if Zits had only been granted adequate therapeutic attention, then his trauma might be unravelled before the destruction), but this is emphasised to greater effect later on, and the important political point to be grasped here regards the misdirection of blame that leads Zits to violence. By withdrawing from (yet all the while unconsciously drawing on) his lived experiences Zits extrapolates diffuse, social injustices from specific, personal injustices. For Zits (of whom this is no criticism), this withdrawal is symptomatic of his abuse; to return to

the terminology of Herman, by performing his Ghost Dance, Zits genuinely believes that he is articulating and addressing a ‘terrible truth’ of history and society, thereby achieving a ‘restoration of the social order and...the healing of individual victims.’ The notion here then, is that larger cultural conflicts may be traced back to an indiscriminate and misguided diffusion of unspoken personal conflicts, which might be ameliorated by a greater capacity to listen to those who feel persecuted. The concept of justice, like its characterisation here, is established as merely a vessel formed and filled by the attitudes and experiences of a dominant social group, to the potential exclusion of dissenters. Perhaps this is not a particularly revolutionary notion, but is certainly a relevant one, particularly in the context of the large-scale terrorist attacks later evoked during Zits’ journey through ‘time.’

Coming unstuck

His ‘flight’ begins just as Zits removes his guns and starts shooting. We are pulled back once more into his delusion, signalled by the (somewhat Lacanian) intrusion of one of his intended victims telling Zits that he is ‘not real’ (35). As Herman explains, some survivors of childhood abuse ‘develop a kind of dissociative virtuosity. They may learn...to hide their memories in complex amnesias, to alter their sense of time, place, or person, and to induce hallucinations or possession states. Sometimes these alterations of consciousness are deliberate, but often they become automatic and feel alien and involuntary’ (102). Zits displays precisely this ‘dissociative virtuosity’ at the point at which he imagines his own death, so beginning an involuntary, hallucinatory flight through imagined time.

Alexie at least partly owes his idea of unexpected time travel as a manifestation of psychological trauma to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). This is acknowledged via the epigram of *Flight*: 'Po-tee-weet?',⁷² which references the final line of Vonnegut's novel. This closing (and opening) snippet of birdsong reminds the reader that 'there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre', which is supposed to excuse both novels for being 'so short and jumbled and jangled' (Vonnegut 14). So with the close of *Slaughterhouse-Five* Alexie initiates *Flight*, and it is worth considering the portrayal of psychological trauma in this precedent text, along with the restorative power of the imagination, before continuing to assess their presence in *Flight*.

Almost in defiance of the surrounding text, the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, whom we are told is the author Kurt Vonnegut (91, 108), doubts he will ever finish writing his novel (this novel) about the fire-bombing of Dresden. During the twenty-three years since returning from WWII, he has written at least 'five thousand pages...and thrown them all away' (11). The frustration here stems not only from the inadequacy of the written form to convey the extremes of his experiences, but also from a sharp sense of time and timeliness. For the anti-war writer, the importance of the anti-war message can be articulated and understood neither too soon nor too often. At the time of publication, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was received as part of a powerful reaction to the ongoing and much protested Vietnam War. Indeed, the novel features as part of its dense metafiction reference to a novel, 'Gutless Wonders', about robots with 'no conscience [...] dropping burning jellied gasoline on human

⁷² This seems to be a typo, as the birdcall is written by Vonnegut in both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* (1965) as 'Poo-tee-weet?', though admittedly this is a rather trivial fact.

beings' (122); this is a clear representation of napalm. Yet the novel is not specifically anti-Vietnam; it depicts such conscious destruction throughout history⁷³, incorporating the Prussian siege of Dresden in 1760 (13) and invoking the 13th century 'Children's Crusade' as its subtitle (briefly chronicled 12). *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an extraordinary novel not only because it so vividly and movingly evokes the horrors and injustices of war, but because it does so through the patchwork tale of a time-travelling, alien-encountering, pornstar-bedding optometrist called Billy Pilgrim.

Vonnegut's apparent adoption of the science fiction mode is in fact initiated and propelled by a narrative of intense personal psychological trauma; Pilgrim's mental flight from outer reality and (perhaps) responsibility being a disturbing revelation of the lasting psychological havoc that war may wreak upon its witnesses and participants. Psychological trauma receives an indirect, metafictional attention similar to that of napalm above when it features in another of fictional sci-fi writer Kilgore Trout's novels, 'Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension', 'about people whose mental diseases couldn't be treated because the causes of the diseases were all in the fourth dimension, and three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn't see those causes at all, or even imagine them' (Vonnegut 75). In this respect, the fourth dimension is simply time. These 'diseases' then, rather than being physical ailments, are diseases of time, that is, the sufferer is not experiencing the present as they should. The mental disease here referred to is psychological trauma, specifically post-war trauma, from which Pilgrim suffers so seriously that at any moment he is liable to mentally 'return' to WWII.

⁷³ Though napalm use became emblematic of U.S. aggression during the Vietnam War, it was developed for use during WWII but abandoned due to (financial) costs.

This notion of the fourth dimension as time takes as a popular fictional precedent H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895),⁷⁴ in which the Time Traveller creates a machine that can negotiate this fourth dimension, and so travel through time. In doing so, the Traveller discovers what he describes as the devolution of mankind; this is an apparent continuation of popular fin de siècle socio-political theories, such as Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892).⁷⁵ Though time travelling itself is perhaps not an overtly political act, the depiction of the will to experience a future state of existence (or re-experience a previous one, though Wells' Traveller never does so), combined with the judgements one casts relative to one's own time, certainly dramatises a political struggle with the present. Robert M. Philmus explains Wells' fourth dimension in time as 'a metaphor: it is the dimension open to the imagination', 'the dimension of prophecy', which 'provides a critical and comprehensive point of view from which to evaluate the present' (Philmus 534). For Philmus, the fourth dimension is time spent away from the present in imaginative contemplation and reflection. So, to take a famous example, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888) is an exercise in the fourth dimension, that of the prophetic imagination, looking to a potential future state of society in order to provide a perspective upon that of the present. Indeed, Bellamy's novel prompted a slew of 'fourth dimensional' responses engaging with the contained Christian socialist politics, the most well-known being William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890). It can be said, then, that much sci-fi and fantasy fiction operates within this

⁷⁴ The notion had been put forward with a little more drudgery in 1754 by Jean D'Alembert; an entry in the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences des Arts et des Métiers* (D'Alembert 1010).

⁷⁵ The definitions of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics some thirty years previously almost certainly came to influence Wells' linear depiction of time, Newton's cyclical notions having been replaced with entropic measurements of time, though some also assert the importance of eternalist metaphysics to the text.

fourth dimension, and that that which does not, such as realist and horror fiction, explicitly attempts to mirror or invade the present of the reader.

According to Kilgore Trout, the fourth dimension is that powerful realm of the imagination that contains ‘vampires and werewolves and goblins and angels...William Blake...heaven and hell’ (Vonnegut 75), those elements not physically part of one’s existence, but through and against which one might mentally define and evaluate the parameters of present, lived, human reality. A disease in this fourth dimension is therefore a disease affecting the imagination. Psychological trauma, then, may follow from the direct experience of the unimaginable, so exposing and testing the limits of the imagination. Doctors are specifically unable to provide aid here as there are no constants or standards in the imagination by which to diagnose, as there are in the physical world. Yet the disease of imagination here remains simultaneously the disease of time: the victim of trauma is unable to consider a realistic future due to the limitations imposed upon their imagination by a traumatic past. Judgement and interpretation of the present, therefore, is similarly restricted by an inability to imagine an existence that does not take the instance(s) of trauma as an utterly defining, near transcendental referent.

LaCapra explains that ‘in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities’ (1999 699). The sufferer of psychological trauma is anchored to a particular time in their life that dominates and impacts negatively upon their interpretation of the present, and thoughts of the future; the ‘here and now’ (at least episodically) becomes

secondary to the 'there and then'. For Pilgrim that anchoring time is composed of his experiences during WWII, for Zits it is his being raped. In order to recreate and engage the reader in the psychological effects of trauma, Alexie, like Vonnegut, has Zits, like Pilgrim, become 'unstuck' and 'spastic in time' (Vonnegut 17), his delusional temporal experience entirely governed by traumatic memories. Pilgrim's mental illness is such that his time-travel fantasy is for him simply another aspect of reality. Whilst the wartime memories are based on Pilgrim's lived WWII experiences, the future elements of his journeying are taken from Trout's science fiction novels, interpolated strategically within the novel. Pilgrim's traumatised imagination uses these stories to concoct a myth (the convolutions of 'fourth dimensional' alien intervention) to explain his inability to remain in the present, the 'normal' linear experience of which is refigured as an exclusively human illusion.

The 'fourth dimensional' disease of post-war trauma occurs when an individual is unable to reconcile the severity of their wartime experience with their domestic post-war existence. No cause is current or apparent, because that cause or those causes are internalised and manifested in the damaged imagination of the victim, which now controls and limits the ways in which he is able to interpret the present. Victims of trauma then, like Pilgrim and Zits, unable to live with constant reference to the horrors of war, and redefining each new experience in relation to a context of absolute suffering, may retreat from present reality into a timeless fantasy world of denial, or rather, free from the need for denial. Peter Suedfeld notes that traumatic stress can demand 'the utmost energization of coping resources' (850). So Pilgrim finds himself imagining complex interactions with the colourful Tralfamadorians: alien creatures who 'see in four dimensions' (Vonnegut 19), and are

able to ‘concentrate on the happy moments of [existence], and to ignore the unhappy ones’ (Vonnegut 142). This dramatises the same eternalist philosophy that may be found in *The Time Machine*, in which the chronological divisions of time are as arbitrary a human construction as the spatial divisions on a ruler. So the attachment of value to time, for instance, in expressing relief that a painful experience is in the past, is petty and unrealistic: there is no movement projecting to or stretching from the present; all moments exist simultaneously. In terms of Einstein’s general relativity, the Tralfamadorians exist in a state of rigid determinism, somehow standing outside what is known as the ‘spacetime manifold’, with moments being accessible in the same way as locations, though the ‘journey’ to moments in time is necessarily instantaneous, being free from spatial constraints.⁷⁶

Alberto Cacicedo discusses the political implications of Pilgrim’s time-travelling, telling us of two ‘schools’ of *Slaughterhouse-Five* criticism (357-8), being those who discern a sense of ethical duty within the novel, against those who find affirmed the antiethical; an ultimately quietist or purely aesthetic ‘Tralfamadorian’ stance. Cacicedo shares the critical view of the former, finding in Billy Pilgrim ‘a man who... finds a way to make his indignation work effectively toward ethical action’ (363), and arguing that Pilgrim’s journey through time reminds us that ‘every person has duties and responsibilities, which spring from one’s time-bound engagement in the world and are to that extent determined for us, but the performance of those take one beyond the limitations of linear time and of the world’ (365). Unlike the Tralfamadorians, Pilgrim cannot move freely in time, so simply ignoring the unpleasant moments is impossible. Indeed, Pilgrim’s horrific

⁷⁶ As with *The Time Machine*, the science here predates the fiction, and it is quite possible that Pilgrim’s Tralfamadorian delusion was influenced by Einstein’s most famous theory.

experiences remind the reader precisely why we feel the need to repress memories and deny events. For Cacicedo, Pilgrim's imagining and preaching of the Tralfamadorian narrative is an indirect method of engaging with the bombing of Dresden; of somehow integrating that traumatic experience into relative normality without contradiction or imbalance, so being able to function independently from that experience, and indeed act against its recurrence. Cacicedo explains that '[u]nlike the Tralfamadorians, Billy has a hard-won, time-bound, memorial sense of the horrors of life from which human beings cannot escape and in response to which they need tidings of comfort and joy' (365). Like the writer of the trauma narrative, Pilgrim, or rather, Pilgrim's imagination, manages to negotiate Herman's 'central dialectic', combining the denial and proclamation of 'horrible events' into a coherent assertion of responsibility, which he imagines delivering to a future full of willing listeners.

Just as Pilgrim creates a fictional narrative that allows him to integrate his trauma into his existence, so Zits creates fictional identities and scenes that, though initially dissociative, seem eventually to allow him to arrive at and tell the painful truth of his trauma. Both novels claim that the knowledge required to heal the disease of the 'fourth dimension' may only be found in that same 'dimension', using the imagination to construct a narrative that indirectly engages with traumatic memories. Whilst Pilgrim's imagined future is based on his readings of Trout's science-fictions, Zits constructs an imagined past from a conflation of cinema, fiction, historical re-enactments and Indian trivia. Though the events created by Zits have some parallels in 'real' American history, it is important to recognise that Zits is not literally being plunged through time and space to experience actual historical

events. Like Pilgrim, Zits' journey is entirely internal; it is a powerful, consuming psychological symptom of his trauma. This might seem fantastical, yet Herman notes that '[t]he language of the supernatural, banished for three hundred years from scientific discourse, still intrudes into the most sober attempts to describe the psychological manifestations of chronic childhood trauma' (98). It is only by resisting the urge to read the flights of Pilgrim and Zits as science fiction that the reader begins to understand the profound psychological effects of trauma, and the practical political notions that emerge from this apparently groundless aesthetic.

The mental artistry of Zits' flights is subconsciously revealed by his repeated hesitations during the invocation of each episode. Refinements of place, time and character are staggered through as each is narrated into existence. As each episode is a collage of disturbed memories, so emerges the motif of Zits waking in confusion, initially unable to perceive his surroundings in the moment of their creation, and instantly revising his first perceptions with a 'No' or 'wait, no' (36, 59, 78, 107, 131). Though Zits learned movie editing skills in 'real life' 'at a special program for homeless kids in Seattle', the less than smooth transitions that he constructs between each episode are evidence that he paid more attention to the teacher ('the sexiest thing in the world' with whom he falls 'in love' [62-63]) than to editorial technique. Sadly this is not just a witty move on the part of Alexie, as it further reveals Zits' desperation for intimate, trustworthy connections, and his inclination towards their creation.

Zits' first hallucinatory leap, into the body of white FBI agent Hank Storm, contains the various indirect cultural and historical references mined from Zits' memory that become typical of his flight. Zits selects 'Hank Storm' as a name from

the character of the same name, played by Lou Diamond Phillips (a Filipino actor) in *Renegades* (1989). In the film, Hank Storm is supposed to be a Lakota Indian, who becomes the unwilling partner of Buster McHenry, a maverick white cop (played by a marvellously moustachioed Keifer Sutherland). Together they pursue a master criminal who kills Storm's brother after stealing diamonds and, purely to engage an unquestionably 'Indian' plot, impulsively grabs the (entirely fictional) 'sacred Lakota spear'. Storm is subject to the patronising mysticism of Indian stereotyping, communicating telepathically with his father (a 'medicine man'), 'tracking' McHenry (the cowboy to his Indian) through Philadelphia, and instantly calming a recalcitrant guard dog. At some point in Zits' life he has dejectedly come to identify with this nonsensical representation of Indian culture, hence its partial regurgitation here.

The 'civil war in Red River' (47) which Zits/Storm 'remembers' as the setting for this episode appears to be a conflation of the Red River War in 1874 with the Wounded Knee incident at Pine Ridge in 1976. The incident Zits/Storm 'witnesses' is almost certainly based on a combination of the 1975 shootout at Jumping Bull Ranch that led to the arrest of Leonard Peltier, and the unsolved murder of Anna Mae Aquash in 1976. Though the incident in *Flight* has historical referents, and therefore significantly encourages the reader to engage with American history, it remains principally a fiction concocted by the traumatised imagination of Zits. The incident is therefore thematically important, dramatising once more Herman's 'central dialectic' by 'call[ing] attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect[ing] attention from it' (Herman 1). As Junior, already severely beaten, prepares to die rather than speak, Zits/Storm internally wills him to '*tell them*

everything!' (50), apparently unaware that Junior's wounded and silent body represents Zits' traumatised repression. Zits begins to confront the pain of his personal trauma through this incident, though in shooting the already dead Junior he enacts his self-defeating complicity in keeping his traumatic past hidden. This double shooting also dramatises the psychoanalytical notion of trauma as a 'double wound'; the first being the traumatic event, the second the echo, its debilitating memory (Caruth 1996 3).

Zits/Storm finds himself swiftly excused for his actions by his partner Art, and is deluded by the comfort of an imagined loving family. In this instance, as Herman puts it, 'secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom' (1). Just as Rumfoord, 'the official Air Force historian' (Vonnegut 135) who Vonnegut's Pilgrim meets in hospital, declares uneasily that the destruction of Dresden '*had to be done*' (Vonnegut 144), so Art tearfully explains to Zits/Storm (in hospital) that 'what [they] did the other night was necessary...Horrible and necessary' (56). Refiguring the violence as symptomatic of a greater ill, Art attempts to placate Zits/Storm with the propagandist assertion that '[i]n order to fight evil, sometimes we have to do evil things' (56). In a moment of clarity, Zits notes the circularity of this child-like statement, wondering how it can ever be possible to 'tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys when they say the same things' (56), and realises that 'Art and Justice fight on opposite sides of the war but they sound exactly like each other' (56). Like 'Justice' before him, Art represents another form of denial and dissociation from the 'reality' that caused Zits' personal trauma; deflecting blame from personal involvement to a

broader cultural purpose; reducing victim and perpetrators to vague ‘evils’, and balancing the instance of violence against a potentially positive overall outcome.⁷⁷

The subsequent two episodes stage explicitly the difficulty of reconciling apparent ethical problems shared by ‘opposite sides of the war’ (56) with the broader ideological purposes of warfare. The location of personal narratives within spectacles of mass conflict complicates and disperses the supposedly unified motivations of ‘opposing’ armies, dramatising once more the ambiguities and contradictions in imposing ‘justice’ through violent aggression. Zits ‘travels’ to (recreates) the late nineteenth century; ‘witnessing’ his representations of the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876 (also known as Custer’s Last Stand) by inhabiting the body of a mute Indian boy, and (possibly) the Sand Creek Massacre of 1874 through an arthritic Irish Indian tracker, Augustus ‘Gus’ Sullivan. Whilst the physical damage to these bodies corresponds to Zits’ ‘real world’ psychological trauma symptoms of shamed silence and psychological frailty, these wounds in fact serve to force him into imagined ethical dilemmas that expose and urge respectively criticism and resistance of the larger, controlling forces on both ‘sides’ of the ‘Indian wars’. These imagined confrontations demand from Zits a ‘real’ ethical stance, whilst directing him away from the notion of culturally imposed trauma, towards his ‘real’ traumatic memories; the causes of his shame and loneliness.

Following the defeat of Custer, Zits/Boy’s Indian father requires Zits/Boy to kill a young captive white soldier. The act is firmly figured as revenge, and on a living body, apparently representative of the unidentified white soldier who slashed

⁷⁷ Rumfoord’s justification for the bombing of Dresden is equally devoid of positive reasons or results and, of course, the ‘official’ positions in both novels are designed to avoid direct engagement with traumatic realities, and in this way are as delusional as Zits’ and Pilgrim’s flights.

Zits/Boy's throat and rendered him unable to speak. Realising that his father 'wants [him] to want revenge' (75) but lacking the motivation of the Boy's traumatic experience, Zits/Boy produces the traumatic memory of the foster father who inflicted (what appears in the novel's chronology as) Zits' second rape. Rather than prompting violence, this invocation of the rapist 'model-train man' (76) forces Zits to confront directly a traumatic memory that decisively contributes to his 'real world' anger; the background atrocities of warfare surrounding Zits/Boy with the dire aesthetics of revenge left unchecked. Zits' realisation that he has come to 'blame...strangers for [his] loneliness' (77) hints at the circularity of his repression. By repressing the memory of the trauma to which he has been subjected, Zits sees all other people as potential substitutes onto which he may transfer his misdirected feelings of blame and revenge, which only exacerbates his feelings of shame and loneliness. As Zits/Boy this imagined role of the Boy as potential victimiser is explicitly linked to the Boy being victimised, so for Zits the 'real life' link between his being raped and his feelings of shame and loneliness begins to emerge.

Revenge is imagined by Zits as 'a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle' (77), an important symbol that may be understood in several cooperative ways. With regards to trauma, the concentric circles represent potentially violent emotions radiating from and obscuring the experience of a traumatic or unjust event. These psychological symptoms of trauma escalate in scope and scale, as over time and through a strengthening repression of memories the connection of these symptoms to that traumatic source grows weaker. These symptoms become shameful only whilst their source remains unacknowledged, or rather, whilst as effects their corresponding causes remain unheard. In the same way, blame becomes diffuse. At the centre of the

event, the perpetrators are (at least partially) identifiable, yet the victim is unable to tackle them at that centre, hence the retrospective need for revenge. Again, over time, the targets against which revenge seems justified lose specificity; their connections to the original act only presupposed by the traumatised victim, and so revenge becomes a pseudo-justification for hostility towards ever-widening ‘circles’ of people. Zits’ journey in *Flight* shows this process being deconstructed through reversal, as Zits moves from almost universally applied feelings of distrust and hostility, and a need to blame broadly imagined cultural and historical injustices, through a discovery of the complex personal relationships that populate these acts, to a recovery of the ‘real’ perpetrators of his trauma, and a reassessment of the central cause of his anger.

Herman notes that for the psychologist as well as the trauma victim there is a ‘need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future’ (2). Zits’ concentric model of trauma and revenge suggests similarly that if the significance of that past, personal trauma can somehow be accessed, explored, and reassessed, then one can begin to understand and diffuse the power such trauma may wield over the individual, thus reclaiming their present and future. With this in mind, on a structural level these concentric circles simultaneously represent an aim or target for Zits, with each episode of his imagined flight potentially bringing him closer to remembering and coming to terms with the violent sources of his trauma. Indeed, Zits imagines himself as ‘the bullet that blasted through [his] brain’ (58), and it is as this ‘bullet’, driving through and disturbing his repressed memories, that Zits might accurately remember and target the perpetrators of his trauma.

The memory of the 'model-train man' (76) becomes manifest as a physical burden for Zits as he inhabits the aged 'Gus'; the arthritic pain he feels whilst helping to rescue a child from the Sand Creek Massacre is likened to 'a thousand little men...digging a train tunnel through [his] back' (104). The disturbance of traumatic memories is here dramatised as a righteous, painful struggle towards the active defence of the innocent. Hearing Small Saint's assertion that he 'joined the military to defend people' (103) motivates Zits/Gus to sacrifice his life in aiding the escape of the soldier and Bow Boy. This act specifically counters Art's attempts to justify killing, by establishing defence as the only instance in which violence might become '[h]orrible and necessary' (56). As Zits/Gus realises that his newly configured ethics leave him unwilling to suppress the advancing soldiers even to secure freedom, he begins to accept that as a victim of trauma his pain and grief are legitimate and must be 'proclaim[ed]': 'I hear screaming. I realize it is me screaming. I hear weeping. I realize it is me weeping' (106). This moment of self-realisation is crucial to Zits' recovery, as it releases him from the notion that his shame and loneliness are symptoms of the 'cultural' or 'historical' trauma outlined and perpetuated by Art and Justice. Of course, we may read as politically significant that it is only as a bloodied white soldier that Zits can act heroically, having first been surrounded by literally bloodthirsty Indians in his incarnation as the Indian Boy. Yet this demonstration of the effects of negative *indian* representation upon Zits' imagination soon becomes ancillary to the ethical choices Zits must make regarding the maintenance of personal relationships. Though the impact of these choices is intensified and hastened by the surrounding violence, the dilemmas Zits faces are difficult not because he feels an alliance or deference to a re-imagined

cultural heritage, but because of the responsibility he feels as a human being towards other human beings.

Herman explains that '[i]n order to develop a full understanding of the trauma story, the survivor must examine the moral questions of guilt and responsibility and reconstruct a system of belief that makes sense of her undeserved suffering' (178). As Zits explores the ethical complexities of personal relationships, he enacts such a reconstruction, and as his ability to ideate and articulate the physical and emotional responses of others becomes both more powerful and nuanced, so his trauma, when integrated into that context or 'system of belief', 'makes sense', thus demonstrating the vital role that imagination and narration play in his recovery. Whilst subsequent characters and situations are more explicit references to those experienced by Zits in his 'real life' (so bringing him closer to engaging directly with his first rape), the moment of self-realisation as Gus results in Zits feeling that '[a]ll...is beautiful and interchangeable...equally important and unimportant...connected' (107). During the many betrayals of 'Jimmy the pilot' (110), this holistic conception is refined to a heightened sense of emotional cause and effect, providing a dissociated framework through which Zits can account for his and his father's betrayals. Above all others, including the 'model-train man' (76), Zits holds his father ultimately responsible for his unhappiness. Zits believes that his father's abandonment caused his mother's death, which caused him to be repeatedly raped under the inadequate care of her sister, so consigning him to a life of loneliness and shame. By perceiving Jimmy's betrayal and suicidal abandonment of his wife as a direct result of the unexpressed guilt he feels over Abbad's hijacking, Zits realises that acts of betrayal and hatred, like his, and like his father's, are rooted in the same

feelings of guilt and fear that he considers unspeakable. Indeed, Jimmy is unable to talk about the fact that he taught Abbad to fly an aeroplane (127), and in his resultant suicide ‘stays silent all the way down’ (130).

This episode attempts to give some insight into the personal narratives that are lost (or repressed) in a context of culturally-motivated violence. In hijacking and crashing a passenger ‘plane into ‘downtown Chicago during rush hour’ (126), Abbad and his family commit Zits’ reimagining of the attacks on New York City’s World Trade Center in 2001. Though the exact motivations remain unclear, Abbad reveals that his fifteen years living in the United States have been ‘sad and lonely...because [his] real home has been destroyed’(121). Curiously, as Jimmy is representative of Zits’ father, so Abbad is representative of the fifteen year old Zits. This is a risky move on Alexie’s part, for as Susan Faludi notes in *The Terror Dream* (2007), the media response to the 9/11 attacks envisioned a ‘new John Wayne masculinity’, signalling a ‘retreat into a fantasized yesteryear’ of the ‘Wild West’ that took the U.S. “‘back to the days of fighting the Indians’” (4-5). The idea then, though it is perhaps difficult to accept, is that even apparently indiscriminate terrorist attacks may ultimately find their origins in personal trauma, which might be prevented in the future by listening to and appreciating those individuals from whom different cultures are comprised, rather than dictating the ideologies by which they must live. This is all rather conjectural, and somewhat impractical in its reliance on hindsight, but it is certainly feasible that feelings of shame and loneliness similar to those felt by Zits, as he prepared to massacre those at the bank, might have provided the ultimate motivation for Abbad’s suicidal attack, which also finds a parallel in Jimmy’s final flight.

Zits' flight into the imagined body of his father confirms that trauma left unchecked creates a violent narrative history of its own, that dominates and impedes the ability of each affected generation to imagine and create a positive present and future. After telling his story (featuring a further death by drowning), the 'gray man' (141) from whom Zits/Father demands respect issues the sudden and unexpected rebuke: "'You keep your sorrow to yourself'"⁷⁸ (149). Read as both command and assessment, this provides a succinct articulation of the traumatised subject's paradox, being unable to acknowledge and express the very grief that keeps one silent. Without some form of intervention, such as psychoanalytic or social support, the effects of trauma are here shown to spread unstopably from generation to generation, inevitably, and most disturbingly, claiming child victims. In this respect we find another parallel with *Slaughterhouse-5* as an anti-war novel. Peter Reed points out that Vonnegut's portrayal of young, childlike soldiers is 'not so much to say that war is childish as to indicate the haplessness of men caught up in war' (184). *Flight* similarly concerns itself with the paradox of teenage soldiers traumatised whilst fighting for the safety of a generation they may be unable to raise (83), and features throughout a comparable depiction of war as 'a terrifying unleashing of monstrous forces which sweeps up the innocent children of men to destroy and enslave them' (Reed 184). Such a description might well apply to the 'monstrous forces' of trauma, an internal war that may lead in circularity to external violence and further trauma for its victims. Again, without intervention or resolution, trauma, like war, functions as a closed, self-perpetuating loop, another, final reading of Zits' circle of revenge.

⁷⁸ This may be in reference to 2 Esdras 10:15 – 'Now therefore keep thy **sorrow** to thyself, and bear with a good courage that which hath befallen thee.'

So we return to the problem of the ending, though with perhaps now a deeper understanding of Alexie's dilemma. By apparently buckling to the alleged cultural pressures imposed by his sense of 'social responsibility' to 'the native world', Alexie is consciously committing an act of artistic degradation upon the text, so succumbing to the aesthetic equivalent of those cultural pressures that cause Zits to commit his acts of violence *within* the text, in the pursuit of his version of 'Justice'. We might then see the incongruity of the ending as a sort of authorial re-enactment of Zits' attempts to deny and dissociate himself from the realities of his trauma, so personal experience is subsumed by broader, social expectations. Yet in the light of Alexander's formulation of cultural trauma, the possibility remains that with the original 'tragic ending' replacing the neat conclusion, the novel might become to the reader as 'Justice' to Zits, a negative agent of cultural trauma upon an already traumatised individual, hence Alexie's compulsion not only to personalise the trauma and resolution to a specified character, Michael, but close the narrative with a potential way out.

Unfortunately, from a psychological perspective, the novel ultimately fails to satisfactorily negotiate Herman's 'central dialectic' of trauma, in that the implausibly good fortune suddenly imposed upon Zits serves to deny the experiential relevance of the preceding journey, whilst the political aspects of the text are similarly almost completely overwhelmed by the gratuitous poignancy of Zits' rebirth scene. Yet we can almost forgive Alexie's decisions, for they arise only from the profound acknowledgement of the potential power of the written word over the individual psyche, alongside an admission that even the most powerful rhetoric may have its politics perverted or misread by the closed or traumatised mind.

Indeed, the objectivity of trauma theory is surely something that should be questioned in a thesis such as this. Writing of ‘the multiplicity of violences of everyday life’, Kleinman writes:

Possessing different histories, sustained by different social dynamics, we assume, nonetheless, that the outcome in trauma and suffering is the same. But why should that be? Why shouldn’t the trauma and suffering be as different as a different form of violence or its sources are? And if trauma and violence are different, don’t they require different responses? (Das 235).

Whilst I do not wish to undo the fabric of this chapter, this idea of the subjective response to trauma could be employed to explain the novel’s ending. Unfortunately though, the otherwise fairly typical expressions of trauma exhibited by Zits suggest that it was the subjectivity of Alexie that led to the suddenly cheery conclusion.

Through an engagement with contemporary trauma theory and the novel’s precedent texts, this chapter has argued that, like *Slaughterhouse-5*, the aesthetic form of *Flight* is an integral expression of its politics. This can be summarised as follows: although personal trauma must not be accounted for by extrapolation to broader, falsely inherited cultural injustice, the traumatic aesthetic form may also work as a microcosmic dramatisation of externally applicable antiwar politics, the unpredictable, shifting, closed loop narrative of internal turmoil functioning as a metaphor for the traumatic, cyclical injustices and devastations of warfare.

The next chapter examines the effects of structural violence in a range of texts, arguing that several of Alexie’s urban Indian characters are depicted as responding to their internal colonisation, and that these stories function as crucial conceptualisations of the process of decolonization as it may come to bear on urban Indian peoples.

Chapter Six

‘there is nothing surprising / about a dead body’: Structural Violence and Urban Subjectivities

Relatively few of the critical responses to Alexie’s fiction and poetry tackle the proliferation of violence and violent images contained therein, and of those few responses, the majority focus upon physical violence, specifically the gory muggings, mutilations, and murders of *Indian Killer*. Following a brief survey and assessment of these critical responses, this chapter discusses the ways in which the notion of violence has been expanded to include ‘structural’ violence, before focusing on the specific forms of ‘symbolic’ violence that initially prevent Alexie’s urban Indian characters from enjoying meaningful lives in the city. I interpret Alexie’s representations of structural-symbolic violence as stories of personal decolonization that serve to counter the colonial discourse that seeks to deny Indian peoples access to the city. A brief survey of the aforementioned critical responses to Alexie’s depictions of violence helps to situate within the field my reading of Alexie’s representations of structural-symbolic violence, whilst pointing to the usefulness of approaching depictions of violence in Indian literatures as expressions of something beyond the violent anger or despondent hopelessness of the hybrid postcolonial subject.

As discussed in chapter three, Krupat reads the violence of *Indian Killer* as a ‘frightening’ dramatisation of the ‘rage stage’ of Indian literature, in which ‘pain and anger [is expressed] in murderous rage against the whites who have hurt...Indians’ (2011 113, 119). Krupat considers this rage to be a manifestation of ‘Red Nationalism,’ which views anti-racist violence as a creative ‘tool’ to be utilised in the

task of constructing cultural and political visibility for Indians. Although Krupat attempts to discern a positive sociopolitical message hidden in the images that surround the killer's violent actions, he is ultimately only able to advise that the reader must 'imagine' that there are any moral or ethical configurations beyond the suggestions of 'further vengeful killing' (2011 121). Krupat is hesitant in delivering his conclusion, and although he implies that *Indian Killer* places a demand on the reader to actively choose between the continuation or cessation of physical violence, he is unable to find textual evidence that might steer the reader towards making a decision either way. In an unusually expository chapter of his *The Spaces of Violence* (2006), James R. Giles seems to agree with Krupat's broadly negative reading, discussing the events of the novel in terms of a 'continuum of violence', and finding 'no escape, no affirmation, no hope of redemption' offered at the 'physical, mental, social, or cultural' margins represented by Alexie, only further violence, being that 'menacing force tied to excess' (13). Giles finds the novel's Indian characters 'helpless', 'hereditary victims' of 'the violent suppression of the First Nations by whites' (129), and so the violence of *Indian Killer* is understood as setting up a characteristically hopeless example of 'fourthspace', being 'a negative extension of Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace', which 'projects another spatial dimension in which the liberation inherent in thirdspace has been co-opted and is no longer possible' (13).

The similar conclusions of Krupat and Giles stem from their similarly pessimistic postcolonial readings, in which the colonised and occasionally hybrid Indian subjects find outlets for their inherited anger and hopelessness in acts of physical violence against their inherited colonisers. These readings are also aligned

by their interpretations of rage and violence as fundamental aspects of the novel's postcolonial Indian subjects. In his comparison of the 'brutal' violence of *Indian Killer* to that finally 'sublimate[d]' by the close of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), Giorgio Mariani finds evidence of the 'something "more"' that Krupat and Giles may have missed, claiming that 'while the final chapter flirts with the notion of violence as a "creative" force, the narrative as a whole moves in an opposite direction by emphasizing the essentially *destructive* and morally indefensible nature of violence' (n. pag.). Again, this reading is rather uncertain and, like Krupat, Mariani is discouraged by the final chapter of the novel from making any solid assertions about its ethics. *Indian Killer* is thus deemed 'first and foremost...an *aesthetic* failure' (emphasis in original).

Having read *Indian Killer* as a novel that renders physical the dangers of irresponsible, essentialist discourse, and finds these dangers most powerfully resisted by Marie Polatkin, I do not wish to return to that novel for further extended examination in the current chapter. However, there are two readings of *Indian Killer* that notice different, bloodless forms of violence, which I find both illuminate the text in striking and productive ways, and provide a suitable introduction to the definitions and analyses of structural violence that follow.

Janet Dean's 'The Violence of Collection: *Indian Killer's* Archives' draws out 'the cultural logic of ethnographic archives in the text to illuminate the ways collecting underpins a brutal and undeclared race war', noting crucially that 'the critical focus on the physical violence committed by Native American characters obscures more insidious and intangible forms of violence...- namely, the ways institutional and private archives threaten the very cultures they would define and

purportedly preserve' (31, 32). Such a reading supports my overall thesis, in that general *indian* artefacts of Indian histories are here shown to be seized by the dominant white culture and interpolated within an historical narrative of nostalgia and erasure, the effects of which are to anachronise contemporary Indian identities and plot an *indian* history of withdrawal from modernity. The violence here is effected upon Indian cultures, identities, historical records, and communities by commercial and academic means, as well as upon individual bodies through immediate physical exertions, and *Indian Killer* is read as a narrative that exposes this institutional violence. Dean's investigation into the novel's competing narratives of collection and 'countercollection' concludes that the 'archives of Native American violence in the novel, like the archives of white violence, threaten only to recirculate upheaval and redouble the general schizophrenia of a divided national culture' (50). Further to this argument, I see Marie Polatkin as taking a firm and constructive stand against these threats, with her work as 'activities coordinator for the Native American Students Alliance at the University' (*Indian Killer* 31), and her commitment to Seattle's homeless Indian community offering further 'countercollections' that organise urban Indians and help to ameliorate the effects of both the physical and the institutional/cultural violence they encounter.

A similar attention to non-physical violence is successfully demonstrated by Michele Fazio in her 'Homeless in Seattle: Class Violence in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*', which positions the novel as 'working-class literature' (145) that both examines the bidirectional struggles of social mobility and acknowledges the often unnoticed contributions of American Indians to the local and global economies. Although Fazio also finds an ambiguity in the concluding chapter that 'suggests the

continuation of not only physical violence but of class violence as well', she finds a 'constructive approach' in the novel's raising of questions 'that promote the examination of working-class history and culture in the United States' (153). Again, this article might find grounds upon which to form a more surefooted conclusion by paying close attention to Marie Polatkin, who strives to carve a way through such manifestations of violence, both for herself, through her fearless yet studious ambition, and for others, through the aforementioned community work.

Readings of Alexie's depictions of physical violence tend towards generalisation, ambiguity, and a general pessimism, which results in fatalistic conclusions that seem to contribute to notions of *indians* as living hopeless and tragic lives. Although Krupat contextualises his reading with reference to the American Indian Movement as a response to the continued institutional oppression of Indians, this historical background is primarily invoked to suggest a general atmosphere of frustration and anger, rather than to elucidate the specific injustices tackled by the novel. Dean and Fazio's investigations into the pernicious structures upon which these apparently static lives are founded reveal a more active and specialised understanding of the historical imbalances that often lead to frustration and physical violence. The danger of responding only to instances of visible, interpersonal violence is that invisible, non-physical forms of violence go unnoticed, and so unchallenged. These articles engage with the causes and effects of what Arthur Kleinman has called 'social violence' (Das 226), being the practices of dominant societies, typically enacted through their political and economic institutions, that recast, suppress, and silence the cultural expressions of minorities, whether or not they might, in any way, threaten the stability of the dominant culture.

Also known as ‘structural’ violence (Das 227), the effect of these practices as discussed by Dean and Fazio is the bifurcation of Indian and urban histories, again erasing the influence of Indian peoples and communities from both the history of north American urban development and current urban experience. This chapter unpacks examples of structural violence from across Alexie’s oeuvre, looking at the ways in which the various manifestations of both local and global structural violence described therein impact upon urban Indian subjectivities, and the ways in which such impacts are transformed and/or resisted. The preceding tacit acknowledgement of physical and non-physical manifestations of violence will now be refined through a brief look at some relevant attempts to conceptualise violence.

A typology of violence, in theory

Violence is typically understood to have taken place when the deliberate physical action of one effects physical harm upon another. Of course, this is a definition that is designed to prompt, being both extremely reductive and wilfully general, as the varieties and scales of physical violence are limited only by the bounds of imagination and physics. We might substitute the ‘one’ and/or ‘another’ of what Johan Galtung would call ‘the narrow concept of violence’ (1969 168) for multiple persons, groups, or machines, and the collision of these variables may be further complicated by matters of time, space, human comprehension, and philosophical reflections on motivation and justification. In his oft-cited article ‘Violence, Peace, and Peace Research’, Galtung explains that ‘it is not so important to arrive at anything like *the* definition, or *the* typology... More important is to indicate theoretically significant dimensions of violence that can lead thinking,

research and, potentially, action, towards the most important problems' (1969 167). Although this chapter principally addresses Alexie's literary representations of non-physical violence, it would be foolhardy to suggest that deliberate physical harm does not constitute one of the 'theoretically significant dimensions of violence'. Nevertheless, the manifestations and effects of physical violence, which Galtung calls '*personal or direct*' (1969 170), are always visible to someone, whereas those of non-physical violence, which Galtung calls '*structural or indirect*' (1969 170), are not. My reason for engaging with structural violence in Alexie's fiction and poetry is that it is precisely this dimension that has been largely ignored, particularly outside of *Indian Killer*, yet I contend that such an engagement leads us towards some very 'important problems' regarding urban Indian subjectivities. My discussion here cannot and should not constitute an appeal for the universal privileging of the study of structural violence.

But what *is* structural violence? Galtung reaches his definition by noting what is absent from structural violence, being the 'clear subject-object relation' present in instances of personal violence, and stating that '[v]iolence without this relation is structural, built into structure' (1969 171). Galtung points usefully to the fact that personal violence 'is easily captured and expressed verbally since it has the same structure as elementary sentences in (at least Indo-European) *languages*: subject-verb-object, with both subject and object being persons', bringing further clarification through the following examples:

when one husband beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance there is structural violence. Correspondingly, in a society where life expectancy is twice as high in the upper as in the lower classes, violence is exercised even if there are no concrete actors one can point to directly attacking others, as when one person kills another (1969 171).

Of course, Galtung is indebted to the social analyses of Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and those of subsequent Marxist thinkers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and we can certainly see similar ideas in the contemporaneous work of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard, amongst many others. This is not the place for a digression into the history of Marxist thought, and so it is hoped that a few brief examples will sufficiently pave the road to Galtung. In the 'Results' chapter of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Engels writes of 'social murder', perpetrated against the working class by the ruling class, by 'plac[ing] the workers under conditions in which they can neither retain health nor live long', thus 'undermin[ing] the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurr[ying] them to the grave before their time' (95-6). Adding historical weight to their attack on the 'culture industry', which exposed the surreptitiously pernicious effects of 'the entertainment business', Horkheimer and Adorno quote Tocqueville's claim, a century earlier, that 'tyranny leaves the body free and directs its attack at the soul. The ruler no longer says: You must think as I do or die. He says: You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us' (Horkheimer & Adorno 105). Althusser's 'Ideological' and 'Repressive State Apparatuses' are the institutions constructed by the state in order to maintain control over its citizens, the former being private institutions such as 'Churches, Parties, Trade Unions, families', the latter being public institutions such as 'the Army and the Police'. Both Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses are described as functioning 'by violence and ideology', with the balance of this 'double function' determining their status as either Ideological or Repressive (144-145). These

analyses reveal clear trends of structural violence (that is, violence enacted without the direct, interpersonal collision of perpetrator and victim) that either pre-date or coincide with Galtung's definition.

The Kafka-inspired legal proceedings of 'The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire' dramatise the complexity of these multiple dimensions and definitions of violence, as Builds-the-Fire is given two life sentences for narrating the experiences of 'Wild Coyote', a sixteen year old Indian warrior who kills two white soldiers at the Battle of Pine Creek in 1858 (also known as the Steptoe Defeat, or as Hngwsumn by the Coeur d'Alene tribe). Despite an alibi implied by the geographical and temporal distances from the twentieth century reservation trial of approximately seventy miles and almost a hundred and fifty years, Builds-the-Fire is convinced of the value of his bearing witness to the violence of the Battle of Pine Creek, and so his story-testimony is interpreted by the judge as a confession of 'racially motivated murder' (*The Lone Ranger...* 100-102). Surrounding Thomas's historical descriptions of the Battle, Colonel George Wright's slaughter of 800 horses, and the hanging of Qualchan, Alexie's short story contains contemporary examples of violence that is physical (Eve attacking the bailiff as he attempts to restrain her), psychological (tribal chairman David WalksAlong calling his wife '*a savage in polyester pants*' [94, emphasis in original]), imagined (Builds-the-Fire holding the reservation postmaster 'hostage for eight hours with the idea of a gun), political/ideological (Builds-the-Fire's threat 'to make significant changes in the tribal vision' and the fabricated charges brought against him in order to suppress his 'extreme need to tell the truth' [93]), institutional (the sentencing for crimes Builds-the-Fire did not commit, and the subjugation of the poor and/or non-whites

represented by the other prisoners [103]), and cultural (the building of a golf course at Hangman's Creek, the site of Qualchan's hanging, and the area's rebranding as Qualchan). This last example is difficult to categorise even under such a broad term, as it might also be considered a form of topographical or cartographical violence, as well as colonial historiographic violence, as the local significance of the site is shifted from that of a place of remembrance to that of a commercial interest that allegedly honours Qualchan. This purported honour attempts to close the dialogue of disputed histories, granting the final words in the history of Qualchan to the colonial authority, and creates another site in which Indians are permanently associated with violence (part of what Vizenor calls 'the legacy of victimry' [2008 1]), and the past.⁷⁹

An important clarification is made by Galtung regarding the spatial and temporal relativities of what might be understood as violence. These may be understood as stemming from the avoidability of violence. The unique stasis of the already lower than average reservation Indian life expectancy reported by *The Measure of America Report 2013-2014*, relative to an increase for all other racial and ethnic groups, is evidence that demonstrates the avoidability of structural violence against Indians. The study's claim that '[b]ecause most major metropolitan areas do not have a sufficiently large Native American population to allow for reliable calculation of the Index, Native Americans are not included' in their analysis of 'Human Development by Metro Area' (28) is a further example of urban Indians

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Archuleta reads Builds-the-Fire's testimony, delivered after a twenty year vow of silence, as a response to the structural violence enacted by the 'system of retributive justice' maintained by the United States. Invoking Bhabha's postcolonial hybridity theory, Archuleta contends that 'Thomas's critical control of speech and silence in social and legal settings creates a third space for language to interrogate the foundational dualisms that underpin the split between law and society and legal and social expression' (Berglund & Roush 47).

being written out of contemporary urban history, in this case their populations being referred to as statistically unstable and ‘not...statistically significant’ (‘Methodological Note’ 8-9). Whilst these methodological claims may be true for the majority of metropolitan areas as defined by the Report, according to figures collected by the various urban Indian organisations of the National Urban Indian Family Coalition and published in *Urban Indian America* (2007), urban Indian numbers in Phoenix, California, Chicago, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington exceed the 50,000 required for inclusion in this area of the study, whilst Denver, Minneapolis, Maryland, and New Mexico are only a few thousand short, each Indian population including urban Indians in excess of 40,000 (‘Urban Indian America’ 17-19). It is unclear why these hundreds of thousands of urban Indian people do not merit even partial inclusion in such an otherwise comprehensive study.

During ‘The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore’, Victor plots a surprising graph of personal injury relative to a chronology of colonial violence, explaining that ‘it’s almost like Indians can easily survive the big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land rights. It’s the small things that hurt the most. The white waitress who wouldn’t take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins’ (*The Lone Ranger...* 49). The examples given here of what ‘hurt[s] the most’ would typically be seen as less important to the correction of colonial history, yet the scope of these apparently petty injustices is broadened by their implied contexts. Genocidal legislation, enforced boarding school educations, and the policies of allotment and termination continue to affect contemporary expressions of Indian identities, yet the ‘small things’ given here are the contemporary manifestations of these colonial strategies now considered historical. The waitress’s

policy to refuse sustenance to Indians; the internationally circulated representation of a broken *indian* English, being the savage prompt to our white hero's final word; interstate identities constructed through a racist epithet and its continually reimagined caricature: these are twenty-first century expressions of the colonial legacy of structural violence against Indian peoples. The waitress in particular exhibits an internalisation of structural violence that replicates the conditions of oppression through her everyday actions. This dramatisation of the self-perpetuation of structural violence through internalisation of its principles is a defining feature of Alexie's fiction and poetry, and deserves some attention.

In 'Social Space and Symbolic Power', Bourdieu contends that the physical proximities and movements of individuals and groups in relation to each other, which he calls 'social physics' are informed by 'strategies of condescension, those strategies by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others...thus reaping the profits of a recognition granted to a purely symbolic denegation of distance' (1989 16). So, the waitress's refusal to recognise the rights of Indian peoples to be served in restaurants assumes and enacts a hierarchy that places her in the position to deny rights in terms that reduce beings to symbols, such as *indian*. This aligns Indians, here subordinated to *indians*, with Spivak's definition of the subaltern as 'those removed from lines of social mobility' (2004 531) in their being deemed necessarily unable to engage with the spaces of modern day capitalism. Such a hierarchy is assumed to exist by the waitress partially because of the physical distance between the spaces of her everyday life and the nearest spaces of the everyday lives of Indian peoples. Bourdieu goes on to assert that 'agents are

distributed in the overall social space, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of capital they possess and, in the second dimension, according to the structure of their capital, that is the relative weight of the different species of capital, economic and cultural, in the total volume of their assets' (1989 17). So, the physical distance between the waitress and the nearest Indian peoples is a product of the differences in their access to money, education, goods, etc. Control over distribution of capital is understood to be manipulated by the state, in order to further its aims. This is not exactly analogous to the complicated internal and external system of governance on reservations, in that certain tribal governments control their tribal nations, but it is useful in illustrating the cognitive internalisation of physical structures, and the meanings carried with those internalisations. Here Bourdieu makes his larger claim that '[i]f the social world tends to be perceived as evident...this is because the dispositions of agents...that is, the mental structures through which they apprehend the world, are essentially the product of the internalization of the structures of the world' (1989 18). From this point can be discerned Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic violence' (1989 22), that is, the internal, symbolic classification of others according to the hierarchical structures of the state.

Perhaps the most well-known story that can be used to illustrate the relationship between personal, structural, and internalised symbolic forms of violence is that which is supposed to recount the first murder in human history, being that of Abel by Cain.⁸⁰ Given the brevity of the incident and its consequences (Genesis is no *The Secret Agent*), it is worth quoting rather than summarising parts of

⁸⁰ All subsequent biblical references are to the King James Version.

this striking narrative. Some time has passed since Eve gave birth to Cain, and then to Abel:

And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering, but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. (Genesis 4:2-8)

The instance of personal violence here is, of course, Cain murdering Abel, which is prompted by his jealousy of God's favouring of his brother's offerings. The difficulty for Cain (and the reader) here is the apparent arbitrariness of God's preference. Whilst the fratricide certainly seems to be an overreaction from Cain, God's decision to favour one offering over the other, without an explanation that Cain can understand, constitutes a very early move towards structural violence. Of course, at this point the subject-verb-object relationship is still active and visible, but God's rejection of Cain lays the foundation for a structure of oppression that is designed to continually hinder the social progress of Cain and his descendants for the rest of time. The story continues:

And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand, when thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any

finding him should kill him. And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden. And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch. (Genesis 4:9-17)

Of course, God knows that Abel has been murdered by Cain, and Cain knows that God knows, and so I read his famous reply to God's question not as impudent sarcasm, but as an attempt by Cain to position himself in some sort of relationship to others, so reestablishing the stability that God's initial rejection of his offering destroyed. That Cain would murder his brother suggests that God's blunt yet mystifying qualitative justification for his rejections of Cain's offerings destabilised even his sense of right and wrong. Had Cain been sure of the relationship to his brother that God expected of him, as his 'keeper', as well as of his relationship to God, as his faithful subject, then this sense of responsibility and faith in authority may well have tempered his reaction to God's favouring of Abel, fostering love and acceptance rather than rivalry and murder. God's initiation of a curse, in this case a physical mark, that simultaneously condemns and protects Cain and his descendants is the moment in which personal violence becomes structural violence. The arbitrary demarcation by one person(ality) of another as subordinate is naturalised and applied by the authority to all those others associated with the subordinated. The list of Enoch's descendants that follows Cain's exile and city-building affirms the number and variety of individuals who unwittingly become subject to the discriminations of this structural violence, despite their considerable contributions to society, including musicianship and metallurgy.

In 'The Myth of Cain: Fratricide, City Building, and Politics', George M. Shulman discusses the continuing resonance of the story for contemporary Americans, presumably non-Native, explaining that '[i]n America the first losers are

the nomadic natives whom white men call “our red brothers” as they dispossess and slaughter them. America, the “city on the hill,” the modernizing nation par excellence, is built by Cains on the graves of Abels’ (227). According to this symbolic imposition then, the foundation of cities only becomes possible with the total annihilation of Indian peoples, and indeed Shulman points out that the message of such a tale is ‘that aggression is necessary against what is given and traditional, in order to create – dare we say it? – progress’ (228). Whilst I have shown that much of Alexie’s fiction and poetry espouses that same message in different contexts, Shulman’s identification of all Indians with the ‘given and traditional’ against the ‘progress’ represented by the colonists is remarkably regressive. Although Shulman claims his essay ‘presents no privileged reading and refuses to claim the story means *this* or *that*’ (218), when he explicitly refigures Abel as *indian*, in order to strengthen the contention that ‘Cain represents the historical process of modernization that destroys the traditional world and creates the city’ (228), Shulman effects a sacrificial violence against Indian peoples that requires (at the very least) their excision from the history of modernity. Such an essay proves an exemplary contribution to what Vizenor calls ‘the structural conceits of savagism and civilization (1999 vii), being the structures that continue to effect harm upon Indian peoples.

As discussed in the introduction, many Indian peoples were variously engaged in forms of urbanism prior to the arrival of European settlers, and have continued (by varying degrees) to be actively and crucially engaged in the processes of city-building, maintenance, and expansion into the twenty-first century. The myth that separates *indians* from modernity is maintained by ‘structural conceits’ such as

that of Shulman when he interprets Cain and Abel. Such ideologically-motivated rhetoric, disguised as objective academic commentary, upholds the structures of colonial subjugation that frame Indian peoples as primitive, vanishing *indians* who are inherently fearful of Euramerican industrial progress. Even when Shulman implies that the *indian* 'Abels' were wrongfully treated, he does so from within a framework that maintains the inevitability, indeed the *necessity*, of their 'dispossess[ion] and slaughter'. Drinnon documents many examples of more explicit articulations of this naturalised relegation of Indian peoples to prehistory in his *Facing West* (1980), including this from John Quincy Adams' *Memoirs* (1874), in which Adams recalls the view of then Secretary of State Henry Clay 'that it was impossible to civilize Indians; that...it was not in their nature...they were destined to extinction, and...he did not think them, as a race, worth preserving' (Drinnon 179). The notion of preservation suggests that even if Clay were to grant respect and assistance to Indian peoples, they would remain culturally homogenous and static, naturally unable to keep up with the inevitable march of Euramerican progress, let alone make foundational contributions. Richard Slotkin's dense exploration of the frontier myth in *The Fatal Environment* (1985) provides, amongst many others, a similar sentiment from George Armstrong Custer's *My Life on the Plains; or, Personal Experiences with Indians* (1874), in which Custer states that:

Nature intended [the *indian*] for a savage state; every instinct, every impulse of his soul inclines him to it. The white race might fall into a barbarous state, and afterwards, subjected to the influence of civilization, be reclaimed and prosper. Not so for the Indian. He cannot be himself and be civilized; he fades away and dies. Cultivation such as the white man would give him deprives him of his identity. Education, strange as it may appear, seems to weaken rather than strengthen his intellect (410).

Leaving aside for now the reasons why the colonial enforcements of Indian boarding school educations might weaken rather than strengthen Indian identities, it is the notion of ‘cultivation’ which is perhaps most significant to this discussion. Custer’s distinction between the figures of the strong, education Euramerican, inclined towards continuous adaptation in the pursuit of progress and prosperity, and the weak, savage *indian*, for whom the possibility of change only hastens death, is echoed by Shulman over a century later, in his association of *indians* with the simple hunter-gatherer-butcher Abel, and of European settlers with Cain, the skilled cultivator of the land. His conclusion that ‘we need to come to terms with Cain because we are his children, and with his city because we live in it’ (236) maintains this division, allowing no place for the *indian* ‘Abels’ in ‘our’ modern city. The use of ‘we’ anticipates a similar use in 1988 by then President Ronald Reagan, as quoted by Drinnon:

Maybe we made a mistake in trying to maintain Indian cultures. Maybe we should not have humored them in that, wanting to stay in that primitive life style. Maybe we should have said: No, come join us. Be citizens along with the rest of us (xiii).

Alexie’s various references to the story of Cain and Abel in his fiction and poetry suggest that he is aware of the symbolism with which this particular story may be invested.⁸¹ The opening lines of ‘Crow Testament’ retell the fratricide as follows: ‘Cain lifts Crow, that heavy black bird / and strikes down Abel. // Damn, says Crow, I guess / this is just the beginning’ (*One Stick Song* 26). So begins a partial retelling of certain bible verses with Crow occupying various biblical roles, though the inclination to read Crow as representative of Indian peoples should be

⁸¹ See, for example, ‘Haibun’ in *SoBW* (1996) and John Smith’s marking of Jack Wilson in *Indian Killer* (1996). *Indian Killer* also contains a reference to the Abel of N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, which has been read by Alan R. Velie as partly a revision of the biblical story.

signalled as contentious by Crow's interactions with Indians in the poem's final section. Such an interpretive temptation may stem from knowledge of the Apsáalooke people, recognised federally as the Crow Tribe of Montana, or of Crow as a prominent figure in the tribal stories of, for instance, the Hopi tribe of northeastern Arizona. Yet Crow's appearances on the reservation and at a powwow suggest instead that he is representative of a tragic *indian* presence that is being used by the 'white man' to foretell and naturalise the inevitable absence of Indian peoples.⁸² His initial position as the weapon that Cain uses to murder Abel implies the necessity of the stories of the sacrificed, savage *indian* presence in dividing American society into groups of prosperous Euramerican city-builders and vanishing *indian* subjects. The poem thus tells the story of the creation of the simulated *indian* and the violence effected upon Indian peoples by the naturalisation and internalisation of this simulation.

The reader is made immediately aware of the practical effects of the initial acts of structural violence described in the opening stanza when the 'white man, disguised / as a falcon, swoops in / and yet again steals a salmon / from Crow's talons'. The colonial narratives position the 'white man' as a natural predator, thus placing Crow, as *indian*, in the position of a natural inferior, to be exploited and preyed upon. Crow as *indian* cites his inability to swim as the reason for not fleeing the site of these injustices, which prompts the question: why doesn't Crow fly? That Crow is unable to imagine flight demonstrates that he embodies that colonial

⁸² By way of analogy, we might look to the recent auction of sacred Hopi masks in Paris, France, the most valuable (in all senses) being that of the 'Tumas Crow Mother'. Protestations from members of the tribe and their supporters before and during the auction were rejected and suppressed, as the auction was technically legal. The commodification of sacred tribal objects, replacing religious value with exchange value, places an emphasis on Indian art as valuable only when it is historical and rare, and so comes to represent the contemporary absence of Indian peoples.

simulation of the inferior, doomed Indian, the *indian*, that exists in the imagination and stories of the colonisers in order to justify the mistreatment of the Native population. So Crow as *indian* is stripped of agency, inherently unable to transgress the limits of the colonial imagination. The image of the ‘Crow God’ that ‘looks exactly like a Crow’ which, for Crow ‘makes it / so much easier to worship [him]self’ refers to the apocryphal etymological explanation given for Columbus’s naming as ‘Indians’ the indigenous peoples he first encountered in 1492. The late Russell Means preferred to be referred to as ‘Indian rather than Native American’ because Indian is ‘a bastardization of two Spanish words: In Dios, [meaning] "in with god." And Columbus wrote la gente indio, "a people in with God"' (Brooklover n. pag.). This explanation has been debunked by scholars such as Jace Weaver, who counters with the claim that Columbus ‘called the Tainos he first met "Indios" because he thought he had reached the Indies—that is, Asia’, noting that the previous explanation erroneously suggests that Columbus ‘regarded those he encountered in the "New World" as more natural and closer to divinity than Europeans’ (2007 238). The problem that Alexie dramatises with the ‘Crow God’ is the seduction of Indian peoples by the myth that they are somehow closer to God, whilst forgetting that the originary notions of this deity are at best the consequences of colonial missionary work and at worst the results of the torture and murder of non-believers. Crow worshipping himself as he has been reimagined within colonial narratives only legitimises and perpetuates the *indian* simulation, disarming Indian peoples with flattering images of *indians* as inherently innocent and sacred.

The fourth stanza continues this discussion of Indians as being refashioned in colonial discourse as *indians*, destined to be sacrificed in the pursuit of

civilisation towards modernity. Here, ‘Among the ashes of Jericho, / Crow sacrifices his firstborn son’. This refers to the Battle of Jericho in the Book of Joshua, in which Joshua leads the Israelites in conquering the city of Jericho by destroying its walls. Following the destruction of the city and the murder of all but a few helpful spies, Joshua declares: ‘Cursed be the man before the Lord, that riseth up and buildeth this city Jericho: he shall lay the foundation thereof in his firstborn, and in his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it’ (Joshua 6:26). Despite the curse, the rebuilding of Jericho is supposed to have taken place ‘some five hundred years’ later (Wright 263) by Bethelite, who indeed lost his eldest and youngest sons in the process (1 Kings 16:34). In Alexie’s poem, Crow’s sacrifice of ‘his firstborn son’ again symbolises the structural violence enacted upon Indians by colonial discourse, the cumulative effects of which now reach into the next generations of Indians, refashioning in the dominant cultural imaginary even those Indian peoples born five hundred years after first contact, as sacrificial *indian* simulations. This leads to ‘the sky fill[ing] with beaks and talons’ as ‘Crows fight Crows’.⁸³ Implicit in this image is the damage done to Indian communities by their systematic cultural and economic oppression. The violence of the Coeur d’Alene reservation is described in Alexie’s ‘Indian Country’ in terms of rivalry, revenge and retaliation, before the community is further stigmatised and eroded by non-Native newspaper reports (written by ‘white men’) and the ensuing legislative impositions of the state government (*The Toughest*

⁸³ At this point Crow may stand not only for the *indian* presence, but at the same time for all those oppressed through the structural violence of the continuing colonial endeavour. So Crow could stand for those African Americans subjected to slavery and the segregation of Jim Crow laws, or the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, subjected to U.S. military aggression and frequently enforced alliances during the Second Indochina or Vietnam War. In ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, Ward Churchill demonstrates that ‘it has become a hallmark of U.S. Counterinsurgency/counterrevolutionary doctrine that indigenous peoples within Third World states can be manipulated to serve global anti-communist policies’ (Churchill 330). Nevertheless, such a reading may be too broad.

Indian... 122). Yet this conflict can also be read as occurring at a psychological level, within the mind of the colonised subject. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Franz Fanon writes that '[t]he black Antillean...[a]fter having been the slave of the white man...enslaves himself' (Fanon 1952 192), legitimising through a process of internalisation the subordinate position into which he has been pressed, so becoming the passive colonial subject that the coloniser proscribes.

Fanon is narrating the internal psychological conciliation that signals the transition from structural to symbolic violence, whereby the external structures that are designed to oppress certain groups of people are internalised by the members of those groups. This acceptance of the inevitability of their oppression leads the oppressed to reproduce the behaviour and conditions that have been constructed and promulgated as objective truths by the dominant group. Louis Owens is one of several scholars⁸⁴ to criticize Alexie for his alleged reproductions of the stereotypes of Indian peoples created by Euramerican colonial discourse. Owens argues that Alexie's use of such stereotypes (up to and including *Indian Killer*) 'tells the reader that the Indian is a helpless, romantic victim still in the process of vanishing just as he is supposed to do' (1998 77). Further to this, Owens suggests that Alexie's regurgitation of 'stereotype and cliché' is a symptom of his having fallen victim to symbolic violence, indicting him as 'a perhaps unwitting product of the dominant culture he abjures in his writing' (1998 77). Whilst I have already argued against the pernicious clumsiness of this position in the previous chapters, it is a useful example of the extent to which structural and symbolic violence are keenly anticipated in Native American Studies. Of course, Fanon is not writing about Indian peoples, and I

⁸⁴ See also Bird 1995, Cook-Lynn 1996b.

do not wish to simply use the findings of this specific psychoanalytical and sociological study of mid-twentieth century racism against the black migrant subject in Europe (in this case Antilleans) to pathologise Indian subjectivities. Nevertheless, Fanon's descriptions of the processes by which colonial discourse is internalised, alongside the ensuing internal conflict he figures as 'a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and an opposing black part' that renders 'a Negro... forever in combat with his own image' (1952 194) does help the reader understand the similar conflict dramatised by 'Crow Testament'. The result of this conflict is that it becomes impossible to differentiate the simulation from the real, and as 'the sky fills with beaks and talons', so Indian peoples become further abstracted and reduced to disparate parts through the use of synecdoche.

The poem's final images of Crow as Christ and as Death offer no escape from the structural violence of colonial discourse. As Christ, Crow puns on the possibility of redemption by redeeming empty beer bottles found on the reservation for five cents each, alluding to the apparent impossibility of manipulating the system that oppresses him to his advantage. Riding into a powwow on 'a pale horse', Crow as the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6:8) receives no reaction from the Indians gathered there, who appear numb to the possibility of cultural obliteration implied by the appearance of this *indian* simulation. The indication here is that many Indian peoples have become subject to what Alfred Arteaga refers to as 'autocolonialism'. In assertions notably similar to those of Fanon, Arteaga writes:

Autocolonialism, in the extreme, requires the Other's adoption of the hegemonic discourse to the extent that the colonizer permits and to the extent that the Other is able to predicate it. The Other assimilates both discourse and the relationships it systematizes, so to the degree the discourse suppresses, the autocolonist effaces or denigrates him/herself from within (17)

Having established the differences between personal, structural, and symbolic violence, and pointed to the colonial discourse that, in creating and sustaining an *indian* simulation, presupposes the inability of Indians to engage with and prosper through city living, I now examine the effects of symbolic violence on Alexie's urban Indians. Whilst 'Crow Testament' offers little hope for those Indian peoples who have accepted and internalised the limitations placed upon them by colonial discourse, I argue that for several of Alexie's urban Indian characters, the moments that reveal the illusions of internalised colonialism prompt a reevaluation of what it means to have transcended the limitations of structural and symbolic violence.

Urban renewal

Several of the urban Indian characters in *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) and *Ten Little Indians* (2003) are dissatisfied with the experiences that constitute their urban existence, and seek or are confronted by forms of danger and excitement that prompt reevaluations of their immediate personal relationships. The characters display an extended form of autocolonialism, in which they are anxious about the absence of *indian* authenticity in their comfortable, urban lives. By seeking or being confronted by an experience involving those Indians they imagine to be authentic manifestations of *indians*, the characters believe that they will recover that authentic Indian aspect of their identity that seems to have been lost in the city. In fact, these characters discover that this perceived absence is merely another effect of the structural and symbolic violence of colonial discourse. The realisation that their ideas about *indians* are illusory prompts these characters to confront and accept their dissatisfaction with being Indian in the city as a symptom of symbolic violence. This

process of decolonization allows the characters to repair their apparently damaged subjectivities by learning to locate authentic experience in the bonds of love and trust.

Mary Lynn of 'Assimilation', a Coeur d'Alene Indian living in Seattle, is no longer sexually excited by Jeremiah, her white husband. Despite her exhaustive research, Mary Lynn is unable to diagnose the symptoms of her disinterest, which she thinks of as a neurological rather than somatic disorder, joking that perhaps she had 'developed some form of sexual dyslexia or had picked up a mutant, contagious, and erotic strain of Attention Deficit Disorder' (*The Toughest Indian...* 2). Her decision to sleep with 'the darkest Indian in Seattle – the man with the greatest amount of melanin' (3) is clearly informed by her associations of Indian men with danger, against which she opposes the predictability and neutrality of white men, like her husband (5). Mary Lynn's actions are informed and justified by a complex web of sources, which are assumed to be true, and internalised accordingly, yet these sources are removed from their historical and material contexts, and their applications thus lead Mary Lynn to false conclusions. For instance, when she notices the wedding ring on the Lummi Indian man's right hand, Mary Lynn leaps to the conclusion that 'this Indian was married to a French woman, since 'some Europeans wore their wedding bands on the right hand' (4). The internalisation of an assumed truth and its decontextualised application leads to a fantasy of complicit adultery that further motivates and justifies her marital transgressions. Similarly, Mary Lynn employs hazy recollections of Primo Levi's qualitative assessments in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), that apparently characterise as guilty and innocent those Jewish people who respectively did and did not survive Nazi

concentration camps, to justify her associations of Indian men with danger. She implies that the deaths of ‘the best’ thirty-five Coeur d’Alene women on the reservation were at the expense of ‘the Coeur d’Alene men – those liars, cheats, and thieves – who’d survived, even thrived’ (5). Her experiences of reality have been mentally revised according to her association of two internalised assumptions. First, she has internalised the colonial image of the *indian* as savage, weakened by civilisation, and only truly happy outside of the city. She then employs a particular reading of Levi’s memoir, ignoring its status as a subjective account, in order to justify this internalisation. The irony here is that Mary Lynn does not recognise the frequently harmful actions of Levi’s fellow survivors as the intended consequences of the personal and structural violence enacted by the Nazi regime, so missing the implication that the apparently criminal survival of those subject to reservation oppression is similarly directed by structural and symbolic violence. Indeed, Mary Lynn’s ignorance is indicative of such symbolic violence at the same time as it perpetuates that violence.

Despite her assertions that her actions cannot be explained solely with reference to her ethnicity, the contradictory assumptions Mary Lynn makes when seducing the anonymous Lummi Indian man replicate this ‘simple and earnest’ (3) leap from ethnicity to circumstance. Mary Lynn projects ‘the taste of a working man’ (4) onto the man, and at the same time invests ‘the ugly scars on his belly and chest’ with ‘a history of knife fighting’ fitting of a ‘warrior’ (5). Her association of the predictable neutrality of white men with ‘Belgium’ (5) should strike as astonishing any reader of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1901). The atrocities enacted by the Belgian King Leopold II and his forces in the Congo during the late 1800s,

including the torture and murder of millions of Congolese people, invite clear comparisons with the contemporaneous colonial practices of the United States' military, and the barbarity of the Nazis.

Mary Lynn's fantasy of being with an *indian* is an extension of the guilt she feels as a result of excluding Indian men from her life. Driven by her internalisation of negative stereotypes about Indian men, this exclusion is initially employed as a deliberate tactic towards her progression in urban society, away from the reservation. Mary Lynn believes that her 'ambition and mendacity' have allowed her to exploit 'dependable' white men in order to gain her desired urban lifestyle (5). Unfortunately, in this comfortable middle-class lifestyle she finds only meaninglessness. An unknowing victim of the structural and symbolic violence of colonial discourse, and numbed further by the trivialities of her roles as worker, mother, and wife, she is prompted to explore *indian* fantasies that she imagines might recover an authentic *indian* identity. Michael Dorris explains that 'exposure to the media blitz on folkloric or fantasy Indians' encourages Indian children 'to "play Indian" [in the same way that it might encourage] their non-native contemporaries. They may be expected to live up to their mythic counterparts and feel like failures when they cry at pain or make noise in the woods' (Martin 104). Although Dorris is referring to children, the influence of this 'media blitz' is plainly apparent in Mary Lynn's *indian* fantasies. Indeed, in this case her husband, or 'non-native counterpart' has also internalised the discourse of colonial superiority, wondering 'how an Indian from the reservation could be so smart' (10). Despite Jeremiah and Mary Lynn's frequent discussions of racism as 'a destructive force they could fight against as a couple, a family', and Jeremiah's belief that race is 'a social construct, illusory', still

the ‘enemy’ that is race is felt as ‘a constant presence, a houseguest and permanent tenant who crept around all the rooms in their shared lives’ (14). Whilst Mary Lynn and Jeremiah have ‘discussed race as a concept’, and Jeremiah has even ‘learned how to recognize that monster in the faces of whites and Indians and in their eyes’ (14), Mary Lynn is presented as ignorant of the source of her *indian* illusions. After telling Jeremiah that he ‘think[s] too much’, she seeks solace in those *indian* fantasies by ‘masturbat[ing] while fantasizing about an Indian man with sundance scars on his chest’ (15). So her fantasies are linked specifically to tribal traditions and the authenticity with which she invests them. These traditions represent the Indian authenticity she imagines herself to have sacrificed by her move to the city. When Mary Lynn ‘estimate[s] there were twenty-two American Indians who had ever felt even a moment of privilege’ (15), the extent to which she has internalised the colonial notion of the *indian* as inherently inferior and bound to a life subordinated to the city-dwelling middle classes becomes clear.

Alexie does not depict the sexual intercourse between Mary Lynn and the Lummi Indian man, referring back to this omission with Mary Lynn’s musing: ‘What’s the point of porno without graphic presentation?’ (8). This reference functions both as sly writerly self-consciousness, thus revealing the illusion of the fiction in which the reader is invested, and as an indication of the anti-climactic nature of the event for Mary Lynn. This fantasy-turned-reality is immediately exposed as nothing more than a simple act of adultery, as Mary Lynn can only repeat to herself: ‘I cheated on my husband, I cheated on my husband’ (7). Mary Lynn’s autocolonial fantasy of recovering some sort of authentic *indian* identity is lost amidst a series of further illusions, similarly designed to promote fantasies of

recovering the healthy, happy, wholesome self, against the inevitability of death. So the cancers suffered by each of Mary Lynn and Jeremiah's parents prompt the couple to substitute smoking 'unfiltered Camels' for 'faux cigarettes filled with some foul-tasting, overwhelmingly organic herb substance' (7). Suddenly figured as '[u]nited', albeit 'in their obsessive hatred', the couple's mutual disgust at the fake cigarettes apparently prompts a mutual remembrance of when they 'resorted to taking vitamins [and] eating free range chicken' (7). Still, the couple are described in terms of artifice, as appearing to be 'the subjects of a Schultz photograph or a Runnette poem'⁸⁵ (8). These symbols of a reality shaped by simulations continue, with Big Macs, a pointedly non-specific Asian restaurant, 'Botticelli eyes', and a prom queen fantasy (9, 10, 11) alerting the reader to the hyperreality that Baudrillard posits as largely constitutive of contemporary American experience.

Mary Lynn's realisation that 'she loved [Jeremiah] for reasons she could not always explain' precedes her finally feeling the 'something' (15-16) that was previously absent, and which she did not find with the Lummi Indian man. The possibility of sharing love here functions as the closest Mary Lynn can come to experiencing something real: a human connection that is not simply implied by internalised ideas about her ethnicity or where she lives, but which, through her active participation, may provide the sense of completion she desires. This connection is mutual trust, the boundaries of which her autocolonial fantasies led her to transgress. The process of decolonization that began with her realisation of the destructive effects of symbolic violence reaches a critical moment when she faces

⁸⁵ James Willard Schultz, a white explorer and author who lived with the Pikuni tribe in the late nineteenth century, and whose writings include *My Life as an Indian* (1907), and (presumably) little-known early twentieth century poet Mabel Runnette.

the possibility of her husband's death. George Ciccariello-Mahler explains that '[t]urning away from the master (the internal function of symbolic decolonial violence), in practice, often coincides with the realization that that most basic proof of human equality—vulnerability to death at the hands of another—also applies to whites' (Ciccariello-Mahler, n. pag.). Indeed, the sudden fear that Jeremiah is 'dying' or 'dead' leads her to assert 'the one truth Sitting Bull never knew: there was at least one white man who could be trusted' (18-19).⁸⁶ This internal revision of the colonial discourse that naturalises the notion of Indian and white peoples as irreconcilable enemies, signals Mary Lynn's '[turn] away from the master'. Now understanding that her achievements in the city are in themselves the transgressive acts of '[r]ebellion, resistance, revolution!' (4) that she imagined her *indian* fantasy might represent, Mary Lynn is able to love Jeremiah 'across the distance' (20).

Writing on mourning, Butler explains that:

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. (2004 22).

I contend that the loss of the colonial fantasy displayed by Alexie's urban Indian characters constitutes a loss which, in being briefly mourned, reveals to those characters the significance of the connections they have made in the city, *despite* the internalisation of colonial discourse. In several of these stories, crucial to this revelation is the projection of that mourning onto a loved one, if only in the

⁸⁶ Although there is no record of Sitting Bull's absolute distrust of white men, it is certainly reasonable to assume that Sitting Bull would hesitate to trust the increasingly violent representatives of the government that ordered and enacted his murder. (See Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* [1970]).

character's imagination, in order that their emotional, social, and economic achievements are rendered wholly visible. Butler similarly asserts that grief (which, again, she does not distinguish from mourning) 'furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility' (22). In these short stories, the four stage process of decolonization that I detailed above ends in precisely the character's exposure to the successful connections that allow them to discover a sense of their urban Indian identity liberated from the discourse of colonialism.

The protagonists of 'Class' and 'Indian Country' from *The Toughest Indian in the World* face similar situations, and their stories play out with fairly similar results. Those of 'Lawyer's League', 'Can I Get a Witness?', 'Flight Patterns', 'What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?', and (to a lesser extent) 'The Search Engine' from *Ten Little Indians* depict characters who appear to have moved beyond personal decolonization. I only briefly summarise the stories from *The Toughest Indian in the World* here, as I do not wish the establishment of a structural pattern to descend into perfunctory repetition. I then briefly discuss 'Lawyer's League' from *Ten Little Indians*, which moves beyond the moments of personal decolonization in *The Toughest Indian in the World*, to the possibility of decolonizing the structures that maintain the system of Euramerican dominance.

Despite his success as a corporate lawyer in Seattle, Spokane Indian Edgar Eagle Runner pretends to be 'an Aztec' who is 'descended from ritual cannibals' to impress his white women, and his mother is 'overjoyed' by his marriage to a white woman, precisely because the 'simple mathematics' will '[kill] the Indian in us' (*The*

Toughest Indian... 40). Dissatisfied with his marriage, he seeks a drunken fight in an Indian bar, believing 'he is Crazy Horse' (53), is beaten up, and then tries to seduce the bartender who protects him. This personally violent experience exposes Edgar to the effects of structural violence upon these working-class Indian people, reminding him that '[f]or most of [his] life, [he'd] dreamed about the world where [he] currently resided' (55). The realisation that he has been party to that oppression through symbolic violence causes him to reevaluate his relative successes, and the closing scene in which the bloodied Edgar returns to his wife in their marital bed, proclaiming 'I was gone...But now I'm back' (56) suggests his willingness to rebuild their marriage. Low Man Smith of 'Indian Country' is a Coeur d'Alene mystery writer who was 'born and raised in Seattle, didn't speak his own tribal language, and had visited his home reservation only six times in his life' (121). Low Man's naiveté is made immediately and comically apparent. He is equated with white tourists who, unaware of the 'violence...revenge...[and] retaliatory beatings' that take place on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation, invest the 'wet kind of monotony' that they witness on their fleeting visits with 'spiritual[ity] and magic' (122). Following the cancellation of his scheduled meeting with Carlotta, a Navajo poet whom he intends to marry, he tries to garner spiritual assistance from her boss, who he insists on calling an 'elder' (125). Low Man's reliance on stereotypes and fantasy is gradually eroded by the events of the narrative, until he finds himself preventing a Spokane Indian Mormon man from assaulting his daughter for announcing her wish to marry her partner. So Low Man realises that his *indian* fantasies bear no relation to reality, and that the most appropriate way to communicate with the Indians he meets is not through romantic cliché and jokes at the expense of economically oppressed Indian peoples

(‘I make so much money that white people think I’m white’ [144]), but by appealing to the emotions associated with familial love and grief. Edgar’s decolonization reaches its cathartic apex when he asks the abusive, homophobic father ‘What are you going to do when she’s gone?’ (149), referring to his daughter. This refers back to Low Man’s previous attempts to invest the word ‘gone’ with ‘a whole different meaning’ (123) that might somehow indicate Carlotta’s presence, and not her having run off with another man. With the meaning of the word now ranging only from absence to death, Low Man’s understanding of his position relative to these reservation Indians forces him to reevaluate his actions and attitudes.

To summarise up to this point, these stories dramatise the processes by which structural violence becomes internalised as symbolic violence. In the examples given, this is specifically the idea that Indian peoples must sacrifice their cultural authenticity if they are to live in the city, which is internalised and expressed as an acute dissatisfaction with city life and/or fantasises of recovering that sacrificed *indian* identity. The stories include a scene in which the urban Indian character is driven to test the reality of these internalisations about *indians* through some confrontation that is dangerous or somehow relatively transgressive, which demonstrates the practical harm enacted by structural and symbolic violence. Inevitably, this confrontation does not lead to the recovery of an *indian* identity, instead revealing the illusory, colonial nature of this fantasy. At this point the characters begin to relinquish their internalisations of colonialism, and most proceed to find satisfaction in the knowledge that by their emotional, social and economic successes in the city, they have already successfully defied the structural violence of

colonial discourse. In decolonizing his urban Indian characters, Alexie points to the possibilities of success and happiness for Indians in the city.

As mentioned, the related stories in *Ten Little Indians* take these moments of personal decolonization as their starting point, yet still adhere loosely to the pattern described above. 'Lawyer's League' is told from the perspective of Richard, a highly successful half-Spokane Indian, half-African American lawyer whose presidential aspirations are jeopardised by a violent altercation during a basketball game.

Richard's critical engagement with colonial discourse becomes apparent when he decides against sleeping with Teresa, a white woman, because of the future votes he imagines he will lose from those who disapprove of 'miscegenation' (*Ten Little Indians* 61). Although he admits that '[p]ersonally speaking' this was the wrong decision, he feels that '[p]olitically speaking, [he] had no choice' (61). Richard clearly understands the restrictions placed upon him by a political system dominated by white men, and seeks to challenge this system externally by managing the 'Native Voices Now! voter registration drive' (54), thus actively encouraging Indians to vote. This all seems relatively positive, until Richard is goaded into punching a lawyer during a basketball game, which leaves him with a publicly accessible criminal record. The crucial moment of this story is not the violence, nor the racist abuse that provokes it, but the apparent foreshadowing of Richard's loss of control in a conversation with Teresa. First speaking of politicians as wearing 'public masks over private faces', Teresa then compares them to house cats, explaining that '[w]e didn't domesticate cats. They domesticated themselves. But not totally, you know?...there's eventually going to be a day when it goes back wild, you know? When it reverts to its true nature' (60). The implication here is that if Richard truly wishes to become a

presidential candidate, he must continue to publicly negotiate these same processes of structural-symbolic violence even after he appears to have achieved personal decolonization. As a politician, the more successful he is, the more visible he becomes, and the less control he has over his personal and political lives. His perception by the public, a portrait manipulated by ‘campaign ads’ and ‘visuals [that] silently condemn’ (61), will become the simulation of an identity to which his every public action must be shown to conform. The story suggests that structural-symbolic violence is at the foundations of the U.S. political system, and that the process of joining the political elite, when this is even possible, requires the *suppression* of personal politics, in favour of the public acceptance of and conformity to the prevailing ideals. Richard’s experiences offer an affirmative answer to Butler’s question: ‘[t]he body has its invariably public dimension [and] if I deny that prior to the formation of my “will,” my body related me to others whom I did not choose to have in proximity to myself...then am I denying the social conditions of my embodiment in the name of autonomy?’ (2004 26). Although the story ends with Richard’s descent into an imagined trial-by-press-conference, in which he must excuse even his private thoughts to the media, his admission that he has ‘a limited range of motion’ (68) can be read as an acceptance that the racism and ignorance that currently pervades the U.S. political system deprives it of the capacity for structural decolonization. The fundamental challenge remains personal decolonization, and the (ideally accompanying) realisation by urban Indian peoples that they are a fundamental part of the ‘polis’, and so must engage with politics if there is to be any favourable change. The story implies that at this stage, a successful negotiation of the system requires both activism that empowers Indian voters, and a pacifism that

prevents the type of notoriety or success through which control of one's image and politics is sacrificed to that system. Richard's transgression of the latter requirement, both in his violence and his refusal to play by the lawyers' rules, prompts a mourning of the loss of his presidential fantasies, followed by an acceptance of the crucial political powers he already wields as a successful and conscientious black-Indian politician. Basketball here proves analogous, in that the individual players are not judged by their team's win or loss, but by their personal statistics, which either empower or hinder the members of their team, or community. Although there is not room here to develop this idea further, Alexie makes some reference to basketball in his every publication, and his preoccupation with the dramas and structure of the sport is an aspect of his fiction and poetry to which I hope to respond critically elsewhere.

The reevaluations of the importance of love, trust, and social responsibility presented in the above stories are again finally reminiscent of Butler's 'Violence, Mourning, Politics' from her *Precarious Life*, in which she argues that because 'all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody...each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies' (2004 20). Butler's location of community in a shared sense of having 'desired and loved [and] struggled to find the conditions for our desire' (2004 20) is remarkably similar to the sense of human connection and social responsibility ultimately discovered through the struggles of Mary Lynn, Low Man, Edgar Eagle Runner, and Richard 'to find the conditions of [their] desire'. The mourning here is slightly different to that discussed in chapter four, in that it is in mourning the loss of their colonial *indian* fantasies that the characters (at least those in *The Toughest Indian in the World*) experience in their

imaginations the loss of loved ones, which prompts a sudden and urgent need to regain and strengthen their personal relationships.

This chapter has interpreted Alexie's representations of structural-symbolic violence as stories of personal decolonization that serve to counter the colonial discourse that seeks to deny Indian peoples access to the city. My readings demonstrated that the process of decolonization experienced by several of Alexie's urban characters loosely follows a pattern of four stages. First, the characters display a variety of grief over the impending loss of an authentic *indian* self, which has been sacrificed in order that they enter the city. Next, a confrontation with this imagined authentic self reveals the illusory nature of this internalisation of colonial discourse. Third, their relinquishing of this colonial fantasy is felt as a loss, and initiates a sudden and brief process of mourning. Finally, this sense of loss is projected onto a loved one, which forces a reevaluation of their emotional, social, and economic successes. This reevaluation asserts the urban Indian character's successful engagements with city life as the discovery of their potential future, over and against the recovery of an illusory past. I have argued that the analysis of personal violence in Alexie's *Indian Killer* has taken priority over analysis of structural violence in his later fiction and poetry. Instances of personal violence and their detrimental effects are simply easier to find in both fiction and reality, and though this is no less worthwhile, the less visible structural-symbolic violence of everyday life should be understood as both similarly active within Alexie's fiction and poetry, and at least equally detrimental in real life and to his urban Indian characters. Thus I have sought to provide an analysis of structural-symbolic violence here, arguing alongside Butler that the vulnerability that humans share to this particular process of unseen violence

is not limited by physical proximity. We might be critical of the fairly repetitive pattern discerned in Alexie's stories of urban decolonization, which could be taken as denying the often exclusive variability of individuals locating some sort of meaning in response to loss, however, the preceding chapters of this thesis attend to Alexie's representation of the exclusions and distances that sustain such variation. These stories function as crucial conceptualisations of the process of decolonization as it may come to bear on urban Indian peoples.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have sought, gathered, and inspected the features of Sherman Alexie's uniquely urban Indian literature. By introducing the disjunctions of Indian-white histories and traditions at an early stage, I provided evidence to support my claim that a particular attention to the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity has come to define Alexie's literary output, informing his literary turn from the reservation to the city. I then placed Alexie's urban Indian literature in dialogue with several specific types of literary precursor, being those established as authoritative or archetypal. This initiated a form of intertextual dialectics that worked to demonstrate points at which objectivity and subjectivity collide, merge, and become indistinguishable. The introduction found productive articulations of Vizenor's critical and cultural theory in Alexie's urban Indian literatures, despite Alexie's protests and Vizenor's trickiness. Chapter one located the community in 'Distances' that other critical approaches denied, and found Alexie confronting separatism with the possibilities of self-exclusion. That exclusion was active in chapter two, as Coyote Springs found themselves trapped between the physical and emotional hopelessness of the reservation and the pressures to *be somebody* in the city. Alexie's trickster-like dialogue with trickster traditions initiated an ironic turn away from both the repetitive reservation soundtrack *and* the portrayals and sales of *indian* authenticity, towards relative freedom in urban anonymity.

Chapter three saw Alexie taking to those city streets, to track down and interrogate the mystery thriller genre, which implicated itself in a series of crimes of objectivity against the great varieties of human existence. This investigation into the

conditions of urban violence discovered the criminal ideological catalysts of thoughtless language, colonial discourse, and academic greed, and revealed the composite identity of the killer. Chapter four situated Alexie's contemporary urban mourners alongside the mystery and manners of his generic and poetic precursors, discovering that public spectacles of grief and mourning could probably do with taking a back seat to Death. The story of Frank Snake Church suggests that, if identity is a form of self-remembering, then nostalgia is a form of self-forgetting. Thus Alexie's apparently subjective ethics of grieving only gains meaning and efficacy when subjects together take on the responsibilities of intersubjective meaning-making.

Chapter five witnessed Zits' full withdrawal into the spiralling psychic structures of trauma. The novel speaks of the ease with which one can construct a personal vision of justice, before plunging the reader into the ethical swamp of the *justifiable*. The recreation of violent events in the history of Indian-white relations brings to the fore the inaugurations of colonial borders, and the means by which individuals and communities deem acts necessary. Following on from *Flight*'s happy ending, chapter six liberated its urban Indian characters from the myths that mobilise structural violence. This process required the recognition of objective truth as at best based in intersubjectivity, and so open to dispute. Here the city increased the possibility of this personal decolonization by intensifying the symptoms to the point of action. Butler's ethic of shared vulnerability attested to the perspectival nature of truths.

The structure of my thesis was designed to first catalogue and accumulate the variety of effects of colonialism on Indian peoples, both reservation and urban,

before Alexie's fiction and poetry moved from the former to the latter. The thesis concluded by examining the processes of decolonization by which Alexie's characters came to terms with living in the city.

Throughout my research, I have found that studying American and Indian literatures repeatedly returns me to consider the roles of history and tradition. These forms of narrative, the former traditionally seen as objective, the latter historically seen as subjective, can swiftly switch roles. In this way one can be bound by traditions, and excluded from histories, and at the same time aware of the mythologies that grant these narratives power. The small ceremonies and rituals that populate Alexie's poetry and fiction, though described with words, plot that space and time beyond increments of distance, division, and value.

There are a number of directions in which further study may now be undertaken, both back to Alexie for further readings of his urban Indians, and forth to test this approach on other urban Indian literatures. Egawa's *Madchild Running* is a fine example, and if read alongside Hale's *The Jailing of Cecilia Capture* then this would constitute a fine Northwest grouping for critical inspection. During this thesis I have not discussed in detail the effects of consumer capitalism on urban Indian subjectivities, to which Alexie alludes in 'The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless' from *War Dances*, amongst other recent stories. I would also like to explore Alexie's physical depictions of Seattle, particularly as they compare with *Native Seattle* (2007) by Coll Thrush, which revises the history of the city, so challenging the separation of Native and settler histories. Basketball has yet to be explored as a meaningful feature, despite its ubiquity in Alexie's fiction and poetry, and I believe there is a strong case for a consideration of the meaningful narrative of nostalgia and hope that the sport's

seasons, playoffs, and finals bring to both players and observers.

The most significant omission from this thesis is sustained engagement with Alexie's most recent collections *War Dances* and *Blasphemy*. Although *War Dances* is discussed briefly above, the collection is particularly significant for its inclusion of Alexie's first stories and poems not to feature any Indian characters. Whilst other stories cover the familiar topics of alcoholism, death, and suspicious representations of Indian identities (for example, the writing of biography in 'Battle Fatigue'), the shift to sustained representation of non-Native perspectives is clearly deserving of further critical attention.

Blasphemy is something of a 'greatest hits' collection, of which half the stories have been published in previous collections, although several of the new pieces are immediately apparent for their relative tonal quietude and brevity. The activist anger and keen sense of irony that helped position Alexie's earlier work is still present in stories such as 'Green World', in which the (again notably) white narrator stands by as an Indian man fires a rifle at windmills on tribal land, and 'Breakfast' continues Alexie's meditations on patrilineal identity, but there is an eerie stillness to both, even as the son witnesses his father's microscopic corpse pour from a cracked egg. Of course, there are tonal shifts, and the first story, 'Cry, Cry, Cry', being a grisly and physically violent account of meth addiction, is distinctly reminiscent of the brutal darkness of *Indian Killer*. As such, this story feels out of place in the collection, which in Alexie's oeuvre, is surely a reason to give it further consideration.

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