

## **Tracing Trauma: Histories and Intermediality in Sherman Alexie’s Fiction**

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This paper examines the ways in which Sherman Alexie’s fiction traces, and bears witness to, a collective trauma in the aftermath of what Russell Thornton has called the “American Indian Holocaust.” My claims that literature may provide instances of witnessing are informed by Dominick LaCapra’s discussions of the complex issue of truth claims with regards to the representation of traumatic events, and his discussions on what differentiates history from fiction. In exploring the link between history and theory with reference to trauma in Alexie’s fiction, this paper argues in line with LaCapra that trauma has a historic specificity, and thus a limited affect. As fiction allows for trauma to be cathartically and narratively mastered, fiction is also able to capture elements of experiences and emotions that are, in a sense, non-narrative. In its ability to evoke a historical trauma as a radical problem for understanding, fiction may thus, paradoxically, communicate what is inherently wordless. As Alexie’s narratives reflect “[t]he paradoxical impossibility and simultaneous necessity to represent, to communicate, to speak of suffering,” his fiction becomes an Inter-Medium for real histories.

## Tracing Trauma: Histories and Intermediality in Sherman Alexie's Fiction

This paper Hinges Upon Two Crucial Components/Convictions:

- The impossible and simultaneous necessity to represent, to communicate, to speak of suffering.
- The possibilities of fiction (as a medium) to represent, to communicate, to speak of suffering.

### Theoretical Framework

In my recently defended dissertation, *Tracing Trauma: The Narration of Suffering in Sherman Alexie's Fiction*, I examine the ways in which Sherman Alexie narrates suffering in his first four works of fiction: the short story collections *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), and the novels *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996). I also occasionally refer to his latest short story collection *Ten Little Indians* (2003), which was released in Swedish by Ordfront bearing the title *Rödskinn*.

In my work I show that Alexie's fiction traces and bears witness to a collective trauma in the aftermath of what Russell Thornton has called the "American Indian holocaust." I approach the concept of collective trauma in a similar manner to that of Kai Erikson, who talks about traumatized communities. Erikson broadens the concept of trauma by adding a social dimension. Erikson claims that "the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body" (185). But Erikson also claims that "traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can come to create a mood, an ethos—a group culture, almost—that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up" (185). Trauma, Erikson argues, can in fact "serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can" (186), thus suggesting that trauma can even *create* communities (190, emphasis in the original). In Erikson's sense of trauma, then, trauma is a possible dimension and gathering element of a community.

In the aftermath of the systematic oppression created by the Euro-American westernizing and "civilizing" of America, American Indian storytellers have created a body of literature which speaks potently about suffering and the negotiations, both cultural and personal, necessary for survival as American Indians in the United States. This literary output, Ortiz argues, is involved in a continuing political and spiritual resistance against "forced colonization" and is a struggle "for a people to retain and maintain their lives," which provides insight into a national Indian experience ("The Historical Matrix" 66). As in many other instances of colonial oppression and the resistance against it, then, American Indian storytellers use literature as an arena for speaking out.

Although it should be emphasized that not every literary work by an American Indian writer narrates an inheritance of oppression, genocide, catastrophic disease, and hurtful racism, my work rests on the conviction that the literary output generally referred to as American Indian literature or Native American literature is uniquely placed to bear witness to the historical and structural trauma of the American Indian community. My claims that literature may provide instances of witnessing are informed by Dominick LaCapra's discussions of the complex issue of truth claims with regards to the representation of traumatic events, and his discussions on what differentiates history from fiction. I find LaCapra's discussion on the possibilities of representing trauma that fiction opens up to be particularly important, as opposed to the attempt "to professionalize history under the banner of objectivity" (*Writing History* 2). LaCapra here argues that

narratives in fiction may . . . involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible “feel” for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through documentary methods. (13)

Two literary works that evoke such “a plausible ‘feel’ for experience and emotion,” LaCapra argues, are Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*—“with respect to the aftermath of slavery and the role of transgenerational, phantomlike forces that haunt later generations”—and Albert Camus’s *The Fall*—“with respect to the reception of the Holocaust” (14).

LaCapra here argues against poststructural readings of trauma which claim that “there is no full presence that may be represented” (*History and Memory* 103). In such readings, LaCapra concludes, “the past itself [becomes] an object of reconstruction on the basis of traces and traces of traces” (103-104).<sup>1</sup>

In my work I argue to the contrary (and in line with LaCapra) that historical traumas can indeed be traced, or referenced, in the realm of fiction. Fiction, I would like to argue, may capture certain elements of experiences and emotions that are, in a sense, non-narrative, and therefore fiction may, paradoxically, communicate what is inherently wordless.

Because literary fiction must not provide historical evidence, and because it allows for the inclusion of the subjective, fiction is able to evoke, or trace, historical events that cause problems regarding understanding. In fact, I would like to argue, it is the very use of ‘indirect means’ that enable writers of fiction to evoke a historical trauma *as* a radical problem for understanding (1). The signifying practices and codes of fiction thus allows writers like Alexie to ‘trace’ actual histories—not contain them, or fully represent them, but simply provide traces back to them.

### Alexie’s Trauma Narratives

The psychological turmoil caused by trauma finds literary expression in the short story “Every Little Hurricane,” which opens Alexie’s first short story collection *The Lone Ranger*. Narrated by the young boy Victor, the short story starts with a hurricane as it “dropped from the sky in 1976 and fell so hard on the Spokane Indian Reservation that it knocked Victor, from bed and his latest nightmare” (1). The story ends when the storm ascends and disappears, which is also the moment when Victor finally “closed his eyes, fell asleep” (11). In the time period that passes between the appearance and the disappearance of the hurricane, we are told about the events that take place at a New Year’s Eve party given by Victor’s parents. Events from the characters’ childhood are also inserted into the structure of the story. The hurricane thus provides a framework for the story at the same time as it functions as a catalyst of memory for the characters.

The characters in “Every Little Hurricane” live in a turmoil of violent behaviour, heavy drinking, and painful memories. Their destructive and chaotic behaviour imbues the chronology and order of the plot, which is interrupted by flashbacks and traumatic memories. Framed and formed by the tumultuous forces of the hurricane, the story is plotted in what could be termed a traumatic formlessness. Just as the landscape is devastated, the characters are reduced to chaos, disorder, and helplessness. The trauma in “Every Little Hurricane” thus surfaces both in the structure of the plot and in the metaphor of the hurricane. Similar to how

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1 According to LaCapra, “[h]istorical losses or lacks can be dealt with in ways that may significantly improve conditions—indeed, effect basic structural transformation—without promising secular salvation or a sociopolitical return to a putatively lost (or lacking) unity or community. Paradise absent is different from paradise lost: it may not be seen as annihilated only to be regained in some hoped-for, apocalyptic future or sublimely blank utopia that, through a kind of creation *ex nihilo*, will bring total renewal, salvation, or redemption” (*Writing History* 56-57, emphasis in original).

the storm appears without warning and how it cannot be avoided, leaving only ruins behind, the fragmented story surfaces as a symptom of trauma.

At the moment when the hurricane descends on the reservation, an argument between Victor's uncles, Adolph and Arnold, escalates into a fistfight. As "the winds increased and the first tree fell," the two Indians "raged across the room at each other" (1-2). As the evening progresses, "the storm that had caused their momentary anger had not died. Instead, it moved from Indian to Indian at the party, giving each a specific, painful memory" (8). As we are taken back to Victor's early childhood, Victor recollects the Christmas when he saw his father weep because he did not have any money to buy gifts, and the times when the kitchen cupboards and the refrigerator were empty of food. Later in the story, Arnold and Adolph recollect how, when they were children, they "hid crackers in their shared bedroom so they would have something to eat" (8). Such stories of poverty and hunger are accompanied by stories that speak of racism and violence:

Victor's father remembered the time his own father was spit on as they waited for a bus in Spokane. . . . Victor's mother remembered how the Indian Health Service doctor sterilized her moments after Victor was born. . . . Other Indians . . . remembered their own pain. This pain grew, expanded. (8)

The characters' painful recollections suggest that there is something that has been repressed. Something underneath the surface — of the characters' consciousness and of the plot itself — is threatening to break through.

Gradually, Victor comes to the realization that his memory is central to the representation, and by acknowledging the transformation of pain into suffering, Victor not only expounds his own traumas but assumes the role of an emphatic witness. As the story progresses, it is the characters' traumatic memories, which return as repressed, that constitute the narrative.

As the hurricane devastates the landscape, other characters besides Arnold and Adolph also experience physical pain, some as a result of other fights:

During that night, his aunt Nezy broke her arm when an unidentified Indian woman pushed her down the stairs. Eugene Boyd broke a door playing indoor basketball. Lester Falls Apart passed out on top of the stove and somebody turned the burners on high. James Many Horses sat in the corner and told so many bad jokes that three or four Indians threw him out the door into the snow. (10)

The characters' memories are here intimately entangled with physical pain. Directly after Victor describes the fights and the physical pain that the characters go through, he acknowledges that "there was other pain" (4). This "other pain," Victor ponders, is caused by his own "personal hurricanes" and has resulted in "[m]emories not destroyed, but forever changed and damaged" (4). This "other pain," which, Victor tells us, made "his chest throb[...] with absence," is thus psychological rather than physical, and should be referred to as suffering. As *Hurricane* encourages a comparison between the damage that the hurricane causes the landscape and the damage that physical and psychological violence causes the human body and the human psyche.

Yet another comparison which is encouraged by the choice of vocabulary is that between the damage caused by natural forces and the damage caused by human hands in "Every Little Hurricane." The effect that the heavy intake of alcohol has on the characters is likened to the effect that torrents of rain have on the landscape:

In other nightmares, in his everyday reality, Victor watched his father take a drink of vodka on a completely empty stomach. Victor could hear that near-poison fall, then hit, flesh and blood, nerve and vein. Maybe it was like lightning tearing an old tree into halves. Maybe it was like a wall of water, a reservation tsunami, crashing onto a small beach (6).

Victor acknowledges that he hates rain, “[t]he damp. Humidity. Low clouds and lies” (6), and that “[he] feared that he was going to drown while it was raining” (7). In his dreams, the whirlpools of rain, in which he fears that he will drown, are made out of “whiskey, vodka, tequila, those fluids swallowing him just as easily as he swallowed them” (7). After having seen an old Indian man drown in a mud puddle at the age of five, Victor says, “[he] understood what that meant, how it defined nearly everything. Fronts. Highs and lows. Thermals and undercurrents. Tragedy” (7). At the end, though, an entire landscape as well as an entire community are devastated. The storm has effectively effaced difference, as everyone is affected by the storm. As the story ends, “all the Indians, the eternal survivors, gathered to count their losses” (11).

If the storm that rages across the Spokane Indian reservation disturbs normal atmospheric conditions, the characters’ memories, muddled by alcohol, give evidence of a collective trauma. Similar to how the storm leaves behind “random debris and broken furniture,” this collective trauma has affected the Indian characters to such a degree that they are broken—psychologically, culturally, and socially (11). Just as the hurricane is caused by a set of natural conditions, so too are the fights also caused by a set of conditions. In other words, the fights, like the hurricane, are symptoms of something else, namely that of trauma.

As Alexie, in his fiction, allows for trauma to be cathartically and narratively mastered, he is able to capture elements of experiences and emotions that are, in a sense, non-narrative. In its ability to evoke a historical trauma *as* a radical problem for understanding, fiction may thus, paradoxically, communicate what is inherently wordless. As Alexie’s narratives reflect “[t]he paradoxical impossibility and simultaneous necessity to represent, to communicate, to speak of suffering,” his fiction becomes an Inter-Medium for real histories.