

# Sherman Alexie:

## *A Collection of Critical Essays*

■ *Edited by Jeff Berglund and Jan Roush*

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CHAPTER 13

Healing the Soul Wound in *Flight*  
and *The Absolutely True Diary of a  
Part-Time Indian*

*Flight* (2007), Sherman Alexie's first novel since *Indian Killer* in 1996, addresses themes he has explored throughout his career: absent or imperfect fathers, fathers and sons, alcohol and alcoholism, colonialism, history, notions of masculinity, love and family, and the search for identity. Like the protagonist of *Indian Killer*, the main character in *Flight* is a young, emotionally wounded male Indian orphan adopted into a white family.<sup>1</sup> But the two novels create very different visions of redemption for their protagonists, a contrast that attests to the distance Alexie has traveled over the past decade in contemplating the ravages of colonialism, racism, and violence, as well as the possibilities of reconciliation and healing.

Alexie has said that he sees *Flight* as his answer to *Indian Killer*'s nihilist vision.<sup>2</sup> While his works have frequently attempted to narrate historical trauma, *Flight*, and Alexie's subsequent novel for young adults, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), implicitly explore the possibilities for healing the tragic legacy of genocide and colonialism in ways that no earlier works have. In these two novels, empathy, compas-

sion and forgiveness mark a possible way out of suffering and grief. *Flight* and *Diary* convey hopefulness not apparent earlier in Alexie's career.

*Flight's* protagonist is a shame- and rage-filled adolescent who commits mass murder in the lobby of a Seattle bank. As Alexie embarked on the book tour for *Flight* in April of 2007, the massacre at Virginia Tech had just occurred: Alexie seemed attuned to the many alienated, angry, and hurting young people in the United States. Due to the novel's teenage protagonist, some reviewers read *Flight* as a young adult novel: "Was it perhaps meant as a young-adult book—a morality tale of a teenager battling issues of identity and history, alcoholism and acne, who, through some strange 'back-to-the-future' fantasy trip, arrives at an understanding of himself and his country?"<sup>3</sup> Alexie's next novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, published approximately six months after *Flight*, was indeed written for and marketed to a young adult audience to significant acclaim.<sup>4</sup>

While adolescent readers can undoubtedly enjoy both *Flight* and *Diary*, the gravity of the issues they imaginatively address make for a powerful adult reading experience with themes as vital as those addressed by the essays of James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* and Cornel West in *Race Matters*: the despair of young people living in communities ravaged by racism, poverty, and hopelessness.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that Native American and African American historical experience that results in widespread despair is the same but that Baldwin and West's proposals for curing the illness of despair seem to be reflected in Alexie's new works, more so than interventions recommended by theorists of Native American trauma or Native healers.<sup>6</sup> Native American historical trauma theories, however, are highly appropriate as a context for reading Alexie's work.

The "soul wound" caused by the colonization of American Indians is a theoretical concept specific to Native Americans that illuminates Alexie's treatment of cultural trauma. I want to discuss *Flight* and *Diary* in terms of Alexie's "thematization of suffering"<sup>7</sup> and the soul wound,<sup>8</sup> the deep, long-lasting anguish that began with the arrival of Columbus on Turtle Island and the subsequent death, dispossession, and denigration of millions of Native people in the Americas. This wounding of the soul results

from the trauma of colonialism and genocide and the dominant culture's lack of acknowledgement of the American Indian holocaust: "Historical trauma response has been identified and is delineated as a constellation of features in reaction to the multi-generational, collective, historical and cumulative psychic wounding over time, both over the life span and across generations."<sup>9</sup> Theorists of Native American historical trauma have formulated several phases that include contact with Europeans, economic competition, an invasion/war period, a subjugation and reservation period, a boarding-school period, a forced-relocation and termination period, and ongoing forms of colonialism.<sup>10</sup>

In "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief," Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra DeBruyn identify high rates of suicide, homicide, accidental deaths, domestic violence, child abuse, and alcoholism as "the product of a legacy of chronic trauma and unresolved grief across generations[;] racism and oppression, including *internalized oppression* are continuous forces which exacerbate these destructive behaviors."<sup>11</sup> The soul wound, historical trauma, or historical unresolved grief originate from "the loss of lives, land, and vital aspects of Native culture promulgated by the European conquest of the Americas."<sup>12</sup>

*Flight* and *Diary* are narratives of trauma that bear witness to American Indian history and experience and seek witnesses to their characters' ongoing suffering. Recognizing the traumatized victim can alleviate "disenfranchised grief . . . grief that persons experience when a loss cannot be openly acknowledged or publicly mourned,"<sup>13</sup> or the sense among many Indian people that negative constructions of them as subhuman and lacking a full range of human qualities and emotions make them seem incapable of having feelings, the capacity to mourn, and therefore no need or right to grieve.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, many of Alexie's characters—*Flight's* protagonist Zits in particular—can be recognized in Lisa Poupert's claim that "the intense historical unresolved grief and pain that exists is [sic] accompanied by an extreme rage at the dominant culture for abuses past and present. And, like Indian grief and pain, this rage is also invalidated by the dominant culture and denied avenues of expression."<sup>15</sup> This rage is generally turned inward and expressed through depression, anxiety, substance

abuse, and suicide, and manifested externally within families and communities through domestic and other forms of violence.<sup>16</sup> When Alexie was asked by Åse Nygren if there is a central narrative of violence in Indian literature, he responded, “Well, yes, I think so. After all, we come out of genocide, and our entire history is filled with murder and war. Perhaps violence is not the right word, though. But there is definitely a lot of humiliation in Native literature. We write about being humiliated a lot. And that takes physical forms, emotional forms and mental forms. I think Native literature is the literature of humiliation and shame.”<sup>17</sup>

Hence, Alexie feels that—as a result of this grim history—suffering and even trauma are fundamental to the experience of being Native American. Ceaseless suffering attains an epistemological status, as Alexie told Nygren,

The fact is you cannot separate our identity from our pain. At some point it becomes primarily our identity. The whole idea of authenticity—“How Indian are you?”—is the most direct result of the fact that we don’t know what an American Indian identity is. There is no measure anymore. There is no way of knowing, except perhaps through our pain. . . . As for the characters—I make them suffer! I specifically designed them to be suffering. John Smith [from *Indian Killer*], for instance, there’s no redemption there; there’s no healing, there’s no talking cure. For a lot of the characters there’s no cure. All there is, is suffering. The whole point of their identity is suffering. What keeps coming back to me is that when I think about Indians all I think about is suffering. My first measure of any Indian is pain.<sup>18</sup>

I argue that Alexie’s stories are narratives of trauma seeking witnesses to his characters’—and, by extension, Native peoples’—grief and pain. Alexie wants to dramatize Native history, experience, and suffering to disrupt widespread historical amnesia. Nancy J. Peterson argues that ethnic American writers tell history through “literature as a genre because ‘what really happened’ is often so excruciatingly painful that to articulate these events as American history would be to invite utter disbelief.”<sup>19</sup> Alexie incisively characterizes those who don’t recognize or validate the



vast pain of Native people: “The romantic idea is that if people are feeling a lot of pain you’d wish that people would empathize more. I wish that was true. . . . Honestly, I think that people who can’t empathize with the [Indian] mascot [issue] or with feminism, for instance, are not so far removed from a criminal. The inability to understand why something might be offensive is a form of sociopathy.”<sup>20</sup>

For Native Americans, historical trauma is not merely a matter of painful legacies; suffering is ongoing and maintained by present-day forms of colonialism, including—to cite one well-known example—the reduction of Indian religious traditions to sports mascots. Because of this continuing abuse, Nancy Van Styvendale argues that trauma theory is “crucial to the field of Native literatures[.]. . . One of my functions as literary critic is to recognize the fact of trauma in Native literatures (with all the attendant benefits and dangers of such a move) by using the lexicon of trauma to make sense of the constructions of history, woundedness, recovery, and temporality that I see expressed within this literature.”<sup>21</sup> Van Styvendale challenges the assumption “of trauma as rooted in event, where ‘event’ is defined, as it most commonly is, as a singular, recognizable, and chronologically bounded incident” and insists it be understood as “cumulative, collective, intergenerational, and intersubjective[;]. . . the trauma of Native peoples, when understood as trans/historical, exceeds any attempt to fix its location or define its event, even as it demands our attention to historically specific atrocities.”<sup>22</sup> For example, Van Styvendale thinks the removal of *Indian Killer*’s protagonist from his Indian mother to a white family and his subsequent loss of identity and resulting psychosis reflects a widespread practice of adopting out Indian children that the Bureau of Indian Affairs began in the late 1950s and was stopped only by Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978.<sup>23</sup> This specific, historical removal is linked to the many removals, dispossessions, and relocations of Native people through time.

Van Styvendale insists on the efficacy of trauma theory to elucidate Native people and their literature for several reasons: “The deployment of this language provides Native communities with a means through which they can give expression to their collective and individual pain [through] linguistic and diagnostic categories that, because they are

sanctioned within the dominant culture, hold out the hope of having this pain recognized, legitimated, and compensated for.”<sup>24</sup> She argues further that the lack of research on Native trauma “reveals an institutional complicity in larger, nationwide attempts to forget the trauma of Native peoples. This repression ameliorates ‘white guilt’ for the theft of the North American land base and obfuscates the need for Euroamericans to take responsibility for privileges that continue to accrue from this theft—and its denial.”<sup>25</sup> Just as importantly, Van Styvendale contends that seeing trauma as an “event outside the norm . . . allows the ‘norm’ itself to go unrecognized as the site of multiple traumas, an oversight that in relation to the systemic oppression of Native North Americans, justifies the status quo of domestic colonialism.”<sup>26</sup> One of the many accomplishments of *Flight* and *Diary* is the exploration of the multiple traumas of ongoing colonialism (as well as the violence of American culture) as the unrecognized norm.

*Flight*'s protagonist, Zits, is a fifteen-year-old, acne-scarred, half-Indian, half-Irish orphan who lives in Seattle. Because his Indian father abandoned him and his mother when he was born, and his Irish mother died of breast cancer when Zits was six, he has bounced from foster family to jail to foster family for the past nine years. He has lived in and escaped from twenty of these foster homes by the time the novel opens and has attended twenty-two schools. He has just enough clothes to fit in a small backpack and, currently, forty-seven pimples on his face. Zits's counting—the need to take stock—may be part of his response to trauma, an attempt to quantify his otherwise-incomprehensible experience.<sup>27</sup> He has suffered extensive mental, sexual, and physical abuse and has little sense of self-worth. He is angry, bitter, filled with shame, and resentful of those who don't share his rotten life.

Zits takes what solace he finds in his beloved books and getting drunk with homeless Indians “who wander around downtown Seattle. . . . Those street Indians enjoy my company. . . . Of course, those wandering Indians are not the only Indians in the world, but they're the only ones who pay attention to me.”<sup>28</sup> Zits's observation reveals his need for attention to himself and his despair. Furthermore, his camaraderie with other Indians reflects his awareness that his situation is not just personal and

individual; he is part of a much larger group of suffering Indians. Yet these homeless and wounded Indians are probably not the people who can give him the help he needs.

During one of his many brief stays in jail, Zits comes under the influence of a young white man who calls himself Justice. Justice gives Zits the attention he craves and convinces him that an extraordinary act of violence—a violent form of the Ghost Dance—will bring back his parents and give him the revenge, relief, and justice he desperately seeks. This act—a massacre in a downtown bank—sends Zits hurtling through space and time. He finds himself consecutively in the bodies of a white male FBI agent in 1975 who participates in the killing of an American Indian activist; a mute Sioux child at the Custer battlefield in 1876; an old Indian tracker for the Seventh Cavalry, who tries to save a Sioux child; a middle-aged white flight instructor, who cheats on his wife and unknowingly teaches a 9/11-type terrorist to fly;<sup>29</sup> his drunken father, “shambling” and vomiting through a Tacoma alley; and, finally, his own fifteen-year-old body as a transformed young man. This time-travel paradigm creates a “bodily epistemology” that makes traumas of the past present for Zits and readers.

I want to read Zits’s embodiment as his father through the lens of Native trauma theory because American Indian historical grief is widely understood to be transmitted intergenerationally and this situation has a thematic relationship to Alexie’s recurring exploration of fathers and sons, abandonment, and the complexities of forgiveness. These are issues he addressed in his first collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), and the screenplay *Smoke Signals* (1998). In *Flight* Alexie explores this most painful of issues by locating his narrator, the abandoned son, within the body of his missing father.<sup>30</sup>

Initially Zits does not know he is inside his father; he simply wakes up on the ground staring at a rat and vomiting blood (*Flight*, 132). He realizes he is “a street drunk, a loser whose belly is torn apart by booze” (*Flight*, 132). When a “pretty white” couple approach him and he asks them if he is white (he’d most recently inhabited the body of the white flight instructor), they tell him he is Indian: “I look down at my dirty T-shirt, emblazoned with a black-and-white photograph of the Apache

warrior Geronimo and the ironed-on caption FIGHTING TERRORISM SINCE 1492" (*Flight*, 132).

Appearing soon after the 9/11 attacks, this popular T-shirt expresses many American Indians' perspective of having been invaded, terrorized, and colonized and the patriotism of American Indians in their struggle to retain their land, lives, and culture. But the grief and rage that result from Indians' awareness of the ongoing reality of colonization and the dominant culture's denial of it are registered in this man's drunken state. Alcohol numbs the pain of trauma and disenfranchised grief: the sense that the dominant culture neither recognizes this tragic history nor cares about the pain caused by its injustice.

Many symptoms and expressions of the soul wound become apparent in the ensuing scene: when the man again vomits blood, the passersby tell him he is dying and call 911 (*Flight*, 135). But Zits/the man is disgusted by the good Samaritans' compassion and tells them "it's all your fault" and "white people did this to Indians" (*Flight*, 136). Zits tells us, "I don't even know if I believe that. But this fifty-year-old guy wants to blame someone for his pain and his hunger.... This homeless guy's anger is even stronger than my anger. And anger is never added to anger. It multiplies" (*Flight*, 136). He insults the caring woman but realizes, "Maybe I can't defeat her with my rage and self-hatred" (*Flight*, 137). After being punched in the face by the woman's partner, the man/Zits awakes, aware that he is in an alley in downtown Tacoma, only thirty miles from home in Seattle. As he "shambles" out of the alley, his bloody face horrifies the people on the street: "I want some respect,' I say. Nobody hears me. Worse, nobody understands me" (*Flight*, 141).

I read this desire for respect and understanding as a direct expression of disenfranchised grief—the sense that no one recognizes or cares about the suffering of Native people. Though this man may be one of many homeless in the city looking for respect, in the context of American Indian colonization and trauma, he articulates one of the most painful issues of being Indian in America: the history and legacy of genocide are ignored and occluded.

Zits/the man finally feels he has gotten respect when he convinces a man to tell him a story. Afterward the stranger pulls out his wallet to

show Zits/the man a photo of his family and then asks if he has kids. Zits is startled—"I don't know this homeless Indian's name, let alone if he has any kids"—and pulls out a wad of photos and receipts held together by a rubber band (*Flight*, 149). He spots a "familiar photo" and realizes, "It is me, the five-year-old me. The five-year-old Zits. The real me" (*Flight*, 150). Confused, he looks into the side-view mirror of a nearby truck: "I stare at my bloody reflection. I am older than I used to be. I am battered, bruised and broken. But I know who I am. I am my father" (*Flight*, 150). Zits realizes he's staring into the face of his betrayer—the man he should kill—but "what satisfaction is there in killing a man who wants to die?" (*Flight*, 151).

Zits asks the questions he has always wanted to ask his father: "Why did you leave me, why did you want to carry a photograph of me but not me?" (*Flight*, 152). These are questions his father/the man doesn't want to answer: "I can feel him fighting me. He doesn't want to remember the day he left me" (*Flight*, 152). But Zits forces his father to remember and learns that his father was not only sexually molested but cruelly—actually horrifically—ridiculed by his own father to believe he was utterly worthless: "My father wants to weep. He wants to cry out for his father. He wants to be forgiven, to be loved. But if he speaks he will only be ridiculed again. He will only be diminished" (*Flight*, 155). Now inside his father's memories at the hospital where Zits's mother is giving birth to him, he realizes, "My father cannot be a participant. He cannot be a witness. He cannot be a father" (*Flight*, 156). Zits understands that his father has been so damaged by abuse that he does not have the strength or confidence to raise his own son and perhaps fears that he will inflict the same abuse on him that he received from his father.

The word "witness" is important because of its multivalence to trauma. Victims of historical trauma desperately need someone to validate their pain by acknowledging their grief. Without some sort of efficacious intervention, the traumatized person cannot understand or witness the sources of their suffering and thereby gain relief from its continual haunting.<sup>31</sup> Because Zits is now a witness to his father's abuse and understands why he was abandoned, there is hope that he can forgive his father, perhaps find relief from his own suffering, and stop the intergenerational transmission of historical trauma. When Zits suddenly finds

himself back in his body in the lobby of the bank where his time traveling began, he remembers “the dirtiest secret” he owns: his own sexual molestation by his aunt’s boyfriend soon after his mother’s death (*Flight*, 159). Now aware of the source of his shame, he may be able to stop blaming himself for his victimization. In *Flight*’s final chapters, Zits discovers his father’s soul wound and, through it his own.

Alexie provides hope for Zits’s healing through a remarkably happy ending, one that seems too perfect given the degree of trauma the narrative describes. His new foster family is comprised of his friend, Police Officer Dave; Dave’s brother, a fireman; and his brother’s wife, a nurse, all of whom are white, although Zits notices the woman’s cheekbones are like “Indian cheekbones” and “wonder[s] if she’s a little bit Indian” (*Flight*, 175).

How are we to read these “Dick and Jane Patriot” types? Ironically? Can those without many material benefits or power do much to ameliorate the widespread and devastating suffering of young people like Zits? Or is Alexie suggesting that white or non-Native people can do some of the very important—perhaps necessary—work of acting as allies to Native people?<sup>32</sup> That the soul wound can be healed at least partly through cross-racial alliances?<sup>33</sup> Still, I find myself asking, why not create an Indian father and family for Zits, considering the identity and legal issues presented by extratribal adoption?<sup>34</sup> What is Alexie suggesting through offering these caring, almost too-good-to-be-true white folks as Zits’s new family?<sup>35</sup>

I think that this hopeful, interracial conclusion to *Flight* reflects a shift in Alexie’s vision that has been so marked by anger throughout his career.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps after expressing his anger and frustration at the effects of colonialism in many of his works, he is now offering possibilities for healing this painful legacy. Alexie stated that he was changed by the 9/11 terrorist attacks<sup>37</sup>; he told Åse Nygren that he realized that “everybody’s pain is important.”<sup>38</sup> Speaking of his early career, he continued, “I was fundamental. I was so focused on Indian identity I didn’t look at details. So having children, having friends, my life diversifying—all that has changed me.... Worrying about racism is easy! Easy! Dealing with racism is easy, compared with dealing with love.”<sup>39</sup>

Although the legacy of genocide and colonialism that creates nihilism in Alexie's characters such as John Smith in *Indian Killer* and Zits in *Flight* persists, his vision of the way to address the widespread despair among Indian people has changed. His new perspective brings his recent work into implicit conversation with African American chroniclers of cultural trauma, especially James Baldwin and Cornel West. This move is a departure from models offered by Native American trauma theory, which emphasize healing through decolonization and interventions based on tribal cultural traditions and traditional ceremonies.<sup>40</sup>

Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* and West in *Race Matters* address the nihilism and despair that results from severe, extended oppression. In the introduction to *Race Matters*, West writes, "We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks—family, friends, school—that sustain some sense of purpose in life." He continues, "Let us hope and pray that the vast intelligence, imagination, humor, and courage of Americans will not fail us. Either we learn a new language of empathy and compassion, or the fire this time will consume us all."<sup>41</sup> In the essay "Black Nihilism," West avers,

*Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others.*<sup>42</sup>

West stresses the need for compassion and empathy to interrupt the scourge of nihilism, and this is what Alexie's new work suggests as well. The condition of much of the black community that West describes is in some ways analogous to the situation of American Indian people suffering from the soul wound of historical trauma that is vividly portrayed in Alexie's work. West offers a prescription to relieve nihilism that may resonate with those who suffer from American Indian historical trauma,

suggesting that through an ethic of community—what we may call cross-racial kinship—we can all have a role to play in this badly needed healing:

Like alcoholism and drug addiction, nihilism is a disease of the soul. It can never be completely cured, and there is always the possibility of relapse. But there is always a chance for conversion—a chance for people to believe that there is hope for the future and meaning to struggle.... Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one's soul. This turning is done through one's own affirmation of one's worth—*an affirmation fueled by the concern of others*. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion.<sup>43</sup>

I think that something akin to the “love ethic” and “new language of empathy and compassion” that Alexie hints at in *Flight* is clearly evident in his latest novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. In the highly autobiographical *Diary*, the fourteen-year-old Spokane Indian protagonist, Arnold Spirit, chooses to go to high school in the nearby white town of Reardan, despite this making him a “traitor” to his tribe. Arnold identifies alcohol and hopelessness as the plagues affecting his tribe and reservation and believes that an education and interaction with people who are not burdened by these afflictions will allow him to create a better life for himself. One of the strongest messages in *Diary* in relation to healing the soul wound comes from Arnold's dying grandmother, who utters the words “forgive him” after being hit and fatally injured by a drunk driver.<sup>44</sup> I think for Arnold this means forgiving his alcoholic, but loving, father, his tribe for considering him a traitor for leaving the reservation, and himself for leaving the reservation. In *Diary* Arnold mourns the loss of his grandmother and his father's best friend, Eugene, and finally that of his sister, all of whom die alcohol-related deaths. He cries because he knows “five or ten or fifteen more Spokanes would die during the next year, and that most of them would die because of booze.... I cried because so many of my fellow tribal members were slowly killing



themselves and I wanted them to live. I wanted them to get strong and get sober and get the hell off the rez,” which he likens to a prison constructed to make Indians die and disappear (*ATD*, 216).

Perhaps this sentiment suggests why the family that adopts Zits in *Flight* is white: they are archetypes for caregivers and have the clout that comes from being linked into social power structures. They are not burdened by historical trauma and can offer the love that Zits so desperately needs. Maybe these people will actually nurture and sustain Zits’s Indian identity. In *Diary* rejecting alcohol and even the reservation becomes for Arnold an act of resistance to ongoing colonialism and cultural genocide.<sup>45</sup>

The language of *Diary*—particularly its concluding chapters—reflects compassion and empathy. It upholds a love ethic that suggests a way out of nihilism and perpetual grief. Arnold’s father is an alcoholic, but he deeply loves his son. Arnold expresses love for his father, his family, his tribe, and his reservation but believes he must leave to escape the hopelessness and despair that can overwhelm even wonderful, loving people. Alexie told an interviewer that *Diary*’s “theme is about escape” and he hopes “it encourages all sorts of trapped people to feel like they can escape.”<sup>46</sup> In leaving his reservation, Arnold compares himself to an American immigrant—“millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream” (*ATD*, 257). He realizes that he is in fact a member of many “tribes” (*ATD*, 257).

In relation to healing the soul wound, both *Flight* and *Diary* have an important message, one that may not be heard by all who suffer from historical trauma but one that holds out hope for Zits, Arnold Spirit, and perhaps Alexie as well: the efficacy and necessity of forgiveness. In the final scene of Alexie’s film *Smoke Signals*—as Victor Joseph pours his father’s ashes into the Spokane River and screams with grief—we hear Thomas Builds-the-Fire recite Dick Lourie’s poem, “Forgiving Our Fathers”: “Do we forgive our fathers in our age or in theirs? Or in their deaths? Saying it to them or not saying it? If we forgive our fathers, what else is left?”<sup>47</sup> The film, *Flight*, and *Diary* are extraordinary in the ways that they privilege the interior landscapes of contemporary Native men.<sup>48</sup> Through his narrative strategy, Alexie forces us to ask difficult questions: to grieve and heal, must wounded sons forgive their fathers? Must

victims forgive their oppressors, even when they do not receive an apology from them? Can victims of colonialism and historical trauma heal without an apology? Is an apology meaningful if the oppressed do not receive some kind of reparation for their spiritual and material losses?<sup>49</sup>

*Smoke Signals*, *Flight*, and *Diary* suggest—to quote Desmond Tutu—that there is “no future without forgiveness”<sup>50</sup> and cross-racial alliances and communities of concern can play a powerful role in healing those afflicted by the soul wound of colonialism. *Flight* and *Diary* provide validation and inspiration for Indians seeking to heal the soul wound of historical trauma. Yet I argue that one of the most important effects of Alexie’s latest works—particularly since he admits the majority of his readers are white—is making Native American historical trauma and the occluded truth of American Indian history visible. As one thoughtful student exclaimed during a recent classroom discussion of *Flight*, “He wants us to see Native trauma and grief so that we’ll do something about it!” This comment suggests that Alexie’s work—and perhaps all Native American trauma narratives—ask readers “to bear some sort of ethical responsibility for the stor[ies] they read”; when readers turn from private encounters with novels to the public history these texts reflect, a wider discussion on the efficacy and limits of apology, forgiveness, reconciliation, and reparation can begin.<sup>51</sup>

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of the protagonist of *Indian Killer* as traumatized as a result of his adoption into a white family, see Margaret Homans, “Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins,” 4–26.
2. Elijah Elk Center, Saginaw Chippewa Tribe, presentation at the Native American Literature Symposium, Mt. Pleasant, MI, March 9, 2007.
3. Anderson Tepper, “A Boy’s Life, Zits and All.”
4. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* won the 2007 National Book Award for young adult literature.
5. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*; Cornel West, *Race Matters*.
6. See Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, and Susan Yellow Horse-Davis, “Healing the American Indian Soul Wound,” in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, 341–54. See also Eduardo Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and Other Native Peoples*; and Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran, *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*.

7. Åse Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," 149.
8. Duran and Duran, *Brave Heart*, and Yellow Horse-Davis, "Healing the American Indian," 341.
9. *Ibid.*, 342.
10. *Ibid.*, 343–44.
11. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief," 60; italics in original. The term *internalized oppression* comes from Paulo Freire's seminal study *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 66.
14. Lisa Poupart, "The Familiar Face of Genocide: Internalized Oppression among American Indians," 90.
15. *Ibid.*, 89.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Nygren, "World of Story-Smoke," 155.
18. *Ibid.*, 157, 165.
19. See Nancy J. Peterson, *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory*, 7. Peterson continues, "To even begin to tell these kinds of stories, then, requires the capacity to exceed normative narrative expectations. And so, of necessity, wounded histories are written as literature, or fiction, and not as history, for only literature in our culture is allowed the narrative flexibility and the willing suspension of disbelief that are crucial to the telling of these histories" (*Ibid.*).
20. Nygren, "World of Story-Smoke," 159.
21. Nancy Van Styvendale, "The Trans/historicity of Trauma in Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash* and Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*," 204.
22. *Ibid.*, 203.
23. *Ibid.*, 221. See also note 7.
24. *Ibid.*, 205.
25. *Ibid.*, 205–6.
26. *Ibid.*, 206.
27. I am grateful to my colleague David Sigler for this insight.
28. Sherman Alexie, *Flight*, 7 (hereafter cited in the text).
29. Alexie initially thought about organizing the entire novel around the flight instructor, whose appearance in a documentary fascinated him. "He started crying—I forget which of the terrorists he taught—but he said, 'He and I were friends; he would come to my apartment and drink. Some nights he'd get too drunk to go home, so he'd sleep on my couch.' In the midst of this epic tragic event, there was this smaller, more human betrayal, and it seemed to me that nobody has really talked about the way those terrorists betrayed friends." See Rod Smith, "The Metamorphoses: Sherman Alexie Delivers a New Novel and a Shape-Shifting American Indian."

30. When an interviewer recently asked Alexie if it was hard writing about his father now that he had passed on, Alexie replied, "It's always tough, you know. But as somebody pointed out, my whole career has been writing about my father. I've been causing myself pain for fifteen years. I think that's the big thing that drives my career and drives my success. I mean, certainly, it's the Indian thing, but it's the failing father thing bigger than anything else." See Stephanie Dunnewind, "Sherman Alexie Captures the Voice, Chaos and Humor of a Teenager," 4. See also Alexie's discussion of his alcoholic father in relation to Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz" in "A Conversation with Sherman Alexie" by Diane Thiel.
31. See Bessel Van Der Kolk, Alexander McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth, eds., *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*.
32. I define *allies* as people who work to be agents of social change, rather than instruments of oppression. See Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, 106.
33. Alexie explicitly discusses the necessity of cross-racial alliances in Silja Talvi, "Sherman Alexie Isn't Who You Think He Is," *Colors NW Magazine*, December 6, 2003. Originally online but no longer accessible.
34. See Homans, "Adoption Narratives."
35. Jeff Berglund has generously given me a partial description of fathers in Alexie's more recent short fiction: "a dedicated white father in 'Assimilation' who is married to a white woman (*Toughest Indian in the World*); a great, loving Indian father in 'One Good Man' who through divorce now must share his son with his ex-wife's white husband (*Toughest Indian in the World*); a passionate and grieving Indian father in 'Do Not Go Gentle' in *Ten Little Indians*—with his wife he tries to fight for his infant son's life; a good Indian father in 'Flight Patterns' in *Ten Little Indians*, but one who is absent on business trips/speaking engagements; a grieving Indian father in 'Class,' who has lost his child (and who is married to a white woman) in *Toughest Indian*; finally, in 'Whatever Happened to Frank Snake Church' (*Ten Little Indians*), Frank has amazing, loving parents; Frank is an adult, but he keeps them in his memory when he tries to achieve in different undertakings." Jeff Berglund, e-mail message to author.
36. Alexie told Åse Nygren that

it is only in the last few years that my politics has found a way into my work that feels natural [he explains he wrote "politically" to defend himself from people who claimed he was employing stereotypes when he was writing about his own life]. Part of the reason is because you grow older. The way I think about it is that I used to spend more time looking inside myself, looking internally. Now I look at more of the world and wider range of people. "World of Story-Smoke," 153.

37. Elijah Elk Center, March 9, 2007.
38. Nygren, "World of Story-Smoke," 156.
39. *Ibid.*, 168.
40. See Duran and Duran, *Brave Heart*, and Yellow Horse-Davis, "Healing the American Indian."
41. West, *Race Matters*, 9, 13.
42. *Ibid.*, 22–23; italics in original.
43. *Ibid.*, 29; italics added.
44. Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 157 (hereafter cited in the text as *ATD*).
45. I do not believe, however, that Alexie is suggesting that healing can only come through Indians leaving the reservation and assimilating into white families and culture.
46. Dunnewind, "Sherman Alexie Captures the Voice," 4.
47. Sherman Alexie, *Smoke Signals: A Screenplay* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 148–49.
48. I thank Jeff Berglund for this insight. In his interview with Diane Thiel, Alexie suggests this trend will continue:

I am currently working on my first non-fiction, a big book about four generations of Indian men in my family, and our relationship with war, and I've broken it down into [a] fiction, non-fiction project, and poetry, so I'm really looking for a hybrid work here. . . . In some sense, I feel this new book is a summation of all my themes until now. After this book, I think I'll be looking in some radical new directions.

*Alexie's Face* (2009) devotes some space to the relationship between fathers and sons, as well as military service.

49. In "Teaching Smoke Signals: Fatherhood, Forgiveness, and 'Freedom,'" 123–46, Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval urges the creation of a U.S. Truth Commission that will document the atrocities committed against Indian people, put pressure on the United States government to apologize formally and express remorse to Indian people for their suffering, and provide reparations.
50. Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*.
51. See Dean Franco, "What We Talk about When We Talk about *Beloved*," 415–39.