

Undone and Renewed by Time: History as Burden and/or Opportunity in Sherman Alexie's *Flight*

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Zits, the protagonist of Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007), is a half-breed Native American teenager who has serious problems in defining his own identity and finding his place in contemporary U.S. society. A lack of parental guidance and the cruelty of the foster-care system turn him into an angry and dysfunctional young man who is brought close to committing a massacre. However, just when he is about to pull the trigger, he 'falls through time' to revisit some of the key episodes in Native-American history, and a few other recent events, in the shoes of characters belonging to diverse racial and social categories. This figurative journey through history allows Alexie—and Zits—to dig deep into the motives behind conflicts that may explain the plight of Native Americans today. Time-traveling proves an effective fictional device that helps the author—and his readers—to explore these historical junctures from unusual viewpoints in order to see what official accounts have neglected or willfully forgotten. *Flight* represents, therefore, an illuminating instance of historiographic metafiction in which the writer manages both to retrieve and reconstruct important fragments of his peoples' collective past and to surmise the kind of light that those events cast on their present condition.

Keywords: Native-American fiction; Sherman Alexie; historiographic metafiction; *Flight*; narrative technique; time-traveling

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Desorientado y renovado por los viajes en el tiempo: la historia como carga o/y oportunidad en *Flight*, de Sherman Alexie

Zits, el protagonista de *Flight* (2007), de Sherman Alexie, es un adolescente nativo americano que tiene serias dificultades para definir su identidad y encontrar un espacio en la sociedad norteamericana contemporánea. La ausencia de sus padres y el cruel sistema de adopción al que se ve sometido le convierten en un joven rebelde y disfuncional que está a punto de cometer una masacre. Sin embargo, justo antes de apretar el gatillo, 'viaja a través del tiempo' para

revisar algunos de los episodios clave en la historia nativo-americana en la piel de personajes que pertenecen a diferentes grupos étnicos y sociales. Este viaje imaginario permite al autor —y a Zits— indagar en los motivos de los conflictos que pudieran explicar la situación de los indios americanos hoy en día. El viaje en el tiempo demuestra ser un marco de ficción que ayuda a Alexie —y sus lectores— a estudiar estos acontecimientos históricos desde puntos de vista inusuales para discernir lo que los documentos oficiales han ignorado u olvidado a propósito. *Flight* es pues un valioso ejemplo de metaficción historiográfica en la que el escritor consigue tanto recuperar fragmentos del pasado colectivo de su pueblo como establecer nexos entre esos episodios y su situación en el mundo actual.

Keywords: narrativa nativo-americana; Sherman Alexie; metaficción historiográfica; *Flight*; técnica narrativa; viaje en el tiempo

The importance of these little narratives is not only that they challenge the dominant metanarrative and the state apparatus that would prohibit or discredit them, but that they also indicate the possibility for another kind of society, of another form of social relations in fact already functioning “laterally” within the totalitarian state . . .

DAVID CARROLL, ‘Narrative, Heterogeneity, and the Question of the Political’

[Sherman Alexie’s] work carries the weight of five centuries of colonization, retelling the American Indian struggle to survive, painting a clear, compelling, and often painful portrait of modern Indian life.

LYNN CLINE, ‘About Sherman Alexie: A Profile by Lynn Cline’

1. INTRODUCTION: ON THE URGENT NEED TO REWRITE HISTORY

The term ‘history’ comes directly from the Greek word *ιστορία*, which means “inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation” (Joseph and Janda 2003: 163).¹ Most people today would not even think of questioning history, as they tend to accept it as a factual and objectively recorded account of the past. Postmodernist scholars, however, view history as just another type of narrative whose structures are similar to those found in literary art, a discipline that often yields to myths, metaphors and symbols of various kinds. In fact, although its sources may at first seem objective and based on hard evidence, they gather episodes that, as these critics see it, could have been interpreted in many different ways and from manifold perspectives. In Munslow’s words, “meaning is generated by socially encoded and constructed discursive practices that mediate reality so much that they effectively close off direct access to it” (1997: 11). In writing historical accounts, we often put together causal relations and explanations by employing the same devices used in fictional narratives. As a result, defenders of postmodernist poetics argue that history is just another way of representing and interpreting events in narrative (White 1987: 1-25).

Linda Hutcheon coined the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ to designate a new subgroup of postmodern novels that “situate themselves within historical discourse without surrendering their autonomy as fiction” (1989a: 4). As its name suggests, this subgenre emerges on the boundary between historiography and fiction, and explores the function of narrative as a construct that not only represents the past, but is also seen in itself to shape history and identity. According to Duvall, works of historiographic metafiction “question the notion of individualism and the stable self/subject that form our notions of historical agency; they are ironic, they are self-reflective about language and suspicious

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of political power, they show all values as context-dependent and ideological, and they highlight the artificiality of historical explanations of reality” (2012: 24).

These novels remind the reader that history is available only in the form of narrative, a narrative that has been produced by individuals who remember, represent and interpret events from a particular viewpoint. In Hutcheon’s opinion, history-making practices need to be rethought so that a more pluralist view of historiography can be created, “consisting of different but equally meaningful constructions of past reality” (1989a: 5). In this regard, historiographic metafiction plays a decisive role in giving voice to groups that have generally been silenced, marginalized or just misrepresented. In fact, minority authors feel a particular urgency to re-write history in their own terms, using language as a tool to deconstruct the short-sighted stereotypes and misapprehensions that Western peoples have disseminated, as well as to reinforce their own identity (Benito 1995: 33-34). Feeling that the Eurocentric perspective has smothered their opinions and cultural heritage for too long, many ethnic-minority authors have engaged in the task of writing fiction that challenges ‘dominant metanarratives’ and tries to subvert the unequal power relations they have generated.

Most cultural and literary critics today would readily agree that these last two decades have seen a strong revival of what could be termed as ‘contextual approaches’; that is, rather than treating literature as an autonomous system to be decoded according to its own internal rules, we tend to view texts as representations of particular historical and socio-political contexts that inevitably have a bearing on our present-day society. This does not mean, though, that we are utterly unaware of the formal constituents of narrative: we are highly conscious of their innate situatedness and partiality regarding the various discourses at work at any given time. White remarks on this point that, although narratives —historical or otherwise— strive to produce an impression of unity, coherence and transparency, they are in fact always plagued by gaps in and absences of events and figures that, for different reasons, were left out of the picture (1987: 10). What these contextual approaches do is precisely to question the idea of texts as independent and integral objects, and to show how they become convenient instruments employed by dominant groups to accrue power. The use of these alternative methods of analysis has become increasingly urgent in recent times for two important reasons: firstly, in the wake of the postmodern era we have recognized the futility of believing in any metanarrative which tries to resolve the differences, contradictions and frictions that invariably arise in multicultural socio-political spaces (Lyotard 1984: 33-35); secondly, as Carroll remarks in the first epigraph to this article, ‘small narratives’ are increasingly proliferating in our contemporary world, and are seen to counter the metanarratives of old by revealing their biased and manipulative nature. In this sense, these subaltern narratives hold great potential to cause a “rearrangement of relations and positions” that is proof of the more dynamic and complex nature of reality (1987: 77-78).

Most ethnic-minority groups in the United States have felt the need to come up with texts that subvert the modes of representation of the past, which were usually part of a

program to force them into the cultural molds that the dominant group had designed for them. This need has been especially pressing in the case of Native Americans, who have historically been trapped in narratives that mostly cast them as the unknown and uncivilized Other, always offering resistance to the white man's desire for expansion and domination. Tompkins claims that Indians are rarely represented in Westerns as real people with a culture and a history of their own; instead, like women, they are just "part of the repressed", which hardly ever surfaces into consciousness (1992: 8-10). And, of course, when they did emerge with any visibility in narrative, it was only to show their proneness to violence and brutality or their utter inability to adapt to the 'civilized' way of life of the pioneers. Little is said in these accounts of how they were deprived of their best lands, how their lifestyles soon became untenable on account of the pressures of the 'pale faces', or how their children were quickly acculturated by boarding school programs that showed no respect for their traditions. According to Arnold Krupat, a truly ethnocritical approach to the study of Native cultures requires the recognition that "[s]ome people *have* been hurt by others and if that is not the only and the most interesting thing to say, it most certainly remains something that still, today, can probably not be said too often" (1992: 21; emphasis in original). This critic and others have warned about the dangers of perpetuating traditional binary oppositions between Western civilization and the Others, the historical and the mythical, us versus them, which only distort and ossify the processes that took place on the frontier and cultural borderlands. LaCapra rightly notes that representations of the past that attempt to capture this simplified version of reality can easily be turned into an "instrument of control" of the in-group, which either through narratives of mastery or victimization only contributes to the prolongation of the above mentioned dichotomies (1985: 25). This general trend can only be subverted if we move away from the majority/minority and dominant/oppressed polarities, without ever denying the unequal power relations that have prevailed between the groups in history.

2. NATIVE-AMERICAN HISTORY REVISITED

Since the 1970s, minority writers in different traditions, such as Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, Ana Castillo, Bharati Mukherjee, etc., have taken up the task of retrieving the histories of groups that have been underrepresented or completely stereotyped in the literature of the nation. Generally, the main goal was to deconstruct or 'de-doxify' those master narratives that had turned them into the collateral victims of the country's progress or the peripheral beings doomed to assist the protagonists in their struggles for self-realization. Of course, in order to subvert the orthodoxy of traditional narratives, such authors needed to shift the focus of interest toward the marginal figures and to present the alterity between the distinct groups in a radically different light. While it is true that in some instances it was difficult not to replicate the undesirable structures and formal patterns that had pervaded those metanarratives (see Carroll 1987: 69-70), it is unquestionable that a serious effort was made in most cases to avoid the confrontational and essentializing tendencies that

are apparent in the mainstream stories. Native American authors, with their sorrowful history of forced displacements and silenced genocide, were initially intent on recovering a sense of the specificity of tribal groups and their lost spiritual balance through inherited rituals. According to Kenneth Lincoln, “[t]hese peoples are witnesses to a common sense of dispossession forced on them as native ‘Indians.’ Their mythically storied, prelapsarian origins before the European ‘invasion’ . . . , the dream and its descent, transcend factional differences in a shared struggle for cultural survival and rebirth” (1983: 13). Writers such as D’Arcy McNickle and Scott Momaday were primarily interested in showing the damaging conflicts that characterized reservation life in the early twentieth century, and also in finding regenerative continuities that emerged from their own storytelling traditions. One needs to wait until the late 1980s and early 1990s to come across works that truly tackle the possibility of an opening in White-Indian relations, thus causing the much-desired rearrangement of positions and value systems in the general scheme of narratives.

Interestingly, the first Native authors who tried to undermine the dichotomies of West vs. the rest were women who, because they had survived forms of double discrimination, were more sensitive to the need to move beyond ‘the scapegoat mechanism’ that prevented others from seeing how things really work in the world. Writers such as Louise Erdrich, Leslie M. Silko and Linda Hogan transgress the divisions between present and past, the factual and the imaginative, in order to bring about the critical return to history and politics that scholars have long advocated (Krupat 1992; Owens 1992). With the aim of pushing this critical return, they begin by disrupting the conventions of representation that the dominant culture has habitually employed in its attempt to “predetermine all responses [and] prohibit any counter-narratives” (Carroll 1987: 77). By means of family histories, preserved notebooks, passed-down stories and myths, these authors manage to introduce significant elements of continuance and heterogeneity into texts that rarely aspire to produce the ‘totalizing’ effects that mainstream narratives usually sought. On the contrary, as Vizenor contends, “The literal translations and representations of tribal literatures are illusions, consolations in the dominant culture. There can never be correct or objective readings of the texts or the tropes in tribal literatures, only more energetic, interesting and ‘pleasurable misreadings’” (1993: 5). Indeed, novels such as Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988) and Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) present the clash of two civilizations in all its complexity, weaving together family and tribal relationships, greed, dreams, betrayals and a revisionist history that gives a voice to viewpoints that had seldom been articulated before.

Sherman Alexie’s novel *Flight* (2007a) can be said to fit quite squarely into the genre of historiographic metafiction, since he builds his narrative from traces and earlier representations of the past that he uses in different —often parodic— ways to generate alternative interpretations of and explanations for well-known events. As several critics have noted, Alexie’s is the “art of refraction” —and probably infraction— as he invariably complicates the reappropriation of historical data by constantly transmuted them into new signifying formations (Bernardin 2010: 52). In Hutcheon’s words, one of the main

aims of historiographic metafiction is precisely to “get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few” (1989b: 66). Daniel Grassian cogently argues that, besides trying to represent the daily lives of contemporary Indians on the reservations, Alexie’s purpose is also to rewrite “dominant American history” so that those that have been stereotyped and marginalized do finally get a voice (2005: 8). In *Flight*, the protagonist-narrator, Zits, not only travels back to revisit some of the most critical—and traumatic—occasions in Native history, but quite often discovers that the events have been heavily colored by interests and myths that provided them with a certain teleology. Naturally, Zits’ most important task is to try to unravel the meanings that have been encoded into some of the metanarratives of the nation in order to see how, by looking through the ‘fissures’, he can bring us a bit closer to experiencing the actual dynamics in different historical contexts. As several reviewers of the novel have explained, the protagonist is involved in a modern-day quest to gain an understanding of human motivations without offering, in fact, any clear “predigested moral” that would condemn one specific group (Barbash 2007). Taking a highly postmodern stance, what is most conspicuous in Alexie’s ‘small narrative’ is actually his reluctance to pass on any definite judgment that would simply replicate the patterns found in dominant metanarratives, which try to do away with the contradictions and paradoxes that dominate human behavior. Indeed, as will be seen below, *Flight* does not really offer a reversed formulation of history in which the Natives are the heroes, their culture is more wholesome and representations become more ‘authentic’. As Andrews points out, Alexie favors a more independent and critical attitude that “shows us that there are no easy answers. What works one time does not work another. What works for some does not work for others. Like life, it is complicated and just a little bit random” (2010: 51). In this regard, similar to other Indian authors such as Welch, Vizenor or Silko, Alexie does *not* “simplify complexities or ignore conflict”, but simultaneously tries to validate and question “the individual’s desire to bridge cultural and personal difference” (Coulombe 2011: 12).

3. TIME-TRAVELING AS A BURDEN AND/OR OPPORTUNITY TO FIND ONESELF

It is not surprising that, like some other contemporary minority authors, Alexie should have been accused by other co-ethnic critics and writers of not taking seriously enough his peoples’ need to recover their sense of a collective identity and to enhance their so-called ‘cultural integrity’. One will certainly be disappointed if what one looks for in his writings is a direct protest against the policies that white America has waged on the indigenous populations or a eulogy of the tribal cosmogony. Alexie has repeated in several interviews that he is not interested in engaging in the kind of political and socio-cultural criticism that restricts the borders of what is considered authentically Native to a close set of heroes or victims that are re-imagined as the holders of the new ethical standards applied in contemporary America (see West and West 1998: 29). Indeed, the young heroes in some

of his earlier works —Victor Joseph, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and Junior Polatkin— can be seen to be extremely disoriented by both current corporate culture on the one hand and by their peoples' ancient traditions on the other. In contrast, as his bending of tribal and genre conventions shows, he defends the artist's freedom to deal with culture and history in the ways s/he thinks most appropriate to bring about the readers' change of perception regarding certain inherited ideas. Nelson notes on this point that in Alexie's works, his "metaphorical invocation of travel through time, space, and all sorts of in-between, ephemeral moments like flight and dancing reclaim the idea of exploration as resistance against boundaries physical and imaginative" (2010: 44). Indeed, it would be difficult to explain Alexie's unexpected blend of rage and sympathy, stark realism and lyricism or tragedy and hilarity if it were not as a result of his experimental and tentative reexamination of some well-known events and conditions in his peoples' long history of conflict and displacement. In Berglund's opinion, "Alexie's inventive style conveys to readers his characters' suffering and anguish but also the enduring power of humor and imagination" (2010: xvii).

Zits, the protagonist-narrator of Alexie's novel, is a fifteen-year-old half-breed Native American who is at that stage in his life when most of us have serious difficulties in accepting our appearance and, most importantly, our identity:

I'm dying from about ninety-nine kinds of shame.
 I'm ashamed of being fifteen years old. And being tall. And skinny. And ugly.
 I'm ashamed that I look like a bag of zits tied to a broomstick.
 I wonder if loneliness causes acne. I wonder if being Indian causes acne. (4)

But, of course, to think of Zits as the average teenager, unhappy with his looks and worried about the reasons for his social dysfunctionality, would be far too simplistic and, somehow, unfair. Like Alexie's adolescent hero, Arnold (Junior) Spirit, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007b), Zits is also involved in the grinding struggle to survive between his Native culture and the mostly unsympathetic white world. Apart from the general problems assailing youngsters of that age, Zits has grown up deprived of any parental affection and support, and has suffered all manner of abuses in the more than twenty foster homes to which he has been assigned by the authorities. It is little wonder that this lonely young man, who eventually develops an inclination for arson, should feel that he is just a kind of vacuum or black hole defined by what he lacks in his life rather than by what he has: "Yes, I am Irish and Indian, which would be the coolest blend in the world if my parents were around to teach me to be Irish and Indian. But they are not here and haven't been for years, so I'm not really Irish or Indian. I'm a blank in the sky, a human solar eclipse" (5). Having been abandoned at birth by his Indian father and losing his mother six years later to a tumor allegedly caused by grief, Zits grows increasingly resentful not only of a government that places him in inadequate households but also of a culture that keeps stereotyping him and his people from "the reductionist point of

view of the white men who have misjudged Native Americans according to their Western perspective” (Mateos 2011: 126). As is the case with most of the ‘heroes’ in Alexie’s other works, Zits feels that he is not accepted and that he does not belong in the society in which he lives. His loneliness and anger become so unbearable that he constantly seems to be on the verge of lashing out violently against the world: “Yes, that is my life, a series of cruel bastards and airplane crashes. Twenty little airplane crashes. I’m a flaming jet, crashing into each new foster family” (11).

After the customary quarrel with his latest foster family, Zits leaves their home in a rush, pushing his foster mother against the wall, but he is soon arrested by two police officers who are already too familiar with his misbehavior. Although he reacts by kicking and fighting, one of the policemen, Officer Dave, proves sympathetic and is kind to the boy since, as Zits confesses to us, Dave also seems to be one of the “severely scarred”. Even though the situation is tense and they are driving him to juvenile detention for the umpteenth time, the protagonist cannot help joking about the future awaiting him in the hands of the local authorities:

“I’m an Indian,” I say to Officer Dave, “and we *bate* lawyers.”

The cops laugh. They keep laughing as they drive me to kid jail in Seattle’s Central District. The CD used to be a black folks’ neighborhood. Now it’s filled with rich white people who like to pretend it’s still a black folks’ neighborhood. But the kid jail is still here, right across the street from a fancy coffee shop.

Starbucks can kiss my shiny red ass.

They put me in a holding cell with a black kid and a white kid and a Chinese kid. We’re the United Nations of juvenile delinquents. (19; emphasis in original)

Two important aspects of Zits’ personality become apparent in this short passage. On the one hand, he resorts to humor and rather profane language to evade acknowledging the serious implications of what he interprets as the blind alleys of the system. As Coulombe has explained, Alexie and his ‘heroes’ are likely to employ humor as a strategy to do several things at once, from protecting their self-esteem to revealing injustice or fostering bonds (2011: 12). On the other hand, Zits seems to be fully aware of some of the ironies and contradictions that govern a society which, albeit theoretically color blind, keeps imposing boundaries for those who belong to minorities. In this regard, Nelson notes that Alexie’s “poetry and prose uncompromisingly demonstrate [that] communities are far from uncomplicated and are frequently themselves destructive, as with communities of substance abusers” (2010: 46). This becomes very clear when, at the detention home, Zits meets a handsome, seventeen-year-old white boy called Justice who seems to understand his profound anger and pain: “When I tell him I’m an Indian, he says, ‘I’m sorry that my people nearly destroyed your people. This country, the so-called United States, is evil. And you Indians were the only people who fought against the white evil. Everybody else thinks we live in a democracy’” (25). Although it would be hard to dispute many of Justice’s

arguments on the nation's history of conquest and genocide, the solution he proposes to Zits to correct the situation —namely, violence— will act like a drug in the protagonist's brain. By the time Zits is released from jail, Justice has become his hero and begun to fill his head with strange ideas —backed up by his readings of Nietzsche and G.B. Shaw— about how he could resurrect his parents and make all white folk disappear by means of a modern-day Ghost Dance.

A couple of weeks later, equipped with the two guns that Justice has given him —one real, the other a paint pistol— Zits stands in the lobby of a bank in downtown Seattle ready to take the lives of sixty people “of many different colors [and] religions” (35). When a man points at him and tells him that he is “not real”, Zits faces a moment of doubt about his own ‘ghostliness’ before he shoots the man in the face and then turns the guns in all directions. The massacre goes on until a bank guard shoots the protagonist in the back of the head. If up to this point in the novel the reader may have felt a bit ill at ease because it is unclear whether s/he is enjoying a piece of deadpan realist fiction, a political polemic or a *cri-de-coeur* type of memoir, things become even more disorientating from now on, as the narrator gets caught in a surreal maelstrom of time-traveling and body jumping that will not stop until the last three chapters of the book. Bernardin underlines the fact that Alexie has always been fond of breaking conventional genre divisions but, in this case, he stretches his imagination even further when, like Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, “Zits finds himself ‘unstuck in time’ —entering and exiting the bodies of young and old, white and Indian, through the televised scenes of PBS and the History Channel documentaries on ‘How the West was Won’” (2010: 53). But if the reader is quite puzzled at finding the ‘hero’ inhabiting the white body of an FBI agent on the Red River Indian Reservation back in 1975, the same can be said about the protagonist himself who, initially, thinks that he must have been undeservedly saved by some amazing doctors: “I wonder if it makes them mad or sad when they do that. I wonder if I deserve to live. What the hell was I thinking? What kind of bastard am I? I'm just another zit-faced freak with a gun. Man, I had no idea I was this evil. And then it makes me wonder. Do evil people *know* they're evil? Or do they just think they're doing the right thing?” (38; emphasis in original).

Zits' first thoughts when he wakes up in this alien body are to regret what he has done at the bank and to admit that he had been fooled and brainwashed by Justice. After that, he gradually manages to get his bearings on the situation but, of course, he soon realizes that what he has learnt from PBS and the History Channel about White-Native relations has little to do with the original events. As Andrews argues, Alexie is always conscious that “none of these representations are authentic or even based on first-hand experience. Instead, they are based on other invented representations, which themselves are based on previous invented representations” (2010: 50).

Alexie is quite selective concerning the historical occasions that he chooses to include in Zits' time-traveling for, while they should sound familiar to the average reader, they have all been the subject of a great deal of mythologizing. Thus, the battle between IRON (the Indigenous Rights Now! movement) and HAMMER (the traitor tribal government

officials who were eventually joined by the FBI) in the mid-1970s, Custer's Last Stand at the Battle of Little Bighorn in June 1876, or the massacre of a whole Native community by the U.S. Cavalry near the Colorado River in the same era, they are all convenient settings for exploring issues that capture the author's imagination. Among these, loyalty, betrayal, violence, relations across racial divides and revenge occupy prominent positions. As mentioned above, what is most interesting and original in the retrieval of these historical events is that Zits is invariably reincarnated in the bodies of peripheral figures and, as a result, the version we receive from him differs significantly from the more official accounts. Not only that but, as Walsh has noted, "rather than getting bogged down in the details of seminal historical events, he [Alexie] telescopes to the most intimate moments, when his characters rise and fall" (2007). The protagonist is likely to recount precisely those aspects of these historical episodes that the records say nothing about: how the FBI bribed some of the IRON leaders to achieve their purposes, how some U.S. Cavalry soldiers deserted the Army in mid-battle to help their opponents, or how awful Native camps smelled during the summer: "Justice never said anything about the smell of old-time Indians. I never read anything about this smell. I never saw a television show that mentioned it. / I don't mean to be disrespectful, but it smells like the Devil dropped a shit right here in the middle of this camp" (61). But more shocking and troubling than anything else, Zits is faced with numerous instances of gratuitous human violence that destroy his belief in the heroic character of victory. For example, after the Sioux have defeated Custer's troops, he explains that although he understands why the soldiers had to be killed, he does not understand what happens to the soldiers' bodies afterwards:

Right there, an Indian grandmother is stabbing a soldier with his own bayonet. He's dead and bloody, but she keeps stabbing him over and over again.

I stand and watch as she strips off his clothes. She wants him to be naked and ashamed in the afterlife.

And now she cuts off his penis and stuffs it into his mouth. She wants the gods to laugh at him when he arrives in the afterlife. "Hey, kid," the gods will say to him, "do you know you have your own cock stuffed between your teeth?"

All around me, grandmothers are cutting off penises and ears and hands and fingers and feet. (73)

The reader cannot fail to suspect that, apart from revealing the most horrendous features of these historical chapters, Alexie also wants his 'hero' to learn the lesson of how violence and revenge create a vicious circle from which it is almost impossible to escape. It is not surprising that, as mentioned earlier, Zits is disturbed by images of his own criminal deed after each of these bloody incidents. When he sees the hundreds of dead or dying cavalry soldiers on Custer's Hill he comments, "I feel sick in my stomach and brain. I feel sick in my soul. I remember that in another life I killed people like this. I left behind a bank lobby filled with dead bodies" (72). Be it in the body of an FBI agent or an innocent

and voiceless Native boy or an Indian tracker in the U.S. Army, what is evident is that Zits is confronted with situations that inevitably remind him of the consequences of his own murders. When the little Indian boy is urged by his father to kill a young white soldier after Little Bighorn, Zits cannot help contemplating the human need for revenge:

And then I wonder if that's the reason I killed all the people in the bank.

Did I want revenge? Did I blame those strangers for my loneliness? Did they deserve to die because of my loneliness?

Does this little white soldier deserve to die because one of his fellow soldiers slashed my throat?

If I kill him, do I deserve to be killed by this white soldier's family and friends?

Is revenge a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle? (77)

Obviously, Zits' metaphorical journey into the past is far from being a pleasant and comforting experience. Besides being a witness and active participant in some of the most brutal confrontations between Native and white Americans, the 'hero' is somehow compelled to redeem his own crime by coming face to face with ordeals in which he is forced to rethink his own motivations. Clara West summarizes the contents of the 'small narrative' as follows: "Alexie's novel is extraordinary in its sweet simplicity. It locates the personal and internal human life within the framework of history and a system of racial supremacy that produces a circle of division, devaluing and violence in order to perpetuate itself. But because human beings have made this system, they also have the ability to short circuit that cycle for their own and, perhaps, the entire species' survival" (2007).

4. BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN COLLECTIVE AND PERSONAL HISTORIES

The time-traveling experience and the five body metamorphoses that Zits undergoes during the novel are, no doubt, integral to his rapid development as a character. The manifold events he witnesses and the difficult situations he faces in other people's skin provide him with an invaluable opportunity to become aware of unknown aspects of his inner self. Not only that, but his process of self-discovery runs parallel to the realization that the history of racism and oppression that his people have suffered is not without its unexpected moments of empathy and mutual understanding. While it is true that prejudice and outright hatred dominate much of the story, there are also a number of surprising reversals in which characters—both white and Native—demonstrate that they are capable of great compassion. Zits' inner maturation is provoked as much by his brutal encounter with the man-devouring giant of American history as by his discovery that the human beings he comes to inhabit are, like himself, full of regrets and guilty feelings. Walsh has correctly remarked that "by offering perspectives from both sides of the battle", Alexie convincingly allows his 'hero' to understand that no one can really overcome pain on his own, no matter how divided the situation is (2007). Nowhere does this become

more evident than in the last third of the novel, when Zits travels into the bodies of a flight instructor, Jimmy, and that of his own alcoholic father.

At first, turning suddenly into Jimmy grants Zits one of the few moments of respite in the novel: “I have survived my journey through time and place and person and war and have now arrived in my Heaven. And my Heaven is a small airplane that will forever fly. I will never land” (108). However, he will soon realize that he is once more trapped in the body of a man who is going through a terribly difficult time in his life. In fact, Jimmy is constantly tormented by the memories of a personal past that has left him psychologically scarred. Zits is privy to Jimmy’s recollections of his deceased Ethiopian friend, Abbad, who betrayed him by hijacking and then crashing a plane —using the piloting skills that Jimmy had trustfully taught him. This unnamable act of betrayal has left the flight instructor devastated. His emotions reveal a mixture of bitter regret, loss, and frustration. When Abbad returns to haunt Jimmy in the form of a ghost, Zits promptly sees that the Ethiopian was full of resentment and antagonism against American society. As a matter of fact, when Abbad was trying to learn to fly, he had been turned away by seven different instructors who —one assumes, still under the shock of 9/11—thought he was a terrorist. Abbad felt, and his ghost continues to feel, profoundly wounded by this, so he explains his innermost feelings about Americans to Jimmy, thus unconsciously reinforcing his angry views and misconceptions: “You Americans love capitalism so much, he says. That man didn’t tell me to get out of his house, or out of his life. He didn’t tell me to go to hell or back to Africa or back to wherever he thought I came from. No, he told me to get out of his *place of business*. Business! That’s all he could think about” (111).

His negative experiences make Abbad hate American people so profoundly that he even ends up accusing his friend Jimmy of thinking he was a terrorist when they first met: “You are a liar, Jimmy. When I came to your door, when I said, *I want to be a pilot*, you immediately thought I was another crazy terrorist who wanted to learn how to fly planes into skyscrapers” (110; emphasis in original). His friend’s betrayal shocks and disorients Jimmy in such a way that he quickly loses his bearings in all the important relationships in his life. Zits soon discovers that the flight instructor is having a torrid love affair and that, although he still seems to love his wife, Helda, he is heading for disaster due to his mental instability. Of course, it takes some time for Zits to make the necessary connections between Jimmy’s deep psychological wounds resulting from his friend’s disloyalty and his own marital misdemeanor, which Zits finds difficult to untangle: “He is having an affair with a woman he doesn’t love. So he’s cheating on her, too, sort of. I mean, I don’t think you’re supposed to have sex with people you don’t love. I know, I know, I know. People do it all the time” (119). However, after a while, although Zits cannot approve of some of Jimmy’s actions, he begins to understand the kind of pressure he is living under, and so pities him, for he is able to see things from both outside and within his story: “Jimmy is a traitor. I’m mad at him, sure, but I also feel sorry for him. Or maybe he’s just feeling sorry for himself, and so I feel him feeling sorry” (119). Regardless of whether it is he himself who learns to feel sympathy for the pilot or whether he is simply experiencing Jimmy’s

own remorseful feelings, this is one of several moments of insight in the novel that show us that the narrator is moving deeper and deeper into the intricacies of the human heart (Lenfestey 2007).

Most reviewers of the novel (Murray 2008; West 2007) agree that “by far the best episode in the book” is Zits’ final transformation into his lost alcoholic father, prior to returning to his own body a few moments before opening fire on the crowd. This is probably the protagonist’s most painful metamorphosis, since throughout most of the novel he has been constantly blaming his father for all his misfortunes and it is against him that he harbors a strong grudge for leaving his mother and him when they most needed him: “[M]y mother loved my father. A few months after that photograph, my mother was in labor with me, and my father was leaving. By the time my mother held me, a newborn, in her arms, my father was already hundreds of miles away, never to return. Fucking bastard” (109). At first, Zits does not realize that the drunken man whose body he has come to occupy is his father; he thinks that he has just become a common beggar on the streets of Tacoma. However, he gradually learns that he is an Indian during an encounter with a couple of helpful young tourists who elicit from him all sorts of preconceived judgments regarding the superior attitudes of whites:

“It’s all your fault,” I say.

“What?” Paul asks.

“It’s all your fault,” I say again.

“What’s our fault?”

“White people did this to Indians. You make us like this”. (136)

Another passerby shares a moving family story with him and inquires whether he has any kids, after which he immediately pulls out a photo of Zits from his wallet. The ‘hero’ is absolutely astounded at this incredible revelation, and so he rushes over to a delivery truck to check his reflection in the side-view mirror: “I stare at my bloody reflection. I am older than I used to be But I know who I am. I am my father” (150). Predictably, uncontrollable anger surges up in Zits, and he wants to kill his procreator. But first he wishes to learn the motives for his unjust treachery against his family. So he looks into the mirror again and asks him about his awful behavior. Although his father is unable to come up with an answer, Zits forces him to travel back in his mind to the day he was waiting for Zits to be born. At the hospital, his father had waited patiently in the corridor, constantly tortured by the memories of his own drunken father’s abuses when he was a kid. He had been psychologically harassed all the time by this man, who blamed him for the family’s misfortunes: “You’re just a pussy boy. I can’t believe you are part of me. I wish you’d just go away” (155). Eventually, Zits realizes that his father was scared to death of being a father himself as he had never enjoyed the advantage of having a positive role model. In fact, he decided to run away from the situation precisely because he did not want to disappoint his wife and his newborn son: “And now my father, whipped and bloodied by his memory,

stops pacing in the hospital hallway. Somewhere on this floor, my mother is giving birth to me. But my father cannot be a participant. He cannot be a witness. He cannot be a father. And so he runs, he closes his eyes. And as he closes his eyes, I close my eyes" (155).

Witnessing this scene in his father's mind makes the protagonist understand that this lost man had been deeply traumatized since his childhood, and that it is unfair to blame him for his pathological reaction. It suddenly dawns upon Zits that his father did not abandon them because he did not love them but, rather, because his troubled past prevented him from accepting his new responsibilities. Once more, as is the case with many other characters in Alexie's fiction, Zits realizes that his father was the victim of tremendous burdens and dismal circumstances that he was hardly able to control.

As mentioned above, after this last body-migration, Zits returns to the scene of the bank, to the moment when he is just about to pull the trigger on the innocent crowd. Nevertheless, now he sees things in a completely different light, for he knows that it would make little sense to sacrifice all those lives just for the sake of showing his rage. He comes to the conclusion that violence is always brutal and absurd: "Maybe you're not supposed to kill. No matter who tells you to do it. No matter how good or bad the reason. Maybe you're supposed to believe that all life is sacred" (163). In Murray's words, Zits comes to see at this point that he is not the only one alone in the world, and that others also have their own obsessions, but "connections sometimes redeem" (2008). Consequently, he decides to walk away from the bank and suddenly feels the urge to tell someone about his incredible time-traveling experience. Soon, he runs into Officer Dave, but instead of telling him the story, he asks him to help him get rid of the two guns he is hiding inside his coat. Very concerned, Officer Dave and his partner take him to the police station, interrogate him, and watch the video recording from the bank. The video shows Zits just about to commit the massacre, but he suddenly vanishes from the scene for a few seconds, which one of the policemen interprets as "just a flaw in the tape . . . They reuse tapes over and over. The quality goes down. They got weird bumps and cuts in them" (166). Several reviewers have compared this structural device, which allows Alexie to explain his 'hero's' intense mental journey into the past, to Bierce's original experiments with time in some of his tales (see Buchan 2008).

The fact that at the end of the novel Zits is no longer considered 'dangerous' and that he is placed in a new foster family with Officer Dave's kind brother, Robert, gives the protagonist a chance to start from scratch, the chance to have a real family who truly cares for him. Unlike the previous foster families, who seemed to adopt him just for the money they would receive from the social services, Robert and Mary treat him from the beginning as if he were their own son. Moreover, his new mother helps Zits regain self-confidence by tackling his problem with acne: "No, you're not ugly. You're handsome, actually. But your skin –we need to start working on your skin. You'll be a lot happier if we do" (179). By the end of the novel, the reader is fully aware of the fact that time-traveling and body-dwelling have turned Zits into a radically different, wiser, and more trustful young man. Throughout the story, the 'hero' learns how important the choices we make

are and the serious consequences they may have for ourselves and others. He realizes, as well, that human behavior is often driven by prejudice and misconceptions, which only generate additional anger and hatred in those caught in underprivileged positions. Zits' 'flights' into the past and into himself also allow him to see that violence is useless and rather than solving problems, it simply perpetuates them, making them bigger every time. But, most importantly perhaps, Zits finally seems ready to accept who he is, and he leaves behind the dysfunctional teenager he was in order to become just Michael.

5. CLOSING REMARKS

Sherman Alexie's latest novel, *Flight*, is a work of historiographic metafiction in which the author explores the limits and contrivances of some of the 'master narratives' of the nation so as to show that there are alternative forms of discourse — 'smaller stories' — that can be equally illuminating regarding the kind of realities that people have experienced in the past. Instead of imposing fixity and stability on the events lived through by different groups, this novel tends to dialogize the significance that we have usually attached to particular historical episodes. As Benito sees it, "[t]he discourse of history as the ultimate representation of identity becomes de-privileged and relativized in literature. In its place, fiction appears as a counterfactual history that inscribes a new politics of representation within which traditionally marginalized groups can forge a more appropriate sense of identity" (1995: 42). In order to bring about this change of paradigm, minority authors have felt compelled to try other modes of representation that thematize in various ways the very process of turning events into facts through the re-codification of different information (Hutcheon 1989b: 62). In this regard, it is not surprising that Alexie should rely on techniques such as narratorial self-reflexivity, intertextual references, parodic reversals and multiple perspectives to counter the 'totalizing' effects of previous narratives governed by the logic of causality and a definite closure.

The time-traveling and body-migrating devices perfectly serve Alexie's purpose of delving into the cycles of violence and mutual denigration that have pervaded White-Native relations since the eighteenth century. As Nelson points out, apart from providing new perspectives and unexpected revelations, these devices also allow the author to "bend some of the rules" of Western storytelling to offer new openings into history (2010: 46). Rather than obtaining clear answers to his questions, Zits is perplexed by the complex ways in which human beings get entangled in situations to which it is difficult to apply any ethical standards. Thus, when, as white FBI agent Hank Storm, Zits is told by his partner, Art, that they are "soldiers" and so they have to do tough things they do not like, he wonders: "Art and Justice fight on opposite sides of the war, but they sound exactly like each other. How can you tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys when they say the same things?" (56). Although the 'hero' is mostly confused by the acts of treachery and disloyalty, vengeance and cruelty that he witnesses in the alien bodies he inhabits, he reaches the conclusion that he is not the only one lonely and outraged by a

reality that oppresses him: “I open my eyes. I think all the people in this bank are better than I am. They have better lives than I do. Or maybe they don’t. Maybe we’re all lonely. Maybe some of them also hurtle through time and see war, war, war. Maybe we’re all in this together” (158).

Flight shows the quality of an interstitial space between sleep and wakefulness that permits the author to reconsider and rearrange the positions occupied by diverse human categories at different historical junctures. Like Zits, the reader may feel uncertain about the benefits to be derived from these ‘small narratives’ but, as the ‘hero’ admits, maybe the lesson is so plain in them that we find it difficult to recognize: “I want to tell him [Officer Dave] the entire story. I want to tell him that I fell through time and have only now returned. I want to tell him I learned a valuable lesson. But I don’t know what that lesson is. It’s too complicated, too strange. Or maybe it is really simple. Maybe it’s so simple it makes me feel stupid to say it” (162).

In the end, what makes Zits’ time-traveling tale such a compelling and provocative narrative is the fact that it lands us where all good literature should: in the depths of the human heart. What is original about his story is that it does so by combining equal doses of the present and the past, the personal and the communal, the dramatic and the comic without missing a beat of his ultimate purpose, which is to “transmit and transmute” the possibilities of re-envisioning the intricate narrative of the nation (Bernardin 2010: 55).

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