Telling Identities

Sherman Alexie's War Dances

SARAH WYMAN

I

Sherman Alexie's collection of stories and poems, *War Dances* (2009), plays with fictions, with the art of constructing stories, identities, and, thus, interpretations of the world.[1] By probing the juncture between reality and representation, Alexie asks the oldest questions in a fresh, new voice: How do we attempt to know each other and to narrate experience? He launches investigations into the power of the imagination and the tricky reach of language as it articulates lived lives and selves. His polyphonic text enters the canons of contemporary US and world literature, where it can converse with great writers of the past and present. His contemporary myth-making or constructs of the human experience engage metadiscursively with the project of fiction as a philosophical question. Alexie reflects our own world back to us by asserting new aesthetic spaces that invite us to question the power and consequences of defining identity and documenting reality in language. In *War Dances*, the life-art connections are often scattered or tenuous as fantasy estranges or elements of the absurd seem to skew our expectations.[2] Strangely enough, many characters clearly resonate with their creator: the writer-narrator who suffered serious childhood illness, the lustful teen out of place, the confused father/son confronting desire and death.

Various themes tie the diverse texts of *War Dances* together: loss, change, identity, and the past's reach into the present. The fundamental question of *War Dances*, however, the one that weaves these arguably disjointed pieces into a wonderful cohesive fabric is, Who gets to tell the story? And as a corollary, How do the tales we tell represent or

relate to reality? In many of the poems and stories in *War Dances*, one finds a fierce rejection of being defined, edited, or otherwise silenced. Alexie investigates the vestiges of such violations in his book. The most powerful response he proposes is the very act of fictionalizing—not only the author in the act of writing but an editor splicing scenes, a child imagining the heroism of a pop star, a voyeuristic traveler fantasizing connections with strangers, the news media spinning a tragic accident into a hate crime, the way a eulogy can refashion a life. Alexie presents again and again the seam between fiction and reality as it complicates our perception and interpretation of the world. He acknowledges language's failure to fully capture our experience yet revels in the intricacies of our attempts to render it sensible.

Who gets to tell the story? Sherman Alexie does, but this project proves less straightforward than it may appear. Postmodern negations of authorship and narrative twists aside, *War Dances* plays with the power of representations in a remarkably subtle and searching way. Alexie offers alternatives to mainstream depictions of Amerindian and US culture with such success that he now enjoys superstar status. However culturally marked, *War Dances* confronts broader human questions lodged within carefully defined characters as it speaks of life, deprivation, and change in diverse voices.[3] Individual personas represent discrete identities in conflict or collusion with hegemonic mainstream culture. Alexie allows his characters to take responsibility for their own views and for their often-flawed choices.

The author celebrates his established place within the canon of US literature. In *War Dances* alone, Alexie evokes many great compatriot authors, all stylistic innovators and, in one way or another, nonconformists. Explicitly, he names Whitman (120), Melville (171), "bad dads" Faulkner and Hemingway (101), then Fitzgerald (49), Cheever (170), and others in the course of following his characters through their maneuvers and meditations. Implicitly, he alludes to additional literary icons as he philosophizes on topics from representations of the human experience to strategies for survival. For example, Paul Nonetheless's contention that "Americans were shockingly similar," for they "all know the lyrics to the same one thousand songs" (118) seems reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, in which she insists on the lack of individuality amongst her discourse community. The concluding couplet of "The Limited," "the only life I can save / is my own," echoes Flannery

O'Connor's gothic inversions in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," inviting comparison between the poetic speaker's sense of helplessness and Lucynell's victimhood at the hands of Tom Shiftlet.[4] And George Wilson's pet editing strategy, "skip the door" (5) (i.e., omit all unnecessary information) in "Breaking and Entering," recalls Ernest Hemingway's "iceberg theory," positing the rhetorical advantages of leaving the obvious unsaid. As in the typical iceberg scenario, with seven-eighths submerged, or in the style of minimalist modernist poets Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Wilson and Alexie elect to leave much of the expected information out, relying on reader-scriptors to participate in the creation of meaning and coherence. Additional celebrated North American voices appear in more ghostly fashion in Alexie's book. The blocked writer's coy cry, "What happens to a soul that's shaken *and* stirred?" (172), echoes Langston Hughes's more ominous, "What happens to a dream deferred?," granting urgency to the narrator's situation. Continuing the conversation, Sethe from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* might haunt this work with her words, "definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (190), a key to understanding *War Dances*. When the narrator of "Salt" identifies himself as "a reservation Indian boy intern," he explains, "I was to be admired for my ethnic tenacity but barely tolerated because of my callow youth" (192). Alexie proudly contends, "My entrance into the mainstream has changed the mainstream—forgive the immodesty—but I think my career has totally altered many people's ideas of what an Indian can do and can be. Especially other Indians."[5] In T. S. Eliot style, Alexie evokes the canon as an evolving model adapted to his own entry into it. Yet, unlike his predecessor, Alexie insists adamantly upon the grass-roots impact of any-brow literature.

It's no surprise that Alexie, unbounded by national boundaries, evokes creative free thinkers from other lands and genres as well, most strikingly, Kafka (29), Dickens (52), Tennyson (81), and Blake (163). He implicitly conjures Baudelaire and Wilde with his repeated characterization of fiction as (amoral) lying or precious artifice (180-81). These popular yet peculiar wordsmiths sing in conjunction with the very American alternate canon of popular music as Alexie references artist-singers from Aretha Franklin to Hall & Oates (117-18). Along with pop culture references to athletes, film stars, and cheap grocers (Trader Joe's), the author re-visions historical figures, including Nez Perce leader Chief Joseph (187) and Abraham Lincoln (105).[6] Alexie thus places *War Dances*

in dialogue with the broader Western canon of supposedly "high" and alternative cultures, facilitating the inclusion of many celebrated Amerindian voices. As the canon expands to incorporate these new twenty-first-century perspectives, the attention to identity intensifies.

Indeed, Alexie the self-proclaimed outsider has joined the ranks of important writers in US culture as articulated by many memorable voices. As a young writer, he somewhat sardonically identified his primary influences as his father, his grandmother, Stephen King, Steinbeck, and *The Brady Bunch*, yet he has also acknowledged the impact of many additional Native and non-Native authors.[7] The Amerindian authors he finally discovered in his twenties and still most admires include Adrian Louis, Joy Harjo, Simon Ortiz, and James Welch, as well as Leslie Marmon Silko, whose *Ceremony* he calls "probably the best book of Native American literature."[8] He considers these authors to be "constantly aware of history," whereas he differentiates his own work as more autobiographical than historical.[9] Still, the impulse to write and rewrite history comes up constantly in his work, characteristically on the personal level, as in "Salt," in which a widow attempts to transform her imperfect husband's life into a narrative via the instrument of obituary (203), or when his eccentric characters interact with famous figures from US history.

II

In *War Dances*' first story, "Breaking and Entering," the media dictates reality as the film editor–narrator George Wilson attempts to protect the integrity of a young actress named Tracy by editing out explicit scenes from a mediocre work of quasi porn, only to find himself misrepresented in the press as a murderous white racist. Yet when he corrects the record by insisting on his Spokane identity, he has to deal with the appalling liberal spin in which his moral dilemma over manslaughter is rescripted as the result of his own exploitation as a Native person. As Wilson plumbs the lower limit of realistic portrayal in both fictional film and the news media, he regrets passing through a door he would better have skipped.[10] Had he left the house instead of descending into the basement to confront the black adolescent thief, he might have remained his self-designated self forever, "never . . . the kind of man to defend his home, his property, his shit" (9). Instead, he swings a child-sized bat and kills somebody's son. This single-handed swipe with a

"lum-a-lum" (aluminum) bat turns out to be a game changer, as his momentary choice determines and defines his future identity, even in the eyes of his wife (18). Strangely enough, as a nod to linguistic arbitrariness, this murdered boy's name slides between Briggs and Riggs. Is this simply a typographical error or a sly invitation to read identities more carefully? As the story's three African American victims—Tracy, Elder, and Althea (Elder's mother)—and the perversely victimized George enter a "pain contest" in the narrator's imagination (16), he concludes that it is not even guilt or blame that runs the world but *shame* (17). Shame indicates the dissonance between the way one is perceived (as diverging from socially constructed norms and values) and the way one would prefer to identify oneself.

The title story, "War Dances," deals not only with individuals defined by their illness or Amerindians stereotyping each other as blanket providers but, more remarkably for this study, with the observation of how interview questions frame the analysis of identity.[11] As the narrator interfaces with various others, caring for his dying father while coping with the news of his own suspected brain tumor, he finds himself interpreting their identities and even inserting himself into their souls as a type of embedded fiction writer within the story itself. When his father finally dies, he senses his own mortality strongly. Having buried his patronymic father, he stares at a tombstone with his own name on it (46).

The narrator attempts to authentically reconstruct his father's and grandfather's life stories even as he intentionally obscures his current health crisis for his own sons. With special attention to form, the narrator uses poetic and catalog genres to represent his father, and he implicitly demonstrates the structuring effects of the research-interview process itself. His father's "exit interview," for example, reveals assumptions and facts about the dying man's alcoholism, parenting skills, and penchant for pig's feet (57). As in any interview or colonizing representation, details in the questions posed reflect the concerns and preoccupations of the interviewer more authentically than they ever could the father himself. The narrator tracks down a veteran witness to his grandfather's heroic death, when he was shot in the back as he rescued two comrades. The geriatric interviewee acknowledges his weak grasp on the facts and admits he thought to embellish the story to attribute more honor but did not. Meanwhile, the first-level narrator confronts his own possible death from a brain tumor as well as his relative lack of courage.

Alexie uses the poem embedded in the interview, "Mutually Assured Destruction" (59), to run a lyric up against reality, inviting the reader, by extension, to read the fiction in terms of Alexie's own biography. The narrator categorically disproves the purported facts of the poem one by one, even as he asserts the human impulse to seek authenticity in artificial depictions, to take the representation for the reality it seems to suggest. The charges of inauthenticity, ostensibly launched at an unreliable father, actually ricochet back on the narrator as the creator of the four quatrains. The ironic description of the chain saw–killing progenitor, like the more gentle interview questions, reveals again the agenda of the interviewer, the seeker, as he quests for knowledge about the man who shares his name as well as his memories of the 1970s. The farce of alphabetical organization lapses into comic confusion as syntactic parallelism falters, and the list becomes a Whitman/Ginsbergesque anaphoric catalog of random snatches of pseudophilosophy (61–62). As in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* or T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the endnotes overwhelm the text itself, a wry commentary on the human love of knowledge, the seeking after fragmentary facts to shore up some sense of a coherent reality. So, stylistically as well, Alexie continues his conversation with the Western canon, incorporating forms that have asserted their own significance and planted their own signposts in twentieth-century literary history.

As though to augment the sense of mystery surrounding an ailing son's attempt to understand his disappearing lineage, Alexie employs a hodgepodge of situational complications as well as a variety of styles. As surreal as it seems to confront death as all three men do—son, father, and grandfather—concrete realities figure the present needs for each one. The narrator seeks the appropriate toy for his son along with his prescription, his father needs a blanket, and the doomed grandfather attempts to transport two wounded pals across a battlefield. Yet complexities manifest in these simple tasks. When the narrator chews out a nosy bystander at the cashier's counter, his loss of temper distracts him so that he forgets the toy. The blanket gift for his postop father costs a "cracked and [wavering]" (39) healing song duet, and the record of his heroic grandfather's death depends on the unreliable witness's testimony as the ultimate act of preservation, the source of knowledge, and assertion of heroism. Then Alexie layers in tall tales—a doctor extracts roaches from a man's ears (30), a drunken father drives one thousand

miles on an empty tank of gas (57)—as though to parody any attempt at realistic depiction. The narrator's flights of imagination take him to the point that he dreams up an affectionate angel nestled in his own ear, allowing the "imaginative use of language [to] reshape [his] world," but also to celebrate the equally astonishing everyday experience of fiction writing, in which writers bring characters to life.[12]

An experiment in defining others, the narrator colonizes and completely fabricates the nurse's thoughts, not in the capacity of fiction writer but as a fellow human being who surmises the internal life of another person. Without a hint of omniscience, the narrator reports, "I know she didn't want to be cruel, but she believed there was a point when doctors should stop rescuing people from their own self-destructive impulses" (33). Later on, he credits her more generously as marveling "at the infinite and ridiculous faith of other people" (40), as though to tug this fellow character into the fictionalizing experience of living his own writerly life. Alexie seems to haunt the narrator as he links the childhood memory of infantile hydrocephalus (a pediatric experience Alexie shares) to the narrator's brain tumor scare. Alter ego to the Merriam-Webster's dictionary, the narrator defines this condition as "the obese, imperialistic water demon that nearly killed me when I was six months old" (41). Thus, the biographical fact that defined Alexie's and the narrator's infant identities perpetuates itself in his adult confrontation with illness, with genealogical investigation, and with the act of writing or asserting identities.

Cockroaches, locusts, a butterfly, and a beehive of drones populate the early pages of this story and seem to set up a thematic and rhetorical schema, yet Alexie drops this entomological pattern as the story develops. Despite the fact that he ends with a self-portrait of the moderately comforted yet clearly alienated and bereaved narrator, Alexie neglects to overtly summon Kafka's Gregor Samsa as bug again, a motif many readers probably expect. This deliberate sense of anticlosure lends a contemporary feel of open-endedness to the tale. The author has forged a familiar-feeling identity in a narrator who has revealed more of his past and present than we may have anticipated yet refused to sum him up even via bug-metaphor as this collage of recollections and memories, some invented and some lived coincidentally by the author, comes to an end.

"The Senator's Son" most overtly addresses identity politics, treating the commonalities between 9/11 terrorists and victims, a coming-out

episode, and an appalling hate crime dependent on a misidentification. When the drunken senator's son William and three of his friends engage in a vicious episode of gay bashing, William does not realize that he could be putting his father's political career on the line. Nor does he know that his bloodied victim is his childhood best friend, Jeremy. William's absurdly risky action precipitates a lesson in morality that is anything but politically correct. After the media announces the incident and clearly shields the perpetrators, Jeremy tracks down William for a long-overdue confrontation.

Much in the vein of the emotional reunion between the estranged Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire in "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," the men reestablish their fragile bond via the narrative of their common history. Their defining moment of Jeremy's coming-out announcement years earlier brings their fathers' reactions into the discussion. Just as Thomas grants Victor the knowledge that his own father loved him—"he said I had to watch out for you as part of the deal"—so does William gain a new perspective on his own father.[13] The wholesome Jimmy Stewart–type Republican senator turns out to be ruthless when guarding his adult son's career and his own reputation. William's father insists they claim that Jeremy and his partner started the fight. "He was forcing me to lie," a shocked and disillusioned William realizes (96). Yet Jeremy remains loyal to the senator, even when he learns of this potential betrayal. Like Victor, whose fragile tie to his own father depends on Thomas's knowledge, William wonders whether "this guy [was] more a son to my father than I was?" (98). Alexie thus humanizes even the antiheroes of his tales: "To humanize somebody you show everything. Everything. The best of who they are and the worst of who they are."[14] Alexie's fictional fabrication actually insists upon a core of truth-telling.

Jeremy further complicates simplistic notions of identity politics by differentiating between his sexual preference and his conservative Republican political beliefs (98). In a story that does not foreground ethnicity, as many of the others do, Alexie broadens the debate to deconstruct easy labels based on falsely essentializing categories. Jeremy's passing for straight translates as an eleven-year lie in William's interpretation, but the honesty of his self-expression in the present mitigates any residual blame or resentment William feels. He is astonished that Jeremy forgave his own father after enduring a homophobic beating:

"My dad broke my cheekbone. Broke my arm. Broke my leg. A hairline fracture of the skull. A severe concussion. I saw double for two months" (99). Moreover, he can barely fathom Jeremy's constant devotion to William's father (who betrayed his secret and precipitated the attack), valuing his political ideas over his actions and the senator's admirable "ordinariness," even though William feels defining his father as less than "great" will destroy his own foundations.

Even the less sensational details such as the narrator's switch from a wealthy suburban private school to a racially mixed urban public school engage questions of power engendered by identity and reputation. Here, for example, the son submits to this logistical change (one that separates him from his best friend, Jeremy) for the sake of his politician father's image. In a story of policing sexuality in the service of palatable depictions of propriety, the son suffers disillusionment as his idealized father plans a strategic lie. William's shock over this demystification (as intense as any from "Invisible Dog on a Leash") overshadows other themes and evokes the author's own conflicted relationship with a beloved but flawed father.

Taking up the topics of hate crimes and politicized identity politics, Alexie knows he's treading delicate territory. His unlikely hero, Jeremy, proclaims, "I can't campaign for something as silly and fractured as gay marriage when there are millions of Muslim women who can't even show their ankles" (102). Yet Alexie's irreverence, mediated through his characters or expressed outright in countless interviews, keys to his strategy of raising the issues in a new light, dismantling entrenched and often narrow perspectives. Alexie uses humor not only to deal exquisitely with grief, as in so many of his tales, but to call attention to serious problems in unexpected ways. He declares:

> I think one thing that liberals have a decided lack of is a sense of humor. There's nothing worse than earnest emotion and I never want to be earnest.[15] I always want to be on the edge of offending somebody, of challenging one notion or another, and never being comfortable . . . with myself, or with my own politics or my character's politics, or their lives. . . . Humor is really just about questioning the status quo.[16]

How could anyone not laugh as Alexie points out the ideological inconsistencies that inform the politics and private lives of all US citi-

zens? Like a good Foucauldian poststructuralist, the author troubles the boundaries between Democrats and Republicans, Liberals and Conservatives, all in the name not of deconstructing difference per se but of bringing to light Amerindian everyday realities:

> You can't really tell the political difference between a reservation Indian and a small farm town white guy. It's a very conservative mindset: pro-gun, pro-military, pro-life, pro–capital punishment. So, Indians, in a weird way live these incredibly conservative lives with incredibly conservative values but vote for Democrats because it's the Democrats who try to help us. We live ironic and contradictory lives.[17]

Just as Alexie complicates political categories, so he plays with traditional distinctions of genre.

The author pens lovely Elizabethan sonnets, such as "The Theology of Reptiles" (65) in *War Dances*, with embraced rhymes, cunningly slanted at times, elevating a boy's encounter with a snake to an apotheosis. At other times, he mixes genres to come up with unique forms of his own. The snake who "spiraled off the wire and splayed" (three trochees turning on a final iamb) finds his counterpart in simple stacks of words put to other purposes in Sherwin's word puzzles in "Fearful Symmetry" (173-74) or Alexie's revisionary historical prose poems. The text reminds us of Abraham Lincoln's *other* proclamation—the mass public execution, not the ending of slavery—carried out a year before the Emancipation Proclamation. As though unable to form this content into cadenced rhythms, he rather piles words like blocks of truth, spelling out the implications of Lincoln's dastardly act (105-6). In a second act of microfiction cum historic revisionism, he eulogizes his grandmother's favorite babysitter, the legendary Nez Perce leader Chief Joseph (187). The author upends Chief Joseph's premature surrender speech as though to visually replicate the long mane of his grandmother, braided by the warrior's hands. As often as not, Alexie reserves his true lyricism for unexpected spots in his prose, such as the description of the "War Dances" narrator huddling with his sons: "We all slept curled around one another like sled dogs in a snowstorm" (45). While those sons seem to resemble his own children, David and Joseph, they also recall the desire for security and the deep sense of familial bonds expressed by Junior from the *Diary*, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and Victor.

"Invisible Dog on a Leash" engages a litany of childhood let-downs as various mythical figures and magical illusions are revealed as hoaxes. The memoir of crushing episodes of disappointment in the 1970s includes a demystifying of the beloved Bruce Lee, an unmasking of the Sasquatch monster, the Oz-like revelation of the tricks behind acts of visual sorcery, and the easy tease of an invisible dog. Mixed in with these pushes from pedestals is the boy's realization that adults are the enemy to his youthful sense of wonder. His father recasts Bruce Lee as a wimp, and others testify mildly to the unreality of an obviously artificial monster movie. The child comes across as the true aesthetic connoisseur, loving the illusions as interwoven with the world, reluctant to discriminate between realms of reality and representation.

III

"Paul Nonetheless," a superbly crafted, metadiscursive tale, takes up the theme of defining the other from afar by assigning identity to an unknown apparition misnamed Sara Smile (after a pop song by Hall & Oates). What is it to be an alluring woman in red Pumas, to be a banker, to be crazy, to be Hepburn-perfect, to be good and adulterous at once? "What is your tribe?" Arnold asks in the *Diary* as he establishes a parallel list of labels.[18] When the Sara Smile look-alike becomes an adequate place-holder in Paul's web of signification—in his worldview—we see how dehumanizing such distanced defining turns out to be. And he's declared crazy for pursuing his imagination, taken in by his own forceful storytelling above and beyond the arguably artificial reality of the common public space—an airport in Chicago, in Durham, or Detroit.[19]

Paul's obsession with an object, not only the alluring stranger but, more explicitly, her red shoes, may constitute Alexie's more subtle nod to non-Western notions of semiotic presence. Despite Paul's manic, associative musings, these shoes are *shoes*, with intrinsic meaning and significance in themselves. They seem to suggest Paula Gunn Allen's Laguna Pueblo/Sioux alternative to the Western dualism of the sign and signified. While she has been faulted for essentializing across tribal distinctions, Allen has opened a space for the articulation of an antisymbolist language, a type of materialist literary conjuring to combat the terrifying isolation that ultimately engulfs the hero. Certainly Paul's repeated refrain, "What's going on?," borrowed from the deceased Mar-

vin Gaye, recalls Allen's insistence on the ceremonial power of repeating language or "language repeated for some purpose." Sunk deep in his own self-analysis ("Why was he forced to define and self-define?" [120]), enmeshed in the pulsing language that fevers this story and ultimately severs him from all other beings, Paul may be N. Scott Momaday's Man Made of Words.[20] Like Momaday's one-eyed Kiowa woman, Ko-sahn, who steps out of language and stands before him, Sara Smile seems to step out of Paul's vivid fantasy life and onto the conveyer walkway before him. Paul's artful musings appear to conjure life itself, if only up to a point. With a deft platonic inversion in the manner of Baudelaire or Wilde, supreme value settles at the level of the representational, asserted as a good/truth (in an amoral sense), conjured far from the noumenal realm. Paul's imaginative constructs appear more real than the real, more true than the woman standing before him.

Momaday's notion of storytelling again pertains to Alexie's craft as channeled through Paul. Momaday explains:

> Storytelling is imaginative and creative in nature. It is an act by which man strives to realize his capacity for wonder, meaning and delight. It is also a process in which man invests and preserves himself in the context of ideas. Man tells stories in order to understand his experience, whatever it may be. The possibilities of storytelling are precisely those of understanding the human experience.[21]

In mock heroic terms, Alexie uses the act of storytelling to exercise a stay against the disaster of loneliness (the lost rhyme of Paul's "Nonetheless"). He does not evoke the heroism of Momaday's arrow maker, who uses words to preserve two lives, but he nevertheless demonstrates the way language conjures realities, how a wish articulated can change a scene. He succeeds in evoking unexpected sympathy for a lost and vibrant soul.

Paul articulates the discourse of popular music by living his life in terms of song lyrics. Much the way the Tyrone family communicates via lines from Shakespeare and other literary giants in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, so does Paul read the world in terms of received phraseology set to music:

> There was a rule book: When a man is rebuffed by a beautiful stranger he must sing blue-eyed soul; when a man is drunk with

> the loneliness of being a frequent flyer he must sing Mississippi Delta blues; when a man wants revenge he must whistle the sound track of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. When a man's father and mother die within three months of each other, he must sing Rogers and Hammerstein: "Oklahoma! Oklahoma Okay!" (118)

Reminiscent of the cadences of his own poem, "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel," Alexie provides the parodied formula for an appropriate portrayal of the episodes of one's own life narrative. Paul clearly lives his life in these terms, self-consciously fitting spontaneous events into received forms. This allows the aesthetic features to outweigh the depicted referents, particularly when substituting a misidentified lust-object for Sara Smile.

Narrating about narration itself, this is Alexie's most obsessively metatextual tale. Paul plays out a pop song scenario by falling in love at first sight with a woman whose deeper identity and circumstances he elaborately fictionalizes, romanticizing the imaginative moment in contrast to the brute reality of his family falling apart back home. The narcissistic Paul seems to read his own words even as he utters them, knowing that to speak aloud is to self-identify, in terms of his geeky Top 40 diction (119). And his interlocutor, the airport stranger, replies in kind: "I think that's the first time I've ever heard a man say *nonetheless* in normal conversation" (123). Paul talks about talk—wanting conversation, desiring another's stories, but mainly his own. "He'd turned the avenging and murderous Medea into a sexy punch line. How many men could do that?," Paul gloats (125). A solipsistic postmodern, this gladiator battles, and the enemy's not even in the ring; the enemy is his own shameful isolation.

The most obvious instance of the storytelling theme as a means of self-definition and editing as an opportunity to colonize another's identity is "Fearful Symmetry." Here the writer-narrator must surrender his story to the ravages of an all-powerful "imperial" (170) editor. As a writer-for-hire in Hollywood, the screenwriter-narrator Sherwin Polatkin cannot construct even a metaphoric escape fire or any other means to protect his identity and his integrity as it plays out in his preservation of an artistic vision. Like Paul, this protagonist juggles language in nearly concrete terms, warning against unbridled postmodern appropriation, or "the dangers of creating art based on other art" (167). No

easy aestheticist, Alexie continues to insist upon the social function of art and the integrity of the word. And yet Sherwin ultimately saves himself (if not his paycheck) by making a leap into the refuge of storytelling in the powerful terms of *lying*, of fictions that can be the greatest weapons of self-defense against the individual and societal forces that conscribe self-expression. Faking a *New York Times* Saturday crossword puzzle for the benefit of the voyeuristic airplane passenger seated behind him, Sherwin realizes he is, in a way, creating a useful fiction. This act ends his writer's block, allowing him to regain his sense of identity in a way that clearly resonates with the author himself. As Alexie explains,

> I want the whole world to smell like story-smoke, my story-smoke! So in that sense I'm like Thomas [Builds-the-Fire]. Thomas is really obsessed about making sure that people hear him, but his world-view is tiny in terms of his audience. My world-view was small in the beginning, too. Now, it has expanded.[22]

Thus, Alexie's desire to tell stories springs not only from a sense of social responsibility but from personal need as well.

IV

Alexie comments that, ironically, the supposedly authentic storytellers or representative writers of particular ethnic groups tend to be the weird ones, the social rejects, such as his characters Thomas and Junior from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. As Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez explains,

> [One] of Alexie's concerns is that Indian literatures are erroneously assumed by non-Indian readers, to represent social and historical realities in ways that other literatures do not. When readers' expectations take an anthropological turn, writers are put in the extremely awkward position of being expected to represent their tribes, communities, and Native America.[23]

Yet, Alexie insists, "Most of us [Indian writers] are outcasts. . . . We don't really fit in within the Indian community, so we write to try to fit in and sound Indian. So it's ironic that we become the spokespeople for Indian country, that we are supposed to be representative of our tribes."[24] Drawing from the ranks of well-known Kiowa writers, he offers

"[N. Scott] Momaday—he's not a traditional man. And there's nothing wrong with that, I'm not either, but this adherence to the expected idea, the bear and all this imagery. I think it is dangerous, and detrimental."[25] In fact, Momaday's 1997 "Man Made of Words" reads beautifully against Alexie's own project of remaking the world through acts of storytelling, of insisting upon strategies for survival writ in terms of *anger multiplied by imagination*.

v

When I discussed Alexie's book with community readers in New Paltz, New York, we returned again and again to themes of autobiographical content and the place of truth in fiction. My favorite question from a participant was "Why did Alexie call his book *War Dances* if he does not come from a warrior culture?" I would suggest that the answer lies both in the autonomy of the text—why should fiction have anything to do with real life?—and, paradoxically, in the book's overt link to the author's life, one that he defines himself in terms of being embattled, of being at war.[26] In one interview, holding an intellectualizing trauma-literature critic at bay, he simply explains, "What keeps coming back to me is that when I think about Indians all I think about is suffering. My first measure on any Indian is pain."[27] For once, Alexie does not sound ironic.

This author, who is so humorous, uproariously funny at times, asks some pretty tough questions, including this one echoing Muskogee Joy Harjo's "Anchorage": "How do you explain the survival of all of us who were never meant to survive?" Kenneth Lincoln points out the facts that "Native Americans as a composite are the only in-country ethnic group that the US has declared war against, 1860–1890. Some existing 560 reservations, 315 in the lower forty-eight states, are natively seen from inside as occupied POW camps."[28] One might be reminded of the newborn baby Junior from the *Diary*, who, like Alexie himself, was never meant to survive due to hydrocephalus, or water on the brain, the consequences of which often kept him bedridden through the first seven years of his life. Using the trope of the baby who fought to live, Alexie insists on the theme of survival through storytelling.

Telling the story constitutes Alexie's constant battle. It's not just a question of grabbing the mike, learning the language, or finding a publisher. It's also an issue of considering the way we all represent ourselves

to the world and of the power involved in (mis)defining others. Alexie takes a tough stance, charging his fellow Native writers with responsible execution of their functional art:

> We do have a cultural responsibility above and beyond what other people do, more than other ethnic groups, simply because we are so misrepresented and misunderstood and appropriated. We have a serious responsibility to tell the truth. And to act as . . . role models. We are more than just writers. We are storytellers. We are spokespeople. We are cultural ambassadors. We are politicians. We are activists. We are all of these simply by nature of what we do, without even wanting to be. So we're not like these other writers who can just pick and choose their expressions. They've chosen for us, and we have to be aware of that.[29]

Alexie continues his discussion, stressing the intersection of art and life as he insists that writers must live as they write, or practice what they preach, for their modeling of authentic storytelling must span both their personal and public/writerly lives.[30] Alexie has staked out his spot in the literary canon of North America, a nation that should be represented by the trickster crow, not the majestic eagle, in his opinion (153). He insists upon both knowledge of and attention to history, even as he participates in the contemporary fascination with the crisis of signification. As the clever widow in "Salt" states, "You can name your daughter Euthanasia and nobody would even notice if they didn't know what the word meant" (205). An arbitrary signifier enjoyed only for sonic qualities—*euthanasia*—both draws a chuckle and invites a wry acknowledgment of the sad facts of history. Alexie tells stories that delight and inform, that evoke memories and moral dilemmas we may have missed. By foregrounding the uneasy relationship between reality and representation even as he enjoys the pleasures of fiction, Sherman Alexie highlights the complexities of defining identities and of rendering the world in language.

NOTES

1. Sherman Alexie, *War Dances* (New York: Grove Press, 2009). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

2. Even as *War Dances* asserts its own artificiality as art, the author revels in clear ties to a commonly shared reality, one that resonates with episodes from his own reading. Alexie's overtly autobiographical *The Absolutely True Diary*

of a Part-Time Indian (2007), for example, enriches one's experience of *War Dances*. Even Alexie remarked with a measure of surprise, after reading the new edition of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, "This is a family memoir. This is completely stolen from my own life" (Lorena Allam, "Reservation to Riches: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio National's *Awaye*, June 16, 2006, in *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*, ed. Nancy Peterson [Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009], 160). Alexie himself emphasizes the link between life and art, calling his three best-known fictional characters (Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor Joseph, and Junior Polotkin) the "(un)holy trinity of me" (John Bellante and Carl Bellante, "Sherman Alexie, Literary Rebel," *Bloomsbury Review*, May–June 1994, 14; Tomson Highway, "Spokane Words: Tomson Highway Raps with Sherman Alexie," *Aboriginal Voices*, January–March 1997, 40). This trio relives events from the author's life and combines aspects of Alexie's own character: the geek storyteller who loves the traditions of his people, and the rambunctious basketball player, betrayed by his beloved, alcoholic father and proud of his culture. Even more overtly, the author identifies with Arnold Spirit, the *Diary*'s writer: "Arnold is me. Well, he's twice as smart and funny as I was at the same age" (Tanita Davis and Sarah Stevenson, "Sherman Alexie," *Finding* 2007 Winter Blog Blast, in Peterson, *Conversations*, 189).

3. See Joelle Fraser, "An Interview with Sherman Alexie," *Iowa Review* 30, no. 3 (2000): 69.

4. Alexie claims, "I . . . see my reservation in the work of Flannery O'Connor" (Davis and Stevenson, "Sherman Alexie," 190).

5. Matt Dellinger, "Redeemers," in Peterson, *Conversations*, 127.

6. Alexie erroneously locates the Bear Paw battle in Idaho, although it actually took place in central Montana (anonymous *AIQ* editor).

7. Dennis West and Joan West, "Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals: An Interview with Sherman Alexie," *Cineaste* 23, no. 4 (1998): 37.

8. Duncan Campbell, "Voice of the New Tribes," *Guardian*, January 4, 2003; E. K. Caldwell, "More than Just a Writer: Sherman Alexie (1995)," in *Dreaming the Dawn: Conversations with Native Artists and Activists* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 57–58; the quote about Silko is from Peterson, *Conversations*, 114.

9. Diane Thiel, "A Conversation with Sherman Alexie by Diane Thiel," *Crossroads: The Journal of the Poetry Society of America* 61 (2004): 6.

10. Speaking of filmic fictions, Ward Churchill provides the facts on the cultural saturation of inauthentic portrayals of Native experience: "All told, more than 350 'name brand' Euroamerican [actors] had made their mark appearing in redface by 1970." He goes on to explain that "during the near half-century when real native people were all but frozen out of the movies, the studios

cranked out something in the order of 2,000 films dealing with what are called 'Indian themes' ("*Smoke Signals* in Context," in *Considering Cultural Difference [A Longman Topics Reader]*, ed. Pauline Uchmanowicz [New York: Pearson Longman, 2004], 85). Alexie's award-winning independent film *Smoke Signals* (Miramax 1998) set a new standard and inaugurated a genre of alternative cinematic representations of Amerindian experience.

11. In a characteristic move, Alexie employs the social function of art by calling attention to the effects of health issues on Native populations without belaboring the facts. Here are the unbelabored facts, according to Cherokee analyst Rennard Strickland:

> Indian health level is the lowest and the disease rate the highest of all major population groups in the United States. . . . The incidence of tuberculosis is over 400 percent higher than the national average. Similar statistics show that the incidence of strep infections is 1,000 percent, meningitis is 2,000 percent higher, and dysentery is 10,000 percent higher. Death rates from disease are shocking when Indian and non-Indian populations are compared. Influenza and pneumonia are 300 percent greater killers among Indians. Diseases such as hepatitis are at epidemic proportions, with an 800 percent higher chance of death. Diabetes is almost a plague. And the suicide rate for Indian youths ranges from 1,000 to 10,000 higher than for non-Indian youths. (Churchill, "*Smoke Signals* in Context," 86–87)

12. David Moore, "Nonfiction," in *Nothing but the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001), 11.

13. Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993), 70.

14. Timothy Harris, "Seriously Sherman: Seattle's Favorite Pissed Off Poet Talks about Truth, Terror, Tradition, and What's So Great about America Anyway?," in Peterson, *Conversations*, 133.

15. Alexie makes a nod, perhaps, to Oscar Wilde's satirical drama *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Kenneth Lincoln has drawn fitting parallels between Sherman Alexie and Oscar Wilde ("Futuristic Hip Indian: Alexie," in *Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry, 1890–1999* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], 10).

16. West and West, "Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals," 37.

17. William Cole, "Sherman Alexie in Conversation," in Peterson, *Conversations*, 111.

18. Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007), 217. Alexie considers his own "strongest tribes" book nerds and basketball players, emphasizing the racial, cultural, economic, and spiritual diversity of these groups (Davis and Stevenson, "Sherman Alexie," 190).

19. Rhonda Shary, instructor at the State University of New York at New Paltz, conversation with the author, October 27, 2011.

20. N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

21. N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words," in *Nothing but the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001), 88.

22. Ase Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," *MELUS: Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-ethnic Literature of the United States* 30, no. 4 (2005): 162.

23. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez, "Fancy Dancer: A Profile of Sherman Alexie," *Poets and Writers*, January–February 1999, 57.

24. Brill de Ramirez, "Fancy Dancer," 57.

25. John Purdy, "Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie (1997)," in Peterson, *Conversations*, 43.

26. Ron McFarland, "'Another Kind of Violence': Sherman Alexie's Poems," *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1997): 251.

27. Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke," 165.

28. Lincoln, "Futuristic Hip Indian," 15.

29. Caldwell, "More than Just a Writer," 58.

30. Alexie continues in his interview with E. K. Caldwell:

> As native writers, we certainly talk the talk about the things everybody should do and we should do, but if you're going to write about racism, I don't think you should be a racist. If you're going to write about sexism and exploitation, then I don't think you should be sleeping around. If you're going to write about violence and colonialism, then I don't think you should be doing it to your own family. So, I think we have a serious responsibility as native writers to live traditionally in a contemporary world. And I don't think that a lot of us do. (Caldwell, "More than Just a Writer," 58)