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Constructing Identities and Narrating the Self: Sherman Alexie's *Flight* as a Fictional Memoir

Sabrina Völz
Leuphana University Lüneburg

Abstract: In *Flight* (2007), Sherman Alexie takes a pristine approach to Native identity and the complexity of being Native in contemporary U.S. society. In this both highly praised and somewhat criticized novel, personal and social identities are closely linked to history and memory as well as to violence – past, present, and future. As an orphan of hybrid heritage, Zits, the teenage protagonist, is born into a culture that excludes him from participation. Through time traveling, he not only recounts and reflects on episodes in history through the lens of five male characters but is also launched on a spiritual journey. From this vantage point, Zits reflects on multi-temporal levels of the past and on conflicting identities – his own and those of others whose bodies he occupies. Instead of continuing to be victimized by the 'master' narrative, the protagonist becomes the master narrator of his own circular life story, and ultimately of a 'real', more unified self.

Keywords: fictional memoir, native identity, circular narrative

> The way of the Imagination is the way of continuity, circularity, completeness. […] The imaginative construction of personhood is the best, and perhaps the only kind of life.
>
> "Bringing Home the Fact: Tradition and Continuity in the Imagination", Paula Gunn Allen

Sherman Alexie has undeniably become a fixture in American literature. Many of his short stories, poems, and novels deal with Native American identity. Alexie's novel, *Flight* (2007), explores this theme from the perspective of Zits, a half-Native and half-white fifteen-year-old teen of Irish descent who is on the verge of self-destruction. Traveling through time and inhabiting the body of three Native and two white males, the confused teen is confronted with the thoughts and experiences of diverse characters living in a wide range of historical, cultural, and social settings. Zits reflects on and ultimately rejects these involuntary roles with which he is confronted. Nevertheless, these five experiences educate Zits about personal and social identities as he struggles to actively negotiate their meaning. Ultimately, Zits must overcome the oppositional 'fight-or-flight response' and face his problems. In this paper, I will establish that Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz and Estibaliz Vivanco's categorization of *Flight* as historiographic metafiction, an umbrella term, can further be subcategorized into fictional memoir. I will build on their work, which sees Zits' time traveling as a "burden and/or opportunity to find oneself" (33-38) through the "building of bridges between collective and personal histories" (38-42) as well as position these subjects in Native terms. Moreover, I will show that the narrative structure of the novel and process of identity construction resemble a circle, a prevalent symbol for life in Native cultures. The first three and the final three chapters serve as the narrative frame while each new time travel episode also consists of three chapters. The novel ends where it begins, in an altered context. Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that *Flight*'s conclusion is not as unwieldy as some critics have suggested.

1. Native and Western Conceptions of History and Their Relationship to Literature

Before looking at the study of history in the post-modern era, I would first like to focus on the orality/literacy binary as it pertains to traditional Native and Western conceptions of history. Although historians have begun to recognize the fluid borders between history and memory, some Native modes of historicizing are absent from most historical scholarship today, e.g. the spiritual realm, myths, human relationships to other life forms as well as conceptions of time and circularity:

> Aboriginal peoples took a different path [from the Western world]: they traced their histories through myths that tell of their development as human beings through their relationship with spiritual powers and with their land […] as well as with all its varied forms of life. The Aboriginal conception of time as a web of interacting recurring cycles spanning the present, past, and future, did not give importance to chronology; rather its mythic thought focused on how people related to the natural world that provided societal context, and to the spiritual

> world that gave meaning to it all. […] This meant that the myths were flexible in a way that eludes literate tradition that fixes the word in print. (Dickason 117-18)

Native ways of knowing have much in common with collective memory, which can be defined as "experiences shared and recalled by large numbers of people, shared, retrieved, preserved, shared, passed on, and recast in many forms, such as stories" (Ferrante 91). It transports feelings and emotions in a subjective and fragmented way, while history seeks a larger, unified narrative based on facts and collaborating evidence (testimonials and written documents of all sorts).[1] Historians have begun to see themselves as authors of narratives using artifacts of collective memory to supplement their scholarship, a development that has changed how some scholars see the correlations between the fields of history and literature. Elucidating this relationship, Alun Munslow states:

> So, a history acknowledges the 'raw existence' of past things, people, and events, and the historian insists that there must be a decipherable meaning to them. This insistence does not produce any essential difference between a history and a fiction when both are understood as narratives. Both are imagined and fictively construed, although the history claims truthfulness. But meaning and explanation are as much fictively construed as discovered. (32)

In fact, Richard Slotkin, whose monumental treatise *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* has influenced historical scholarship for decades, hypothesizes that "there is no reason why, in principle, […] a novelist's portrayal of a past may not be truer and more accurate than that produced by a scholarly historian" (Slotkin 222). For him, fiction may serve as "thought-experiments" that allow writers to overcome the limitations of historical writing (221).

As mentioned above, Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco have situated *Flight* in the context of Linda Hutcheon's work on historiographic metafiction. Minority authors utilize this literary form to "deconstruct the short-sighted stereotypes and misapprehensions that Western peoples have disseminated, as well as to reinforce their own identity" (Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco 30). Questioning the 'reality' and all-encompassing accounts of the past, historiographic metafiction allows for alternative readings of familiar historic events and for the deconstruction of the master narratives. Due to opposing views on violence and the history of the frontier in the United States[2], a creation of a modified collective memory is a demanding task or journey, which Zits unknowingly embarks upon.

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[1] See also Thelen.

[2] Frederick Jackson Turner coined the term 'frontier' in 1890. From the perspective of settler society, it was understood as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization".

2. Identity Construction and Memoir

Although some aspects of identities are likely to remain the same over time, others may change. Generally speaking, identity can be divided into three parts: personal, social, and ego. For the sake of brevity, I will adopt Steph Lawler's definition based on Erving Goffman's theory: Personal identity is "the unique characteristics of the person, both in themselves and in terms of their relations with others", while social identity describes "what we might call a 'categorical identity' – an identity that persons have by virtue of their membership of social categories." (Lawler 8) Finally, ego or felt identity "refers to a subjective sense of 'who we are' or who we believe ourselves to be." (idem) Identity construction as popularized by Erik Erikson is typically seen as a linear process through which personality develops in a fixed order. In recent years, social scientists have begun to view identity construction as a "social and collective process and not, as Western traditions would have it, a unique and individual possession," (Lawler 2) a view more on par with Native identity conceptions. Identity formation happens through the act of telling individual, collective, and cultural narratives. Yet, as a primarily oral form, Native storytelling is not easily adapted to all literary genres. According to Arnold Krupat, autobiography with its focus on the self and literacy is primarily a Western literary form that was unfamiliar to Native American cultures. (3) He posits that even in Native warrior societies, conceptions of the self are viewed as "'synecdochic,' i.e., based on part-to-whole relations, rather than 'metonymic,' i.e., as in the part-to-part relations that most frequently dominate Euroamerican autobiography." (4) Memoir as a relational form of non-fictional storytelling offers new possibilities for Native authors.

Traditionally, autobiography in the West has been viewed as a grand non-fictional narrative that spans a lifetime and is written retrospectively from the perspective of "wisdom gained through many years" (Larson 16); it has usually been associated with public figures and their impressive contributions to society. Since the rise of post-modernism and the shift from the known to unknown, autobiography has become somewhat suspect as theorists, such as Kenneth J. Gergen, deeply question the idea of a "concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics" (qtd. in Cahil 290). Since the 1990s, this development has given rise to the memoir, as a popular, fragmented form and as a genre preoccupied not so much with individuals but with "the physicality of a materially located place in history and culture. […] Memoirs personalize history and historicize the personal" (Buss 595). For G. Thomas Couser, "this is an age – if not *the age* – of memoir (3).[3]

The word memoir originates from the French word "mémoire", denoting memory or remembrance. Memoirists make memories public by shap-

[3] See also Smith and Watson 127-28.

ing them into works of creative non-fiction. Donald E. Polkinghorne refers to this process as "smoothing", which consists of "flattening" (condensing or excluding information), "sharpening" (expanding or exaggerating other parts) as well as "rationalization" (making sections more coherent and logical) (9). Silence and forgetting are as much of the process of emplotment as are remembering, reflection, and smoothing. In recent years, memoir's borders between fiction and non-fiction and subjectivity and objectivity have become blurred. This development is closely tied to the postmodern distrust of a singular truth, one based on fallible human memory. In his article entitled, "How memoirists mold the truth," André Aciman describes how memoir writing gives the memoirist the possibility to alter the past, to shift the focus onto something more important, and to recast it in the light of the present or future:

> It is not the truth we're after; what we want instead is something that was always there but that we weren't seeing and are only now, with the genius of retrospection, finally seeing as it should have occurred and might as well have occurred and, better yet, is still likely to occur. In writing, the difference between the no more and the not yet is […] negligible.

For this reason, marginalized groups, the silenced, or the misrepresented have closely allied themselves with memoir.[4] Similar to historiographic metafiction, memoir has become an empowering form of expressing alternate histories.

Situated somewhere between biographies (focus on others) and autobiographies (focus on the self), identity construction is of central concern to the memoir: "Life writing not only thematizes or re-presents identity and its construction and deconstruction, but is one of the very sites of its making" (Brockmeier 456). Depending on the authors and the emphasis of their stories, memoir falls between the two poles of these more established genres.[5] The memoirist focuses on the particular, on a phase of everyday life or selected episodes relating to an average person as well as the "times in which the life is lived" (Buss 595), in contrast to autobiography which concentrates on its "hero (its subject-author)". Nevertheless, memoir shares with autobiography the tendency to chronicle and reflect on a "journey toward adulthood, self-awareness, spiritual growth, personal wholeness)" (Gunzenhauser 75). Similar to the autobiographer whose motives are somewhat didactic, readers of memoir seek not only "entertaining distraction but […] insight and the possibility of wisdom gained, not least from the recognition of folly" (Smith and Watson 18). Memoir offers a myriad of possibilities as an intersection between

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[4] See Smith and Watson 156-60.

[5] Most definitions of memoirs include these elements. See, for example, Buss 595-96; and Couser 20-24.

time and place, language and culture as well as society and individuals. Likewise, fictional memoir can do much of the same. Couser has recognized that "first-person novels resemble autobiographies or memoirs" (57), inasmuch the narrating 'I' (narrator) tells a story about the self or narrated 'I' (protagonist), often from the benefit of hindsight.[6] Similar to fictional autobiography's use of a first-person narrator who tells a mostly complete life narrative as if it actually happened, fictional memoir employs the narrating 'I' who recounts and comments on a period of his or her life as if it were non-fictional.[7]

While much of my reading is on par with Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco's, I distance myself from their phrasing of "find[ing] onself" (33) since identity construction requires committed agency, an active process which entails great work and imagination. Although they do acknowledge Zits' personal insight gained from his time travels and suggest that "Zits' journey into the past is far from being a pleasant and comforting experience" (38), they do not view his storytelling as an integral part of his own identity construction. Identities must be negotiated and renegotiated as the past is simultaneously viewed in terms of the present and future (a forthcoming 'present' that has not yet happened). This process of negotiation happens in Zits' case through the smoothing process which happens outside the reader's view. Moreover, I prefer to see *Flight*'s narrative structure and Zits' development in terms of a circle. Circularity is a widely recognized narrative technique in Native fiction (Tatonetti, "Native American Narrative" 392). Through experiencing and revising history, Zits alters his perspective on violence and by doing so alters his view of the self. At the end of the novel, Zits' identity – though still fluid – marks an achievement.

3. Introducing the Narrating 'I'

As a fictional memoir, *Flight* commences with Zits' childhood while recounting family background – the basis for personal and social identity – in chapters 1-3. The book opens with the line "Call me Zits. […] My real name isn't important" (Alexie 1).[8] The narrating 'I' is plagued by forty-seven zits, the source of the nickname others have bestowed on him. Reminiscent of small pox, which had a devastating effect on Native populations, the acne or scarred tissue on his face symbolizes the wounds beneath the surface. Zits does not feel comfortable in his own skin and distances himself from others as a means of pro-

[6] Narrating 'I' and narrated 'I' are two of the four dimensions of narrative identity used by Smith and Watson (71-78). Especially the *Bildungsroman* and coming-of-age novels have much in common with life writing.

[7] Fictional memoir is a relatively new term and as such has yet to appear much in scholarship. The term is also associated with memoirs that are based on an author's life but fill in too many missing gaps in memory, embellish at times, or are overly literary.

[8] All references, unless stated otherwise, refer to Alexie's novel *Flight*.

tection. One such strategy involves employing sarcasm voiced as "whatever" which likewise serves as a form of protest (Alexie 6; 13-14; 28; and 175). As Eva Gruber notes, sarcasm can also be seen as a more direct form of protest than irony: "It allows Native writers to vent some of the bitterness that arises from ongoing injustice, oppression, and misrepresentation" (60). Zits' humorous quips, honesty, and his frank, colloquial way of speaking about typical ills associated with growing up draw readers into the story by giving it a sense of universality, a feature of memoir. Readers must find the memoirist credible as well as discover a personal, affective connection to the life narrative.

At the same time, the narrating 'I' is a confused and lonely fifteen-year-old juvenile delinquent who has yet to experience real love, compassion, and approval. From the beginning, readers learn of the teen's attempts to gain acceptance and attention – even in a negative form – through alcohol, theft, and setting fires (7; 26). Abandoned at birth by his father, Zits is neither legally recognized as Native, nor has he had contact with Native Americans apart from the homeless Indians in Seattle and television images (12). Recounting his story in a detached manner, Zits avoids emotional outbursts and only alludes to the trauma that he has endured: "The narrator's voice is also stripped – of everything except a survivor's intuition" (Barbash). Nevertheless, he refuses to be silenced and to take on the persona of powerless victim pitied by and dependent on others.

Had Zits' father been documented on his son's birth certificate, the boy would have access to his tribal affiliation. Instead, he is a 'generic' Native person stripped of his cultural heritage. Furthermore, if Zits had gained legal status, he could have sought access to Native communal life important for the development of his identity and survival in a world hostile to 'Others'. At the very least, as a legally recognized Native American, Zits would have had a greater chance to be placed in Native foster families (8). However, in order not to vilify whites at the cost of idealizing Native people, the novel shows that Native American foster families can also be cruel through the example of foster father Edgar (9-11).

Only meeting Zits' basic physiological needs, the social system has failed him on numerous levels. After Zits' father "vanished like a cruel magician" (5) and his mother died of breast cancer when he was six years old, Zits was also abandoned by his aunt who could not deal with his accusations of sexual abuse against her boyfriend. Therefore, the boy became an orphan and a ward of the state. After living in twenty foster homes, attending twenty-two schools, and experiencing both mental and sexual abuse (28; 75), Zits' is fraught with deep-seated emotional problems.

Although Zits may indeed have "never learned how to be a fully realized human being" and is "programmed for violence" (27), the state has done little to help him find the love and acceptance he needs as a human being. Describing himself as "a flaming jet, crashing into each new foster family" (11), Zits

is well aware that he is an out-of-control teenager and a danger to others. He needs to be reprogrammed to learn to deal with life without running away or committing violence[9]. The vestiges and legacy of colonialism, s, uch as the breaking up of intact families, violence, substance abuse and the like, remain unacknowledged. He must find out who he is as well as where his home and place in society are. Referring to selfhood in Native American novels, William Bevis explains: "'Identity' […] is not a matter of finding 'one's self,' but of finding a self that is transpersonal and includes a society, a past, and a place" (585). In *Flight*, the first of these criteria addressed is the past.

4. The Ghost Dance and Its Aftermath

When Zits comes in contact with a smart seventeen-year-old white boy named Justice who pays attention to him, he becomes an easy target. Zits comes to view Justice as a best friend, perhaps the "only real friend" of his life, and as a savior or "some kind of Jesus" (24). After speaking with Justice repeatedly about the Ghost Dance as a justification of American Indian violence against whites, Zits loses his inhibitions about harming others. Justice has 'helped' Zits understand that the Ghost Dance is real and that he has the needed knowledge, as well as power, to usurp justice. The next day, the teen finds himself in a bank shooting numerous people, so that his "mother and father can return" (35). Zits falsely imitates the behavior of a long line of heroes in American literature who use violence as part of their transformation, purification, or regeneration. In such instances, violence primarily serves as a means for self-assertion, self-affirmation, or self-preservation in the struggle for moral integrity and identity (Heller 76). Typically, the Ghost Dance is viewed as a form of collective resistance (Tatonetti, "Dancing that Way"); however – in Zits' case – it is neither part of a struggle for moral integrity nor a pan-Indian collective religious ceremony, but the revengeful act of a misled, alienated individual. Nevertheless, it is this very act of violence that sets the narrator's involuntary journey in motion.

The symbolism in the bank episode is compelling. First, Alexie shows that Zits can easily be deceived into believing that justice can be found at the barrel of a gun and that the 'eye for an eye' violence which runs deep in American society – more recently in form of the modern-day shooting sprees – is a solution to his problems. Second, the bank as the setting for Zits' attack

[9] In an interview with Dave Weich in 2007, Alexie commented on the impact of growing up in a violent world: "It's what I saw. Fistfights were incredibly common. I learned to fight. It wasn't until I left the reservation school and went to the white high school on the border that I learned you don't throw a punch, that your automatic reaction was not to throw a punch. It's still ingrained in me. I've met all sorts of people from other backgrounds, generally from poverty, whose first instinct is to throw a punch. […] As young men, we were taught to fight. It's still the case" (170).

is also symbolic as social justice cannot be achieved without the necessary financial means. All of Zits' possessions fit into one backpack, as he obviously has neither directly benefited from the wealth of the United States, nor from the welfare checks of his foster families.

Zits opens his ghost dance with a "little prayer" (35). After dancing, shooting others, and spinning in circles both literally and figuratively, Zits is shot in the head and seemingly dies. Perhaps he does not exactly get what he has prayed for. Instead of bringing back his Native ancestors and causing white people to disappear, Zits – as he shares in chapter 20 – disappears at least for a second: "On the video, my image disappears for a second. I'm gone. And then I reappear" (66). Perhaps he becomes a ghost or a spirit, which might explain Zits' ability to inhabit the bodies of others.[10] *Flight* questions the validity of the status quo and opens up the possibility of another realm, one more closely linked to traditional Native spiritual beliefs or visions, a space in which Zits' time travel is located. Earlier in the narrative, Zits comments: "My memory is strange that way. I often remember people I've never met and events and places I've never seen. I don't think I'm some sort of a mystical bastard. I just think I pay attention to the details" (2). Zits' outright rejection of his own spirituality could be attributed to an internalization of Western cultural codes that exclude such possibilities.

Through his time travel or spiritual crisis, Zits has several lessons to learn about the nature of violence, his own identity, and place in the world. As Christopher Macgowan notes, "[h]is time travel shows him perspectives beyond the merely violent, perspectives that invite tolerance rather than rage, and that involve a broader sense of community" (193). Of the five time travel episodes, four re-create the mood of the various historical eras and events. Thus, national memory is rewritten and interpreted through fragmented and subjective bottom-up minority perspectives, which in turn become an integral part of Zits' identity.

5. Zits' Journey

In chapters 4-6, Zits finds himself in the body of Hank Storm, a white, blond, blue-eyed FBI agent seeking to infiltrate IRON, an AIM-like organization, on the Nannapush Indian Reservation in Red River, Idaho, in 1975. Hank's partner, Art, shoots a Native man who will not talk after a brutal beating and torture session, in which all five of his fingers were cut off. Art expects Hank, whose body Zits is occupying, to shoot the corpse to ensure his silence and

[10] Ultimately, Alexie leaves the question open whether Zits experiences, dreams, or envisions the entire events between chapters 4 and 18. Each escapade begins with Zits opening his eyes and each one ends with him closing them. While a bank employee explains Zits' disappearance as a malfunction of video equipment, a Native reading of this scene would not likely rule out the link to the spirit world.

commitment that they are "in this one together" (53), and Zits hesitantly pulls the trigger. Failing to cope with the bloody, gruesome brutality and killing, Zits begins to question his actions in the bank: "Justice made killing make sense. But it doesn't make sense, does it?" (53).

In chapter 7, Zits is transported into the body of a mute "old-time Indian kid" shortly before the Battle of Little Bighorn in June 1876. This battle symbolically represents a larger war that is raging inside the teen and outside in the world around him as part of the national myth of Manifest Destiny.[11] Fascinated with the "real Indian camp complete with thousands of real Indian tepees and tens of thousands of real old-time Indians" (60), Zits experiences the love of a strong Indian father and warrior against the backdrop of nineteenth century U.S. governmental paternalism and through the lens of a mute Indian boy. He sees Native icon Crazy Horse – "the Sioux Jesus" (68) – from a distance. At this juncture, as a more or less passive witness, Zits is still looking for a savior/hero to free him from the paternalistic government today. The teen will learn over the course of his travels that there are, in fact, no modern-day saviors; he must take a more active role in the securing of his own future (Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco 33).

In chapter 9, Zits feels sick when confronted with the grisly reality of battle, especially when viewing the mutilation of the soldiers' bodies. While entertaining the idea that Native Americans at Little Bighorn fought justifiably in self-defense, Zits compares the events to his actions at 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 a circle inside a circle? (77)

For Couser, memory invoked in memoir reconstructs events retrospectively from "presumed factuality" or factual information believed to be true (15). Based on fallible memory, self-referential writing which can neither be fully verified nor fully discredited produces "a polyphonic site of indeterminacy rather than a single, stable truth" (Smith and Watson 16). Through his narrative, Zits deconstructs the most decisive victory of Native people in American history. Instead of perpetuating the glorification this battle among

[11] Manifest Destiny is grounded in the Puritan belief that the New World was to be a city on a hill based on moral character, a light to other nations as well as a 'holy experiment' founded on a 'God-given destiny'. As such, no other justification for subjugating and massacring Native Americans as well as possessing and mastering the land from sea to shining sea by European settlers was necessary.

Native peoples, as a fictional memoirist, Zits shows what was always there but not yet seen: the unpleasant smells, the gruesome nature of battle, and the senselessness of revenge. Each time jump exposes Zits to different types of violence, all of which he subsequently rejects. As circles are never ending, revenge inevitably begets more violence.

Chapters 10-12 take up the topic of revenge. In the body of Gus, an old war hero and Indian tracker, Zits is expected to help one hundred Calvary soldiers retaliate against an Indian village for mutilating the bodies of twenty-five Christian settlers. While in Gus' body, the "time-traveling mass murderer" does not fully participate (85); he does, however, witness the raping of women and murdering of innocent bystanders. Wishing he were dead, Zits, too, feels culpable: "I don't kill anybody. But I ride with killers, so that makes me a killer" (90). As a result, he wants to save a young boy, but another soldier beats him to it. As the General takes aim at the deserter who has "gone Indian" (94), Zits hits him with his rifle. Internally, he must overpower the patriot Gus who fights him every step of the way. Inasmuch as Zits is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of others and to show genuine empathy, this marks the beginning of the turning point in the story. In this episode, Zits entirely rejects the concepts of revenge and war, as it only leads to increasing amounts of bloodshed.[12]

Chapters 13-15 bring the story back full circle – back to the 21st century, to a post-9/11 world.[13] When Zits opens his eyes, he immediately realizes that he is flying a plane; he inhabits the body of a blond, blue-eyed pilot named Jimmy who feels guilty for having taught a would-be terrorist named Abbad how to fly a plane but who – at the same time – feels sad for having lost a friend. Zits, too, can relate to Jimmy's feelings as he has felt betrayed by his family through his father's flight, his mother's death, and his aunt's abandonment. Many Americans also felt consternation or a sense of betrayal after the 9/11 attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Teach-ins had to be held to help Americans understand the historical and geo-political context (Young). Until that time, Americans had naively seen the country mainly as a benevolent nation, giving aid to the needy and supporting the cause of freedom.

As a consequence of his betrayal and his ruined marriage, Jimmy gets into a plane to commit suicide: "As we [Jimmy and Zits] fall, I think about

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[12] Alexie wrote *Flight* in part as a reaction to the Iraq War: "I think the Iraq War really is what made me write this book, the continual sense of failure, turning on the news all the time, the constant death, my sons who are nine and five asking me now for a couple of years what is happening? Why does this keep happening? […] So it was, for me, a way of trying to deal with all those unanswered questions about why this current war continues" (Roberts).

[13] Coulombe locates *Flight* in the discourse on global terrorism and sees a correlation between Euro-American treatments of Native people depicted in the novel as acts of terror.

my mother and father. I think about the people I loved. I think about the people I hated. I think about the people I betrayed. I think about the people who have betrayed me. We're all the same people. And we are all falling" (130). Responding to his experience as Jimmy, Zits realizes the necessity of community and the danger of categorizing people into diametrically opposed groups, whatever they might be: Native vs. white; poor vs. wealthy; betrayed vs. betrayer. The short, choppy sentences and the shift from 'we' to 'I' and then 'I' to 'we' emphasize Zits' ability to turn the focus from himself and his problems to a more inclusive view of the world: "We're all the same people. And we are all falling". Zits' use of the present progressive points to a process that has already begun: "And we are all falling". Ironically, Zits needs less individualism and more community – something he has been denied all his life.

In the next section, Zit is confronted with a potential future self. He slips into the body of a homeless drunk, dead in spirit. Two white tourists, Paul and Pam, notice that the man – surrounded by rotten food, his own bloody vomit, and rats – is in need of medical attention and try to help him. However, the confrontational Native man wants to hurt them for "their reflexive compassion" (136). Although they are well-meaning, the alcoholic – whom Zits later learns is his father – projects his notion of 'collective guilt' onto the two whites: "White people did this to Indians. You make us like this'" (136).

Both Zits and his father do not want to be dependent on the compassion and hand-outs of whites. As a result of this experience, Paul and Pam are likely to view the stereotype of the drunken Indian as the 'truth' and fail to recognize the vicious circle operating that prohibits Zits' father from accepting help from whites. Likewise, Zits' father represents the stereotype of the angry Indian who transfers years of rage stemming from racism, discrimination as well as the results of several hundred years of colonization on to individual, even well-meaning whites. If Zits continues to take the path that he is on, he will become his father.

After Paul and Pam leave, Zits comes in contact with another man who initially acts condescendingly towards him by calling him 'chief' but then tells Zits/Zits' father a story as a way of showing his respect. As an important part of Native American culture, storytelling can, at times, break through the wall of rage and traditionally has an interactive, healing function (Tatonetti 2005, 392). The man and Zits' father/Zits exchange photos of their children, and Zits sees himself at the age of five: "I am my father", Zits exclaims (150).

Zits forces his father to answer some questions that have been plaguing him his entire life, such as why he was abandoned at birth. The confused teen learns about his belligerent grandfather who belittled Zits' father after an unsuccessful hunting outing: "You're just a pussy boy. I can't believe you are part of me. I wish you'd just go away. [...] You ain't worth shit now. And you ain't ever gonna be worth shit" (155). As a result of mental abuse, Zits'

father leaves. Running away is a form of flight as is his social withdrawal and substance abuse. In situations in which people feel powerless to change their circumstances, as is the case today on the reservation, flight is also a response. The fate of Zits' father serves as a warning to where the flight of a Native person to urban areas can lead: loneliness, homelessness, and alcoholism.[14]

Zits' father feels too weak to be a parent (156). The verbal violence becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, perpetuating a long line of broken families. In an interview with Dave Weich in 2007, Alexie comments on the enduring effects of colonialism over 135 years after the Battle at Little Bighorn:

> That missing parent is a constant theme in colonized people's literature. […] After so many generations of being colonized, it's not about actual murder anymore. It's about the symbolic murder and legacy of murder. One of the ways in which colonization works is that it destroys family units, and it destroys generational contact. I had no grandparents because they all died for various colonial reasons. Without that connection to grandparents, I lost my connection to history. (Weich 171)

6. Closing the Circle

The final three chapters complete the circle and bring Zits back to his own body in the bank shortly before the shooting spree is to begin, but this time he walks out the door without shooting anyone. He rejects the script and the role that Justice demanded he perform. While reflecting on his aunt's boyfriend who molested Zits as a young boy, he remarks:

> I learned how to stop crying.
> I learned how to hide inside of myself.
> I learned how to be somebody else.
> I learned how to be cold and numb. (161)

The trauma of his life seems to pass before him: "I am tired of hurting people. I am tired of being hurt. I need help" (162). Seeing Officer Dave, a kind-hearted police officer whom Zits introduces earlier, the teen turns over the guns and rejects violence once and for all: "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).

While sharing personal stories, a bond is formed between Officer Dave and Zits. In essence, Zits and people like him need agents of compassion, not agencies. At this point, the story seems to break and abruptly take another direction. Time is condensed – comparable to jump cuts in film – and within

[14] For a closer reading of this episode and 'soul wound', see Johnson.

a few pages, most of Zits' problems seem to be solved. The memoirist uses flattening to condense this episode; the fifteen-year-old memoirist chooses to focus not on his own trauma and suffering but on the end result.

As a consequence of months of counseling, the teen is no longer seen as and no longer sees himself as a threat. Zits is placed with Officer Dave's brother Robert, a fireman, and his sister-in-law, Mary, both in helping occupations. The three will "make it permanent" (177). Mary helps the adolescent treat his pimples. By staying with Robert and Mary, Zits overcomes the 'fight-or-flight response' and finds a home or place, vital for selfhood as previously mentioned.

As the tears flow, he asks to be called Michael, his 'real' name (181). At the beginning of the novel, Zits questions whether he is 'real'; at the end, he is sure he is neither fake nor artificial. Prior the shooting at the bank, one man points at him, saying "'You're not real'" (35). These words haunt the teen throughout his journey. At the end of his self-story, Zits is more secure about his identity: "I think he's wrong; I think I am real" (157). With the final lines of the book, the teen memoirist is on the path of actively taking control of his identities, something his father is unable to achieve. However, the question of whether Michael will be able to come to terms with his cultural identity as a Native person is left unanswered as is the further development of his transpersonal self. Although he is interested in his roots, has great knowledge about Native peoples and their histories (12), and has ironically become a storyteller who makes use of Native American storytelling modes, Zits' experiential knowledge of contemporary tribal life is non-existent. New vantage points will certainly foster further personal, social, and ego identity construction. With his renaming, Zits' existential struggle seems to be overcome, and the fictional memoir finds its conclusion.

Conclusion

Flight is a self-story about an ordinary, flawed character – not someone whose life should be emulated. It is told retrospectively by the narrating 'I', who – through his willingness to share his folly with his readership – establishes credibility as a narrator. The fictional memoir focuses on the cultural contexts in which the people whose bodies Zits inhabits live. Through the storytelling process, Zits makes sense of these experiences as well as his relationship to the identities and actions of these Native and non-Native people whom he encounters during his time travels. Instead of sharing a complete life story, the memoirist is selective and transforms significant life episodes into a unified, cohesive whole. Most importantly, *Flight* as a fictional memoir chronicles and meditates on relational identity construction as an arduous, continuous process, requiring much effort.

Despite the didactic impulses of the book, readers are likely to identify with Zits as a humorous teen, an outsider who creates a place in society

for himself. Most of Alexie's work is anything but happy. *Flight* is different and as such is difficult for some critics to swallow. Although the reviews are generally positive, the ending is often criticized. While Alexander Tepper acknowledges that the conclusion is fitting, he nevertheless regards it as a "too-simplistic homily, a watered down truth". In a similar vein, Mark S. Luce denounces the moralizing impetus of the novel in his review as a "knock-you-over-the-noggin message". By writing the happy end, Melnick supposes that Alexie has taken the easy way out, that he "has seemingly become a proponent of uncritical togetherness" (130). Disturbing endings might be more aesthetic, but Alexie seemed to be first and foremost interested in exploring what healing might look like. This brings us back to Slotkin's idea of novels grounded in history as thought experiments. The genocide of Native peoples and its devastating effects on future generations have been well documented. In *Flight*, Zits has the chance to heal and determine his own future. Reporting on Native elder Lyle Longclaws' adage, Tomson Highway states: "Before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed" (6). Conceivably, this can also said of Alexie's work and of the ending in *Flight*.

Alexie deals with Native themes in *Flight*, but the book is much more. Just as Zits speaks through a mirror to his father (152), Alexie holds a mirror up to American society so that through the eyes of a troubled teen our empathy might be activated and we might learn about the modern-day effects of the frontier. In a novel so deeply engrained with American values, it is appropriate to also end with one: optimism. For Alexie, the end "was a form of a prayer" and a "way of hoping that something positive happens or hoping to be hopeful" (Roberts). This is one prayer that will hopefully be heard, understood, and answered.

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Sabrina Völz has been teaching English and American Studies at Leuphana University Lüneburg (Germany) since 1997. Prior to that she taught at Syracuse University, Gettysburg College, and Pennsylvania State University where she received her Ph.D. in 1998. Her teaching and research interests include critical diversity studies including North American ethnic literatures and film as well as creative non-fiction. She has published on the short stories of Terry McMillian and Drew Hayden Taylor. As part of North American Studies at Leuphana, she has led a number of project seminars including a two-semester project on organizing an international conference on Native North America, the proceedings of which she co-edited (*White-Indian Relations: Moving into the 21st Century*. Berlin: Galda Verlag, 2011). She has recently become an academic blogger and is a member of the editorial board of the American Studies Blog: http://blog.asjournal.org/