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How to Teach a True Spokane Story: Learning Sherman Alexie's *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* Through Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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Helping students connect with the experience of characters who come from backgrounds other than their own, such as those in Sherman Alexie's *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* can be difficult. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* presents similar challenges for students since it treats historical events in an innovative formal structure, but at least some students may have parents or relatives who have experienced those historical events. O'Brien's work discusses a war that occurred before "traditional" students were born; Alexie's concern native culture which few students in the lower Midwest such Ohio and Indiana come into any contact with except through popular representations. Further, O'Brien's insistent focus on factual and fictional boundary of his work offers a challenge to students who prefer to take their fiction straight. Alexie's autobiographical stories similarly dance along the fictional/factual divide. The shared formal elements and unexpected connections among their characters make O'Brien a useful work to teach in conjunction with Alexie's.

In *The Things They Carried* Tim O'Brien's narrator (also named "O'Brien") distinguishes between "story-truth" and "happening truth." Story-truth, he says "is sometimes truer than happening truth" (TTC 203). Consequently, "a thing may happen and be a total lie, another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (TTC 89). It's a somewhat elusive distinction, but useful in helping students understand a distinguishing characteristic of many contemporary fiction writers and an important element in apprehending all mediated reality, fictional or otherwise, despite its seeming factuality. O'Brien's narrator, like Thomas (and like Alexie and O'Brien) want both "lies and the truth," or the truth that exists in the "lies" they create as authors of stories based on their experiences. In other words, the "lies"

authors tell in stories have their own truth.

Sherman Alexie has always insisted on the fictional aspect of the stories and resented comments by others on their “autobiographical nature,” but also admits that he “was full of shit,” characterizing “the book . . . [as] a thinly veiled memoir” (LRT xix).¹ A few pages later, though, he reverses himself again, insisting “they’re not really true” (xxi). He finishes his account by confessing the story “This Is What It Means When We Say Phoenix AZ” grew from a trip he took with his best friend Steve to recover Steve’s father’s ashes, though Joseph Arnold in the story more closely resembled Alexie’s own father. The story, in part, plays out Alexie’s tortured relationship with his own father, celebrating his relationship with his friend’s father’s kindness to another, orphaned, son and lamenting his sense of abandonment and mistreatment by his own father.

Students can usefully contrast the ways in which O’Brien and Alexie employ their own experience for fictional purposes. O’Brien often focuses on the nature of the transformation itself and openly discusses and displays that transformation. Alexie goes the more conventional route (much like earlier twentieth-century writers such as Ernest Hemingway or Katherine Anne Porter) of mining his own experience growing up on the Coeur d’Alene reservation for his material, yet his portrayals emphasize the historical and personal reality that undergirds them despite the often fantastic events recounted.

Similarly, in Alexie’s script for *Smoke Signals* (the film based on his *Lone Ranger and Tonto*) Victor disputes the story Thomas barter for their ride, but the story he tells---that of a war-protesting Native who gets into a fight with the National Guard and is sent to jail as a result even while becoming a celebrated image on the cover of Time magazine--sounds plausible enough, and whatever it may or may not show about Joseph Arnold, it shows the truth of “being an Indian in the twentieth century,” the crime Joseph Arnold is ultimately convicted of, according to Thomas. In the film Velma declares it “a

1 I use the accessible recent paperback edition of *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* for reference throughout my essay. Hereafter abbreviated as LRT. Similarly I use O’Brien’s most recent paperback edition for *The Things They Carried*, which is abbreviated TTC.

fine example of the oral tradition,” which suggests its different claims of authenticity than a printed work that may not be strictly factual.

The formal connections between Alexie’s and O’Brien’s books is more than coincidental. Exploring the various connections demonstrates how fiction writers respond to other author’s work. In his forward to *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Alexie recounts the early pressures to produce fiction after the success of his first collection of poems, *The Business of Fancy Dancing*: “have you written any fiction?” the agent asks. Alexie responds that he has a “manuscript of short stories. There must be thirty of forty stories in it.” “But do you write fiction?” the publisher continued. “I didn’t realize that ‘fiction,’” Alexie writes, “was a synonym for ‘Sure, we’ll publish your book of obscure short stories as long as we can also publish your slightly less obscure first novel as part of a two-book deal’” (xiv-xv). Alexie understood that something more novelistic would be received best by publishers. Unfortunately, he only had fragmentary short stories. O’Brien’s *Things They Carried* showed Alexie how short stories could be arranged into a novelistic form.² O’Brien’s book which had recently been published to great acclaim in 1990, a year or so before Alexie began assembling his short stories into book form, would have been very visible to the young author, especially one alienated from the larger population and who clearly has a wry view of the relationship between factuality and truth, one derived from many years of rewritten and overwritten histories that failed to acknowledge his and his people’s presence. *Things They Carried* provided a useful model for Alexie’s efforts toward creating a greater sense of cohesion from shorter pieces.

Alexie adapted O’Brien’s use of the short story sequence and exploration of story truth vs. happening truth to suit his broader purposes. Alexie’s initial description of his stories implies that these stories had no particular arrangement or planned order, but they did

2 One could also point to Amy Tan and Louise Erdrich, of course, but Alexie has never referred to them extensively. On the other hand, he often mentions O’Brien in interviews and even cites him and *The Things They Carried*, as an influence (Weich 174). Just as telling, Alexie has even recorded a reading of “On the Rainy River,” one of the stories from TTC. At one time there was even a recording of Alexie reading a passage from O’Brien’s “On the Rainy River,” but it is no longer available.

present a range of experiences of life on the Coeur d'Alene Spokane reservation. In O'Brien's *Things* Alexie discovered how he could arrange his stories with interconnected characters and location to depict life on the Spokane reservation on which he grew up. He found a form that allowed his various short stories to become more novelistic, less of a collection.³ Further, he discovered a tone and a perspective that would bridge the gap between his experiences and the larger society.⁴

Even more than in 1990 when O'Brien wrote *The Things They Carried*, the historical gap of the events must be bridged for a younger audience. O'Brien does that for students by overtly problematizing the truth and factuality of the events he recounts. The uncomfortable feeling such boundary play creates inevitably portrays the disturbing feelings engendered by the Vietnam War at the time. "It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (TTC 74).

Several elements in Sherman Alexie's *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* connect with Tim O'Brien's short story sequence *The Things They Carried*—its unique form, its insistent assertion of "story-truth" over "happening truth," and the alienated and traumatized populations that each author presents. As teachers, we can use these elements to allow the works to help instruct students on the sometimes slippery forms and surprising contents and attitudes in O'Brien's and Alexie's works.

Introducing Native literature presents an additional challenge since students may assume that the problems faced by Native peoples are largely past problems. Alexie's characters and stories assert just the opposite. His solution to crossing the gap between the lives of his

3 The short story sequence is not unique to O'Brien, of course, and the success of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* may have lent further support to Alexie to use such a form. Indeed, some critics have argued that the short story form in general and the short story sequence in particular are "suited to 'submerged population groups' feeling themselves alienated from national norms" (Dix 159).

4 Though the form of a short story sequence was expedient for Alexie, as Rocio Davis notes, the form suited Alexie's purpose of detailing the difficulty of growing up Spokane in a nation that considers the term a designation for a city in Washington state and not for a people (Davis 8).

characters and the likely experience of most of his reader with what he calls “reservation realism.” After discussing in his forward to the book the true and fictional elements of various stories (“Phoenix, AZ,” “Fun House,” “Indian Education,” “Witness, Secret and Not”), Alexie insists the stories are “not really true. They are simply the vision of one individual looking at the lives of his family and his entire tribe, so these stories are necessarily biased, incomplete, exaggerated, deluded, and often just plain wrong. But in trying to make them true and real, I am writing what might be called reservation realism” (LRT xxi).

Alexie declines to offer a definition of “reservation realism,” inviting the reader instead to “read the book and figure that out for yourself” (LRT xxi). O’Brien’s approach to fiction is helpful in explaining Alexie’s term. Alexie’s contradictory statements about the truth of his fiction resemble Tim O’Brien’s similarly contradictory attempts to define how to tell a true war story in the *Things They Carried*. O’Brien asserts that “a thing may happen and be a total lie, another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (TTC 89). The difference, the narrator notes later, lies in the fact that “story-truth is sometimes truer than happening truth” (TTC 203). “You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask . . . [if] afterward you ask, ‘Is it true?’ and if the answer matters, you’ve got your answer” (83).

Alexie’s discussion on the experiential basis for his stories and their truth further mirror O’Brien’s convoluted assertions and denials in “Good Form”: in that story O’Brien admits only his age at the time of composition and his service during the war. “Almost everything else,” he declares, “is invented” (TTC 179). He goes on to explain “this book is written as it is. . . [because] . . . “twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near . . . My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present” (TTC 179). “But listen,” O’Brien importunes, “even *that* story is made up. I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth” (TTC 179). Both authors maintain the right to alter their experiences to make us feel their truth and still maintain claims to actuality—if not complete factuality. As Suzy Song in *Smoke Signals* asks Thomas, “Do you want lies or truth?” to which he replies, “I want both.”

Alexie’s “Because My Father Always Said He Was the

Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix.” embodies the same contested factuality and fictionality of O’Brien’s work. Alexie asserts documentary evidence (Time magazine covers, Pulitzers, feature films, etc.) as proof of the story’s existence, even as Victor notes the slipperiness of his father’s memories. “Somehow,” he observes, “my father’s memories of my mother grew more beautiful as their relationship became more hostile. By the time the divorce was final, my mother was quite possibly the most beautiful woman who ever lived” (LRT27).

When Victor complains of never having a real war to fight, his father “‘That’s all there is . . . War and peace with nothing in between. It’s always one or the other.’ ‘You sound like a book,’” Victor says. “‘Yeah, well that’s how it is. Just because it’s in a book doesn’t make it not true.’” (LRT 29). Fiction may not be true, his father insists, but that doesn’t make it false either.

Later, Victor describes his dreams of his father at Woodstock as Hendrix played “The Star -Spangled Banner,” seemingly uncertain of its reality yet noting the rain which he’s seen in “actual news footage” and “documentaries” (LRT31). His dreams, however, do nothing to know “what it meant for my father to be the only Indian who saw Jimi Hendrix play at Woodstock,” though he acknowledges there may have been “hundreds but my father thought he was the only one” (LRT31). Eventually, Victor complains to his father that “‘sometimes you sound like you ain’t even real’ ‘What’s real? I ain’t interested in what’s real. I’m interested in how things should be,’” says his father (LRT 33). Victor admits that “if [his father didn’t] like the things you remember, then all you have to do is change the memories. Instead of remembering the bad things, remember what happened immediately before” (LRT 34). The story concludes with Victor dreaming of his father’s return. “I knew I was dreaming it all but I let it be real for a moment” (LRT 35). Alexie notes that for any individual the most powerful reality often are those stories they choose to tell themselves.

The alternation of assertion and denial of truth in Alexie follows a pattern similar to O’Brien’s narrator’s assertions about “The Man He Killed.” The first outright telling of the story leaves readers with the impression that “O’Brien” killed the man (as does the title).

He imagines the man's life and what brought him to the point that "O'Brien" kills him. Kiowa tries to explain and to soothe his anguish and odd sense of loss—"You want to trade places with him? . . . it's *war*" (TTC 126). The notion is reinforced in "Ambush," the story that follows, in which "O'Brien" wants to tell his daughter Kathleen "exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. This is why I keep writing war stories" (TTC 131).

The formal connections between Alexie's and O'Brien's work, finally, are not so surprising. However, their characters' experiences and feelings share unexpected similarities. Pointing those similarities of experience to students helps them connect to Alexie's likely more distant subject matter. Both the GI's who fought in Vietnam and the Spokane exist in circumstances most Americans are either unaware of or choose to ignore. Just as O'Brien tries to bridge the gap between the readers' understanding and his characters' realities, Alexie tries to explain the confusing circumstances and frustrations of "being an Indian in the twentieth century". Finally, both groups have been under attack and suffered losses; both had been through the war, or in the latter instance, wars (even if now long past), and endured the traumas of such an experience.

In "Jimi Hendrix" Victor notes that though his father's arrest ultimately "kept him out of the [Vietnam] war, [he] went through a different kind of war behind bars" (LRT 25). In turn Victor's father reminds Victor when he complains of having no real war that "fighting a war for this country [makes no sense]. It's been trying to kill Indians since the very beginning" (LRT 29). Alexie shows that his family and neighbors, like O'Brien's Vietnam veterans, are completely familiar with war. Over one-third of the stories in LRT refer to wars or attacks of one kind or another. From the visions of the Ghost Dance in "A Drug Called Tradition" to the Vietnam War protests in "Jimi Hendrix" to Thomas' testimony of Col. Wright's attack on the Spokane to the apparent nuclear attack described in "Distances," Alexie details the numerous instances of aggression past, present, and even future. Even internal disputes such as the brotherly battles of Adolph and Arnold in "Little Hurricanes" are "touched by memories of previous battles,

storms that continually haunted their lives” (8). Clearly, in Alexie’s view the war is not over, and continues to be fought in various ways through the lives and circumstances on the Spokane reservation. Likewise, O’Brien notes about that “you can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it” (85). “The point doesn’t hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and tell your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you’ve forgotten the point again” (82). Both O’Brien’s and Alexie’s characters continue to experience traumas of their immediate past and beyond.⁵

Most of O’Brien’s soldiers are not separated from the rest of the nation by ethnic or cultural background (except Kiowa, the son of a missionary from Oklahoma who carries the new testament and his grandfather’s hatchet), but their experiences in the war have left them alienated from their families and friends. They find themselves in-between their former lives and their lives as soldiers, and unable to mediate between them—like immigrants in a new country (or dislocated tribes in their own). To an extent, the returned veterans’ situation is more troubling and confusing since the place they now find strange and unfamiliar was once their home. One might say it is even more akin to Alexie’s depiction of life on the Spokane reservation which shares the same popular culture as the rest of America, yet exists in much different circumstances and realities. The “familiar” America assumed by the mass audience sees the reservation as an alien place, and are in strict terms, “foreign” in the view of national polity since reservations are sovereignties within U.S. borders, or more properly—as Vine Deloria observes-- the U.S. is an occupying, foreign nation surrounding native territory.⁶

Giving voice to their characters’ experiences has a special

5 Nancy Van Styvendale notes Alexie’s understanding of a “trans/historical” trauma that descends through generations of aboriginal people.

6 Deloria’s describes white American’s sense of themselves as foreigners in North America. “therein lies the meaning of the white’s fantasy about Indians—the problem of the Indian image. Underneath all the conflicting images of the Indian one fundamental truth emerges—the white man knows that he is an alien and he knows that North America is Indian—and he will never let go of the Indian image because he thinks that by some clever manipulation he can achieve an authenticity that cannot ever be his” (xvi).

urgency for both Alexie and O'Brien. Like foreigners or aliens, the O'Brien's living and dead GIs must rely on others to speak for them, but the men who survived cannot always communicate their stories either. Norman Bowker fantasizes constantly about having a conversation with his father about his time in Vietnam—when he “could've won the Silver Star” (TTC 150) but the smell of the shit field prevented him from doing so. He dreams of addressing the Kiwanis and instructing them about his hard won expertise “about all the wonderful shit he knew. Pass out samples” (TTC 144). Instead Norman drives around the lake again, imagining the conversation with his father or the Kiwanis speech, telling the story to himself. He has similar fantasies about casual conversations with Sally Gustafson (nee Kramer)—and *not* “saying a word about how he almost won the Silver Star” (TTC 140) or the shit field (TTC 145). Significantly, even in Norman's fantasy Sally objects to his crude language, insisting he does not “have to use that word” (TTC 145). Unlike many of his fellow soldiers, Norman survives, but he does not possess the ability or nerve to tell his own story, much less his comrades'. His imagined conversations betray his certainty that even if he could, his auditors would not be willing to listen to his unvarnished version of events.

Those soldiers who are able to speak of their experiences often remain silent. O'Brien's narrator admits that “in ordinary conversation I never spoke much about the war, certainly not in detail” (TTC 179). When he does tell his story, something gets lost in the retelling. Essential aspects of the stories are left out: as Norman laments, “Where's Kiowa? Where's the shit?” (TTC 181). A gulf exists not only between those who experienced Vietnam and those who did not—but amongst the combatants themselves.

O'Brien's GIs' encounter the same inability to communicate their experiences that the characters in Alexie's stories have in making their stories heard. Like O'Brien's characters, Victor's relatives cannot discuss their pain; they fear the “weather” in their lives—their historical and personal circumstances—as the storm moves “from Indian to Indian . . . , giving each a specific, painful memory” (LRT 8). They can only gather “to count their losses” but cannot or do not recount them freely (LRT 11). Likewise, in the foreword to LRT,

Alexie recounts his inability to ask his father about the incident he fictionalizes in “Amusement” (LRT xix).

Both authors dramatize the gap between their characters’ stories and their audiences, and in the process dramatize the disturbance readers may initially experience with their works. Alexie’s Spokane storyteller, Thomas-Builds-the Fire, spends most of his time “talking to himself” because “nobody wanted to be anywhere near him” and hear “all those stories. Story after story” (LRT 61; 72). Nevertheless, Thomas continues his tale-telling, convinced that “Mine are the stories which can change or not change the world. It doesn’t matter which as long as I continue to tell the stories. . . . They are all I have. It’s all I can do” (LRT 72-73). Evidently, the resistance to stories has been around long enough to make listening to them a form of punishment: Norma tacitly threatens to drag Victor and Thomas “to some tipi and [make] . . . them listen to some elder tell a dusty old story” (TLR 65).

In “A Drug Called Tradition” Junior and Victor watch Thomas talk to himself by Benjamin Lake, “telling himself stories” Victor says. “Ain’t nobody else going to listen,” they say (LRT 19-20). Some think he was “dropped on his head,” others believe “he’s magic” (LRT 20). In Thomas’ vision, he claims that he and his friends decide “to be real Indians” and have a vision, breathing in the smoke from the fire. In the vision they throw away their alcohol and steal horses. Victor protests: “You don’t believe that shit?” But Thomas insists “Don’t need to believe anything. It just is” (LRT 21). As O’Brien’s narrator might say, “if the answer matters, you’ve got your answer” (83). In the end Thomas warns them of dancing with skeletons, of being trapped “in the in-between, between touching and becoming” (LRT 22). “You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end” (TTC 76). For O’Brien’s characters, as for Alexie’s, the past has a way of hanging on; even if they cannot tell or even articulate their stories, their memories will not die, so they threaten to overwhelm their present life.

“We kept the dead alive with stories . . . passed [down] like legends . . . Often they were exaggerated, or blatant lies” (TTC 239). In similar fashion, Adrian and Victor tell stories of basketball legends, reservation heroes like Silas Sirius and his flying dunk. Adrian insists

that he “flew the length of the court . . . And I don’t mean it looked like he flew, or it was so beautiful it was almost like he flew. I mean, he flew, period” (LRT 47). Victor laughs. He claims that he “believed Adrian’s story more as it sounded less true” (LRT 47). The assertion echoes O’Brien’s distinction between “story-truth” and “happening-truth” in “How to Tell a True War Story.” “In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It’s a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn’t, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness” (71). In Alexie’s “The Only Traffic Light” Victor narrates an uneventful evening’s events to an unspecified audience. Clearly, the audience (like most of Alexie’s readers) is unfamiliar with reservation life. Victor constantly needs to explain his actions and provide background for the stories that he and Adrian pass between them.

The traffic signal that no longer flashes prompts Adrian to point out that it “might cause an accident” (LRT 48), reducing both to tears since only one car passes in the hour they have been shooting the breeze. The joke is the sort of joke that is mainly funny to the participants, one which “you had to be there to get.” It comes after Adrian’s complimentary insult to Julius Windmaker that simultaneously questions and confirms Julius’ status as the current basketball legend. Neither Julius or his friends respond to Adrian’s insult because “they all knew Julius was the best ballplayer on the reservation these days, maybe the best ever, and they knew Adrian was just confirming that fact” (LRT 41). Victor makes certain his audience takes in the proper import of the insult—and confesses to his own fallen state as a former semi-legend trying to hide his “beer belly and chicken-pox scars” (LRT 44). Victor fills in an unknowing audience on Julius’ place as “the latest in a long line of reservation basketball heroes, going all the way back to Aristotle Polatkin, who was shooting jumpshots exactly one year before James Naismith supposedly invented basketball” (LRT 45).

Victor goes on to predict Julius’ likely fate: “There’s a definite history of reservation heroes who never finish high school, who never finish basketball seasons” (LRT 47). His current condition suggests

fears about Julius future are not unfounded. Nevertheless, Victor insists that unlike in the white world where heroism quickly fades (such as “those guys who dove into that icy river to rescue passengers from that plane wreck”), “a reservation hero is remembered. A reservation hero is a hero forever. In fact, their status grows over the years as the stories are told and retold” (LRT 48). Julius is already on his way to becoming a petty criminal, vandalizing a BIA pickup and showing up drunk for his basketball game. Predictably, he is not the ballplayer they “all remembered or expected” (LRT 51). The game he shows up drunk for feels “like a funeral and wake all rolled up together” for the once and future reservation king, Julius Windmaker (LRT 51). The fans at the game tell “their favorite Julius Windmaker stories,” celebrating his former exploits and lamenting his failed promise (LRT 51).

The laudatory stories depart starkly from depressing certainty both characters express about Julius and his predecessors downward course. As Victor notes, “It’s hard to be optimistic on the reservation,” though he also asserts “still, Indians have a way of surviving” (LRT 49). Again, compliment and insult (or at least damaging information) exist as one and the same; reservation heroes exhibit the same ambiguity—they offer role models in their sport for a time, but negative examples when they “don’t even know how to pay their bills” (LRT 49). Despite Victor’s bitter victory in predicting Julius’ failure (and excusing his own), Victor comments to his presumably white audience, “I just can’t explain how much losing Julius Windmaker hurt us all” (LRT 52).

Victor and Adrian do not see any connection between their negative predictions and the latest reservation hero’s fate. They notice the broken traffic signal is still broken, but agree there is no “point of fixing it in a place where the STOP signs are just suggestions” (LRT 52). Neither warning sign—the failed drunken Julius sleeping on their living room floor or the broken traffic signal—is actually heeded; Victor, Adrian, and their neighbors observe the warning signs but do nothing to change either situation. As the narrator of “Little Hurricanes” comments about the many witnesses watching Victor’s uncles fight, “They were all witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale” (LRT 3).

Similarly, when Victor and his father come upon Jimmy Shit Pants, they leave “Jimmy to make his own decisions. That’s how it is. One Indian doesn’t tell another what to do. We just watch things happen and then make comments. It’s all about reaction as opposed to action” (LRT 216).

Victor’s father exhibits the same detachment as their car spins completely around and they continue on their way—neither Victor nor his father even comment. Victor muses “I’m always asking myself if a near accident is an accident, if standing near a disaster makes you part of the disaster or just a neighbor” (LRT 214). Obviously, the question is easy to answer if you stand by and watch the disaster unfold and do nothing—which is what Victor and Adrian do. They merely watch Julius Windmaker’s fate overtake him in the same way they watch the coffee cup revolve again and again until it hits the ground.

The need to explain personal and collective failures binds O’Brien’s and Alexie’s characters. Both groups feel their failures have been imposed on them by circumstance, but both also feel responsible for their failures. Norman cannot forgive his inability to hang on to Kiowa in the muck; Victor and Junior cannot forgive themselves for acquiescing to the failure others expect of them. As Rocio Davis notes of ethnic writers and the short story sequence, the implied search that serves as the center of such sequences projects a desire to come to terms with a past that is both personal and collective,” reflecting “displacement” and “a search for self” (Davis 7). One could say about Alexie’s and O’Brien’s characters feel similarly divided feelings (despite their gender) to the division Karen Weekes describes in female ethnic characters who feel “torn in various directions by familial, social, and personal demands; her divisive conflicts are perfectly reflected by the disjunctive possibilities of the genre in which they are presented” (Weekes 94).

The sense of guilt in both authors finds expression in guilt about complicity over killing. In “Good Form” the narrator O’Brien imagines being able to answer his daughter Kathleen’s questions about the war. He imagines being able to say to her question “‘Did you ever kill anybody?’ . . . ‘Of course not.’” Or he “can say, honestly, ‘Yes.’” He feels responsible because he “watched a man die . . . I did not kill

him. But I was present” (TTC 179). O’Brien’s narrator is a witness; similarly Alexie observes “for hundreds of years, Indians were witness to crimes on an epic scale” (LRT 3). Alexie’s characters feel the same generalized guilt, as the title to “Witnesses, Secret or Not” attests. The questioning of Victor’s father in regard to Jerry Vincent’s disappearance goads Victor to question his father (in a manner reminiscent of Kathleen in O’Brien’s work):

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

. . .

“Why do you want to know?”

“Don’t know. Just curious, I guess.”

“Well, I never killed anybody on purpose.”

“You mean you killed somebody accidentally?”

“That’s how it was.” . . .

When they get home Victor’s father “nearly cried into his food. Then, of course, he did cry into his food and we all watched him” (LRT 219). He’s mourns Jerry Vincent’s disappearance with something like survivor’s guilt—and perhaps of his own future disappearance and his failure of responsibility toward his family.

Teaching O’Brien and Alexie in conjunction with each other can help us explain each to our students. The possibly unfamiliar subject matter of O’Brien’s and Alexie’s stories may present challenges to students, yet both assert the power of narrative: as O’Brien’s narrator states, “But this too is true: stories can save us” (TTC 255). Stories are more than entertainments, more than even artistic renderings of reality. They preserve human life in a story, “for when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story” (TTC 38). O’Brien insists that storytelling itself equals survival, just as the “Man He Killed” “wakes up in the stories of his village and people (TTC 124). O’Brien amends Alexie’s aesthetic formulation of “survival=anger X imag” (LRT 150). Alexie puts it another way in Lone Ranger and Tonto, “Imagine a song stronger than penicillin” (153). Norman Bowker’s suicide demonstrates that storytelling equals survival in a different way: sometimes survival depends simply on being able to tell one’s story, even if some may see them as lies.

O'Brien's narrator says that "what stories can do . . . is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again" (TTC 172). These "lying" stories of Alexie and O'Brien can demonstrate for our students the truth of things we might not otherwise know or feel, make the hidden lives of these author's characters--GIs and Native Americans--present and real. They explain their characters' experiences to the outside world. O'Brien (as author and as narrator) and his characters feel a responsibility to those who did not return—the dead must rely on the surviving members of the company to tell their exploits as they explain themselves; Alexie's work bear similar witness for the erased history of his people and past atrocities that helped in large part to create their current circumstances. In this fashion, the stories make it off the reservation and into the lives of those students who hardly know reservations exist.

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