Alexie’s Healing Stories for American Indians’ Collective Trauma*

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1. Introduction

Sherman Alexie’s two short stories with long titles, “Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ at Woodstock” and “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona,” narrate about an Indian father who is “lost” and his son who is trying to connect with him. Both stories that first appeared in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven in 1993 are told by protagonist Victor. In the former, Victor recalls his father who looked like a hippie, demonstrated against the Vietnam War, appeared on the cover of Time magazine, drank and listened to Jimi Hendrix’s “The Star-Spangled Banner” all night long, made love to his wife, quarreled with her, separated from her, and eventually left them and never came back. He was a lethargic alcoholic but Victor misses him tremendously. In the latter, Victor takes a journey to Phoenix with Thomas Builds-the-Fire, an estranged friend known as a lunatic storyteller “whom nobody wanted to listen to” (164), to collect his deceased father’s remains. Victor had been disconnected from his father for a few years, but “there still was a genetic pain,

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which was as real and immediate as a broken bone” (164) when he heard of his solitary demise. Victor had to go claim his corpse and savings account of three hundred dollars. During the trip, Victor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire talk about the father and at the end recognize some middle ground in their once-estranged friendship. The two stories are not only linked in terms of the storyline but ideologically of the issues related to the absence of the Indian father and his son’s yearning for him, and the collective trauma and the irrevocable memories of American Indians and their permanent loss.

The stories are attached to Sherman Alexie on a personal level as well. He has publicly shared his feelings toward his father on several occasions. In a PBS interview, for instance, Alexie stressed on the similarity between his father and himself, “We looked alike. We talked alike. We thought alike. More than anybody else in the family, my father and I were immeshed in all sorts of ways” (“Poet Sherman”). Even his name is the same as his father’s, he added. In a talk show with Bill Moyers, Alexie professed his longing for his father:

But my dad, that alcoholic nomad, he used to leave my family for days or weeks at a time drinking and roaming. And I would lie awake all night waiting for him to come home, and five or six times I cried myself sick into hospital. […] So maybe I learned how to be an insomniac because I’m still waiting for my father to come home. (Moyers)

His father, in Alexie’s words, was an “alcoholic nomad” but no matter who he was, Alexie wanted him desperately. Nevertheless, like Victor’s father, his father never came back and Alexie had to suffer.