Born from Loss: Desertification and Regeneration of Native America in Sherman Alexie's Autobiography *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* (2017)

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Sherman Alexie stands as one of the most famous contemporary Native American writers. He started to bloom as a multifaceted author in the 1990s, publishing collections of poems and short stories, as well as novels and screenplays, which earned him several literary prizes. Many of his writings are inspired by his own life trajectory and experiences, and they often combine a propensity for tragedy with an often black sense of humor. He published a first short autobiographical account in 2000, "The Unauthorized Biography of Me," in which he mixed personal recollections and socio-political considerations (Krupat and Swann 3-14). In 2007, Alexie won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a text he deems the "fictional version" of his childhood and youth in his most recent book *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* (573). In the latter, he admits that *The Absolutely True Diary* was his "best-selling book" and that he had further planned to write the "years-late sequel" in order to earn money to cover his mother's medical expenses (38). *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* is the end product of this project. His mother Lillian Agnes Cox (1936-2015) is thus the central "subject" of this "memoir" (164). Her death led Alexie to focus on the notion of loss that seems tragically pervasive in Native Americans' lives.

Starting from his own personal and family example, Alexie analyzes the multifarious forms of dispossession that have struck Native Americans since the beginning of Euro-American colonization. Through a long-term and more or less overt process of territorial, cultural, spiritual, and identity dispossession, the Native peoples of North America have been rejected into a *regio egestatis*[1] or a desert that the author strives to probe. "Born from loss"; "The loss extends in all directions"; "Poverty was our spirit animal"; "We are Un-"; "Tyrannosaurus Rez": these are just a few examples of wry phrases whereby Alexie tries to encapsulate the sense of dispossession experienced by hundreds of different Native peoples that suffered from the colonial aftermath.

However, just as "dinosaurs live in birds" (410), Native Americans have not complied with the expectations of a complete and definitive vanishing they were beforehand sentenced to by the deterministic and ethnocentric perspectives of the settlers. Alexie asserts that Native

[1] This Latin expression is taken from St Augustine's *Confessions* (Book II, chapter 10, paragraph 18) and can diversely be translated as "region of lack," "a state of extreme poverty," "place of desolation," or even "the waste land," being derived from *regio* and *egestas* (need, want, poverty).

Americans still exist, even "miraculous[ly] . . . despite the crimes" (546). Native Americans have been able to reinvent themselves and "successfully negotiate the white world" (302), and "start anew" (422).

The tension between a forced desertification and a renewed fecundation which permeates the book will provide the mainstay of our approach articulated around the following queries: what was the mechanism that led Native America to appear and become a "desert"? Have the Native Americans been able to survive the desertification of their milieu? In a first part, we will see how Alexie discloses and dismantles the various dimensions of the genocidal mechanisms wielded by the colonizers to eradicate every form of Native presence in history and in memory, in order to make North America appear as a desert bereft of a truly evolved population and civilization. We will also see how colonization has tended to create a shared feeling of being "Native American" or "Indian" among a wide diversity of peoples who were far from being united, but who developed a common feeling of loss and binding grief. The next part will be devoted to the specific example of the damage of colonization on the Spokane tribe that Alexie explores through the specific case of his mother Lillian, whose name and fate stand as the metonymies of a wider damaging process that has left no Native people unscathed. The last part will focus on the sublimation of this grief into a positive energy, as Alexie wants to show how the Native Americans have been deprived of everything but their tears, probably the last element they can still control and may use to rehydrate and re-fertilize the barren land they have been assigned to: "That's how we reverse colonialism" (451), he claims, in an optimistic posture of resistance and resilience as well as reconquered pride symbolized by the moccasins.

Desertification, genocide, and the creation of a common Native identity

The first English settlers saw America as a "desert," though as a desert that was not completely empty. Those who peopled it were automatically considered as being wild, benighted heathens who did not belong to the same civilized world as the Christian newcomers. The Puritan writings speak volumes. For instance, William Bradford, governor of Plymouth Plantation, described "those vast and unpeopled countries of America . . . devoid of all civil inhabitants, where there are only savage and brutish men," comparing America to "a hideous and desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and men" (Miller 12-17). Congregational minister, Cotton Mather, used the same disparaging semantic field some time later in *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) when he spoke of "the deserts of America," the "American desert," or "these dark regions of America" and "this outer darkness" (Miller 63-65). John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, added an emptying dimension when he construed the epidemics that scythed out the Native population of New England as a divine scheme to get rid of inferior creatures, so "vile and base" that "this land [grew] weary of her inhabitants"; "so as there be few inhabitants left," as he wrote in 1629 in "Reasons to be Considered for Justifying the

Undertakers of the Intended Plantation in New England" (Heimert and Delbanco 71-73). In "God's Promise to His Plantation" (1630), Puritan minister, John Cotton, also thanked God for making "room" for the "sons of Adam and Noah to come and inhabit" in "a country though not altogether void of inhabitants, yet void in that place where they reside" and which they could rightfully take possession of as it was "a vacant soil" (Heimert and Delbanco 77).

This rhetoric opposing an almost empty wild "desert" or "wilderness" to a blooming civilized "garden" or "plantation," though not deprived of sincerity as far as the Calvinist perspective and the Puritan typological reading of the Bible are concerned, justified the Christian settlers' right of conquest and expansion with a sense of mission, as the vanguard of civilization in a promised land designated by God, in which to build a new Jerusalem. They arrived in an "unprecedented space," in the words of Colin Calloway, that European cartographers described as "wilderness, vacant land, or *terra incognita* . . . 'empty wilderness', a 'virgin land'": though "emptied" or "depopulated" would be more relevant than "empty" or "unpopulated" (10, 12, 39). In his scathing and seminally revisionist historical approach, Francis Jennings described Native New England coping with an "invasion" of pitiless settlers as a "widowed land" (15). The settlers can therefore be considered as "undertakers" in both senses of the word.

Alexie definitely considers the arrival and hegemony of the Western settlers as an invasion, rather than a discovery, that turned a thriving Native America into a desert. He does not hesitate to use and frequently repeat the word "genocide" in his book. According to him, it is doubtless that Native Americans are the victims of "centuries of genocide" or "of genocidal acts" (200, 439) that turned them into "a dispossessed people . . . a people stripped of their language, art, religion, history, land, and economy" (487). He concludes Chapter 46 with this sentence: "My name is Sherman Alexie and I was born from loss," the noun "loss" being repeated thirteen times before he adds: "And loss" (193). The visual and literary effect created by the layout of words conveys a feeling of falling into an abyss, an "abyss of loss," to use the phrase of another contemporary Native writer, Louise Erdrich (64).

The term "genocide" is quite divisive, especially when applied to the history of White-Indian relations, as Paul Kelton showed in a 2016 lecture at Dartmouth College, saying that the "semantical" and "polemical battle" is neither new nor over. However, for many Native American thinkers, allusions to a lexical field generally associated with the Second World War, the Nazi period or other totalitarian regimes, do not sound inappropriate. In a 2019 showcase tour of her documentary *Warrior Women*, Christina D. King often used the word "genocide" to refer to Native history and asserted that to remove children by force from their own families and communities in order to put them into boarding schools that looked like "reeducation

centers" can be called an act of "cultural genocide."[2] Author and academic, Gerald Vizenor, makes of Ishi, a Californian Indian, the epitome of the Indian victim of a "cultural genocide," who "had endured the unspeakable crimes of miners, racial terrorists, bounty hunters, and government scalpers" (*Survivance* 4), who was the witness of "the extermination of tribal cultures" (*Manifest Manners* 4) and the "death of millions of tribal people" (*Manifest Manners* 6). Writer Tommy Orange speaks of five hundred years of "genocidal campaign" (8), waged on Native populations, while the poet Chrystos argues that the "genocide" is still "killing us" and calls White America to practice self-criticism through an "eye exam right here" (75). Paul Chaat Smith, associate curator of the National Museum of the American Indian, opened in 2004 in Washigton D.C., goes as far as speaking of the "the obvious examples of genocide and the deliberate destruction of language and religious practices" (26) that led to the "greatest holocaust in human history" (36). In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Alexie describes Native reservations as "death camps" (217); in *You Don't Have To Say You Love Me* he describes them as "jails" or "experimental labs" run by "sociopathic" and "torturing" people (487, 586); he also compares them to "concentration camps" (268), a simile already employed by another famous Native writer, N. Scott Momaday (69). Thomas King (Cherokee) reminds us that the word "genocide" was "coined in 1944 by the legal scholar Raphael Lemkin" (101) in the context of the Nazis' massive extermination of the Jewish people.

To use the term "genocide" or other references to World War II terminology sounds like using the trendy "Godwin's law," defined in 1990 by American attorney Mike Godwin as the utmost probability of referring or comparing someone or an argument to Hitler or the Nazis in order to win an argument by vilifying one's opponent. But, as Alexie puts it, there are different ways of being "genocided." When people consider the meaning of genocide, they might only think of corpses being pushed into mass graves. But a person can be genocided–can have every connection to their past severed–and live to be an old person whose rib cage is a haunted house around their heart (236). The reference to the genocide is here used to show the massive loss and the emptiness that nowadays constitute Native societies: "The loss extends in all directions" (196). Or, to say it with another of Erdrich's phrases, "They were shells made of loss" (80). The loss is moreover ceaselessly physically felt, insofar as death is pervasive as a historical fact and a daily reality. As Calloway sums it up (37), "Indian America" has been turned into a mere "graveyard" because of the multifaceted effects of colonization: new diseases, falling birthrates, escalating warfare, alcoholism, general social displacement.

For Alexie, to have a Native identity is to be haunted by death, to be surrounded by ghosts, by people constantly dying, and often dying at a young age: "What makes me and my stories Indian? *All the goddamn funerals*" (351). Alexie remembers that every kid who used to bully

[2] Presentation given at the movie theater Les Korrigans, Guingamp, November 5, 2019.

him at school died before they turned fifty, that most "of them didn't make it to forty" and that even a "few didn't make thirty" (476-477); he even feels "sad" for them with a sort of haunting "survivor's guilt" (477). He later adds, in Chapter 18 entitled "Epigraphs for my tombstone," that to die a peaceful death as an old man is like a "victory" for a Native American: "if I died / As an elderly man / In his unarmored sleep / Then count / My quiet departure / As an indigenous victory" (530, Epigraph 3).

This pervasive presence of death leads Alexie to envision the creation of a museum designed to commemorate the Native genocide: "And what do I make of the genocide museum in our own country? What do I make of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum?" (402). According to Comanche Paul Chaat Smith, such a museum exists, and it is the National Museum of the American Indian. Smith wonders if this place should be called "the Louvre, or the Holocaust Museum," if it should be about "beautiful objects, or history?" According to him, it is both: "It must be a place of memory, memorial, hope, and grief . . . a place that honors the Indian past and Indian future . . . a place where the evidence is presented in a thousand voices and in a thousand ways" (62-63). If Alexie agrees with Smith, saying that there is no such thing as a single Indian voice but a multiplicity of Native experiences and points of view, the Spokane author, however, does not think that a museum of this type has been built yet, for at least two reasons. The first is that White America prefers to forget, and even deny, its past and the violence upon which the country has been built: "The United States wants all of us to forget the crimes it committed against the indigenous." He then repeats three times in a row "The United States wants us to forget" (403). Repetition is a narrative and rhetoric ploy used many times by Alexie for two interrelated reasons: to put into the limelight precisely what the mainstream and dominant discourse would like to erase, and to emphasize that "grief" and death are "repetitious" (372, 436) in the Native American world where they have become a daily, obsessive reality. In Alexie's view, forgetting is part of the process designed to make America appear stripped of Native traces. Smith calls this process a "constructed amnesia" made to render Native Americans vanished and invisible, which means to erase them from memory and history as they are the "inconvenient reminders of a tragic past" (89-90).

Another reason why a Native American Holocaust Museum could not become a reality stems from the ongoing tribal nature of the Native world. If Native Americans probably were the "gold medalists in the Genocide Olympics" (399), they would also ceaselessly debate with one another in order to know whose tribe has suffered the most. Chapter 111, entitled "Tribalism," starts and ends with the identical statement: "we Indians would spend years arguing about whose tribe suffered the worst massacre" (401, 403).

This premise challenges the relevance of the usual terminology which subsumes a broad variety of peoples under a single, and erroneous, term: "Indians," "Amerindians," "Aboriginals," "First

Nations," etc. Thomas King settles the issue saying "there has never been a good collective noun because there never was a collective to begin with" (xiii). In order to widen the scope of an alleged Native American "universe," Alexie uses the word "multiverse," derived from astrophysics studies and popularized, for instance, by French astrophysicist Aurélien Barrau as a "multiplicity of universes" (*Des univers mutltiples* 3; "Des trous noirs"). The Latin prefix "multi-" entails the idea of plurality, of diversity, which Native America actually was and still is. "Who is an Indian?" is the question asked by Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann in their introduction to *Here First: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers* (xii). The beginning of an answer can be found in the first essay in the collection ("The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me"), written, precisely, by Sherman Alexie: "Thesis: I have never met a Native American. Thesis reiterated: I have met thousands of Indians." The answer might sound elusive and deceitful, voluntarily ambiguous and undeniably tongue-in-cheek, but Alexie further clarifies his point of view: "We are Indians, pronounced In-din. It [the word] belongs to us. We own it and we're not going to give it back. So much has been taken from us that we hold on to the smallest things with all the strength we have left" (Krupat and Swann 4).

The fear of another dispossession, another loss, on a lexical or linguistic ground, is therefore looming and leads the indigenous peoples to redefine themselves through the appropriation and resemanticization of a word and an identity, however artificial, imposed on them. If the multiverse of Native America exists as one entity called "the Indians" or "the Native Americans," it is a twofold effect of colonization: the Euro-American newcomers saw the original inhabitants as a mere batch of savages living in the wilderness, whereas the indigenes saw themselves as the "colonized" united by a common denominator: genocide and its many faces–physical, cultural, spiritual, psychological, bureaucratic, territorial, ecological.

Native Americans have been facing an "Anti-Indian Apocalypse" fueled by "hate, pity, disgust, and anger" (26), and the survivors have been sentenced to live in an "anti-Indian world" (286, 548) which considers the indigenous inhabitants as being guilty of "the crime of being Indian" (174). Cancer is used both as a metaphor and a metonymy to emphasize the killing effects of colonization.

A *dam*aging colonial process leading to desertification

The comparison of colonization to cancer is particularly obvious in Chapter 12, entitled "Terminal Velocity." The adjective "terminal" can be heard as an echo of the Termination policy enforced in the 1950s-60s. Officially called "House Concurrent Resolution 108," the act was passed with the explicit aim of abolishing federal supervision over Native Americans, of ending their status as wards of the U.S., of removing them from their reservations to relocate them in cities. This policy can be reckoned as another effort to further erase any trace of the presence

of indigenous peoples from the countryside and from history, to make Native America appear more like a desert designed to be peopled and enhanced by Euro-American newcomers. "Terminal," though, definitely refers to Alexie's own mother's end-stage disease as she died from lung cancer in 2015.

In Chapter 12, we can construe the disappearance of Alexie's mother, Lillian, as an image or a metonymy of the fate met by the Native Americans who, willy-nilly at one moment or another of their history, had to cope with the sweeping effects of colonization conceived as an invasive growing tumor here personified in upper-case letters:

> Diagnosed and dead
> In a few weeks, my mother was *evacuated*
> From this world like it was on fire.
> Fuck you, Small-Cell Cancer, for *invading*
> My mother's lungs. She was not a Smoker! (76, my emphasis)

The latter remarks convey the unfairness of a lethal colonization process that indiscriminately kills every person identified as "Indian." In the previous chapter, Alexie compares "the cancer cells" to "microscopic and domestic terrorists" waiting "to strike." The cancer colonization is described as an insidious, inner enemy that infuses a sense of insecurity, terror, and death. The words "fire" and "evacuated" also provide clues about the process of desertification of Native America sparked or ignited by the intrusion of Euro-American settlers.

The erasure of Native presence is not only physical; it is also cultural and spiritual, even cosmological. Alexie insists that the decease of his mother led to the disappearance of one of the last Spokane native speakers (158-161, 342), hence the worldview attached to the Salish language she spoke.

The Spokane and Coeur d'Alene languages both belong to the Salish (or Salishan) linguistic group. Both of Alexie's parents were fluent speakers of their native languages. Therefore, they "watched the world with Salish eyes" and understood it "with Salish brains," as Shelly Boyd (a Colville Indian, one of Alexie's friends and of his mother's) once told the author (535). Their death subsequently implied the loss of a worldview which could be expressed through an "ancient and powerful" tribal language (525). Boyd compares their loss to a draining that renders a place barren, that turns it into a meaningless desert: "When a fluent elder dies, it's like a river has disappeared. And inside the disappeared river are Salish words–Salish concepts–that have also disappeared" (535). If this statement recalls the famous quote of the Malian writer and ethnologist Amadou Hampâté Bâ, who declared in 1962 that, "In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns down" (Touré and Mariko 6, 54), the allusion to water is more appropriate to the Spokanes.

Colonization can be seen as a *dam*aging process as the building of the Grand Coulee dam (Washington) in 1933 had tragic consequences on the life of the Salish peoples. The parallel between "dam" and "damage" is not directly drawn by Alexie, but sufficient hints are interspersed throughout the book to make the link appear. For instance, Alexie calls the Native Americans altogether "a universally damaged people" (342) and wants to "insist," by using his prop of repetition, that their "damage is greater than all of the damage suffered by all other damaged people" (399). It seems particularly true for the Spokanes whose traditional culture was based on the salmon, the presence of which was annihilated by the construction of the Grand Coulee dam. The "God Damn, God Dam" (179, title of Chapter 42) therefore provoked an "Apocalypse" (194, title of chapter 47) that put an end to Alexie's "ancient tribal culture . . . and thousands of years of salmon-fishing ancestors" (302-303). In five years, "that dam submerged ancient villages and falls and eventually killed all the wild salmon in the upper Columbia and Spokane rivers (179). "That dam," as Alexie writes with a demonstrative that implies a distancing, is compared to a "gravestone" (181) as it buried the Spokane culture with the salmon to which it was intimately related: "The Interior Salish, my people, had worshipped the wild salmon, since our beginnings. That sacred fish had been our primary source of physical and spiritual sustenance for thousands of years" (187). The diet shift led to an epidemic of diabetes and alcoholism which contributed to the increase in the death toll on the reservation. Their totemic animal, which provided food for thought and the belly, was replaced by misery: "Poverty was our spirit animal" (12). Beyond the nutritional and physical crime lies a cultural and religious murder:

> [T]he Grand Coulee Dam murdered my tribe's history. Murdered my tribe's relationship with its deity. And murdered my tribe's relationship with its future . . . What is it like to be a Spokane Indian without wild salmon? It is like being a Christian if Jesus had never rolled back the stone and risen from his tomb. (180-181)

Alexie assesses that his parents were "members of the first generation of interior Salish people who lived entirely without wild salmon" (188). He thus considers the Spokanes as "orphans" because they are "salmonless" or "salmon-grief" (188), because they became the "Unsalmon People" (233). Deprived of the very essence of their existence, the Spokanes, and the Native Americans at large, have become empty envelops "born from loss," "shells made of loss." The only thing they have gained was a prefix, "Un-," which translates the emptiness of the new identity imposed on them, "clarified for us" (233), to which they have all been reduced.

Intertextually speaking, the prefix "Un-" may be a reference to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* ([1897], 1996). In chapter fifteen, the word "Un-dead" appears in the mouth of vampire hunter Van Helsing who uses it to call his prey (201). Alexie makes no clear mention of Dracula in this autobiography, but he certainly knows the book well: in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-*

Time Indian, he calls himself, or at least his *figura*, "Mr. Woe-Is-Me" (9); this pun and phrase is an unavowed quotation (the hyphens added, though) of a cue uttered by Dr. Renfield in Chapter XVIII of *Dracula* (247).

Should the reference to the vampires and the *Un*-dead be proven, what would be at stake are the issues of the body and identity. The Native Americans would appear like the victims of the Whites (and Stoker's vampires have very pale faces) coming from remote regions to suck the essence of the Natives' lives in order to sustain their own lives. Those of the Natives who would survive as Un-dead would only be "paraphrases," a term by which Alexie means bogus copies of their predecessors (233), of which only an outer envelope would look Indian while their inner side would be similar to those who have sucked their blood. Vampirized Natives would therefore appear as "Apples," a derogatory term describing people "red on the outside and white on the inside" (*The Absolutely True Diary* 132); that is, Native only in their appearance but not in their ways. Native Americans would therefore look like the people tortured by the *thoughtpolice* in the dystopian world described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, from which Alexie may also have borrowed his use of the prefix "un-."

In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, those suspected of *thoughtcrime* were arrested and brainwashed, as O'Brien warns Winston Smith: "Everything will be dead inside you . . . We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves" (268-269), a process which could define the indigenous "Apples." Or they could be killed or "vaporized" and become "unpersons," that is people who are supposed never to have existed (48).

In the *Newspeak* language used in the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* country of Oceania, the prefix "un-" is used in the process of simplification of language by the government to make any potential "heretical thought" impossible "so far as thought is dependent on words" (312). In Alexie's autobiography, the prefix "un-" is used to describe the postlapsarian world in which Native Americans have been embedded after the beginning of Western colonization: their world has been reduced and simplified with the loss of their land, their language, their spirituality, their resources. But does it mean that Native American voices have definitively been reduced to naught, that Native Americans can no longer express themselves as indigenous people?

For Alexie, however much sucked by the White vampires, the salmon identity, nevertheless, has stuck. In Chapter 46, he reports his experience as a "visiting writer" in a college located on the Navajo reservation, where his identity as a "salmon boy" made him feel "weird . . . in the desert" as well as "extra thirsty" (189). This dimension of a sticking identity may be related to the tenacious spirit of the salmon which always goes back to its birthplace to spawn. Something

"native" seems to be able to last and return, whatever the extent of the loss or the depth of the grief as he expounds in Chapter 24 entitled "Your Theology or Mine?":

> If you believers want to corner me–if you force me to choose the Word–then I am going to choose only one word . . . a verb. And that one verb will be "return," for I am always compelled to return, return, return to my place of birth, to my reservation, to my unfinished childhood home, and ultimately to my mother, my ultimate salmon. (435)

This return can be accomplished through the control of tears, which appear as an available, powerful tool for the Native Americans to water or rehydrate the desert they have been forced into.

Regeneration and rehydration through available tears and moccasins

"We were supposed to disappear" and "die" in the "prisons" that reservations are: this is how Alexie introduces the deterministic sentence to which native peoples were condemned by Euro-American settlers who believed in their superiority (*The Absolutely True Diary* 216). The use of the past tense hints that something went awry in those racial expectations. Indeed, Native Americans have survived and are still alive today. In the 2013 PBS documentary *Urban Rez*, host Moses Brings Plenty and academic Donald Fixico insist that two of the main qualities displayed by Native Americans as they have coped with colonization are resilience and adaptation. In his books, Gerald Vizenor uses the notion of "survivance," which is, to his mind, a portmanteau word combining "survival," "endurance" and "resistance": "Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories" (*Survivance* 1). In opposition to the invented "Vanishing Indian" or already supposedly vanished Indian, Vizenor defines the concept of the "Postindian" or a Native American who manages to survive and reinvent himself in the post-colonial and contemporary world all the impediments notwithstanding; Ishi stands out as the illustrative example of a miraculous survivor displaying a will to adapt to new conditions of existence (*Manifest Manners* 4, 11-12; *Postindian* 21, 84-85). In Alexie's words in *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*, this would be the "After Columbus Indian" (519), able "to survive every fire" (329) and "to successfully negotiate the white world" (302) in trying "to be new" (423).

Alexie goes as far as evoking a "miracle" when assessing that "Despite / The crimes / Committed / Against any / And all," it was "miraculous" that Native Americans could be capable of love: "We continue lovingly" (546). The idea of a miracle can also be felt in the words of ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and historian Daniel Richter when they both mention the capacity of "reinvention" implemented by the indigenous peoples devastated by the tremendous impacts of colonization. Lévi-Strauss admires that even with a dramatically

reduced population "these [Amazonian] Indians have managed to recreate viable societies, and even, so to speak, to reinvent the state of society" (16; my translation). Richter expatiates that

> The Native communities [of New England] . . . had to reinvent themselves, in countless ways large and small. The Indians' new world, then, was not merely the product of abstract material forces; it was the creation of individuals and shattered families who recombined and reinvented themselves to survive in unprecedented circumstances. In all of this, eastern Native people were anything but passive victims unable to change. The profound economic, environmental, and epidemiological constraints they faced make their efforts to rebuild Indian country more, not less significant. (67-68)

They managed to find a way to regain some sort of empowerment despite or over what had been "undone," to use a word which sounds attuned to Alexie's lexicon and which would relevantly translate Achille Mbembe's idea of being defeated. Mbembe also addresses the notions of victory and defeat:

> How to find back, reconstitute somewhere some memories of victory? How to learn to win again, to move out of the cycle of defeats? This also leads to the question: what is a defeat? When can we say that we have actually been defeated? What kind of defeat: total, partial? What does remain once we have been defeated? How do we get back on our feet, how do we fix things up, how do we launch back the process of life? (radio interview; my translation)

In the same perspective as Lévi-Strauss and Richter, Mbembe argues that some peoples "cannot afford the luxury of collapsology," cannot envision the idea of a complete and definitive extinction because they already have a long-time experience of the catastrophe–colonialism for instance–and are nevertheless still existing, which may seem surprising but which also triggers "a new critical approach" (radio interview). Alexie's autobiography *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* can be read as a critical attempt to inquire into these problems that Native Americans had, and still have, to cope with; it also stands as an assessment of the indigenous faculty to survive in a milieu turned into a hostile desert, to make Native America bloom again. One of the most important ways to achieve this purpose would be to tame the "repetitive" and "relentless" grief (224, 372, 436) that constitutes an inescapable reality in the contemporary Native world. He particularly focuses on children who learn from a very young age to become adept at mastering their feelings.

In Chapters 41 and 59, Alexie describes boarding schools as places of "torture" where Native children are ill-treated and "humiliated" like "prisoners of war" for "the crime of being Indian," for speaking their language, "for dancing and singing the traditional ways," "for resisting and running away," "for wanting to go home" (170, 171, 175, 235). However, in spite of this "epidemic violence . . . all across the United States and Canada" (235), the children forced themselves not to cry overtly: "We learned not to cry. Our tears were the only things we could control. So not crying felt like we had won something" (235). He describes himself as being one

of those kids who stuck to his promise of not shedding tears openly: "I never cried in front of that teacher again" (177).[3]

Controlling one's tears has the taste of victory. Grief and tears seem to have become the only staples "available" for Native Americans, whereas all the other elements upon which their lives and cultures were based had now become "unavailable," to use German philosopher Hartmut Rosa's terminology. Rosa (17) describes something as "unavailable" as something upon which a human being has no control and is therefore unpredictable, conveying the uncomfortable, and even infuriating, feeling of being powerless; on the contrary, an "available" product is something that can be controlled, that we accept as part of our life, even though this product entails some risks–like tobacco or driving a car do. Humor can be added as an "available" staple in both traditional and contemporary Native American expression. It is particularly true for Alexie's work into which humor is pervasive and where its use conveys the feeling that humor helps see reality, however tragic it may be, with hindsight and helps keep a sort of control–at least mental or intellectual–over it. However, the humorous dimension is not the most striking aspect of *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* which brings forward more harrowing feelings such as anger, sadness, despondency, loss, grief, sometimes toned down by a will to survive against all odds.

Victorious though the Natives may seem, Alexie's evocation of tears sounds like a Pyrrhic–pyric?–victory, as if the control of tears would be the only thing that Native Americans could oppose to the fire that consumes the United States, described as a whole country "on fire" (327). Some Native Americans thought finding a means to quench their pain, and especially "the pain of being Indian" (228), in alcohol. Likely to consider booze as their Eucharist, they may have been looking for a way to sublimate their contending with something "too big, too strong, too powerful" for them–as Gilles Deleuze defines drinking and getting drunk–and their suffering through a form of transubstantiation. However, if alcohol may represent an escape or a refuge, it is a deceitful one as it is merely a passageway to death through a "slow suicide" (518). Though liquid, alcohol doesn't help rehydrate the Native community; on the contrary it contributes to making it a desert, taking its toll of deaths. Sherman Alexie's father was one of them, as he "died of alcoholism when he was 64" in 2003 (5, 229). Alcohol has led many "After Columbus Indians" to the afterworld. Others have managed to make their way in this "new world for all," to paraphrase Calloway's phrase. Moccasins can be seen as the symbol of a recovered pride and will to survive even in a world disrupted by the colonizers.

[3] In his 2020 documentary, *Tuer l'Indien dans le cœur de l'enfant,* journalist Gwenlaouen Le Gouil interviews Edmund Metatawabin, a Cree from Fort Albany reservation (Ontario), who says exactly the same thing: "You know what we never gave the missionaries [working in boarding schools]? We never showed them our tears. We never cried."

Alexie remembers that, at the Fourth of July powwow held on the Flathead reservation in 1976, he was given a pair of moccasins by one of his aunts. Wearing these moccasins bestowed upon him the feeling that he had become "a super Indian" whereas he usually "didn't have confidence in [his] body or soul" (392). Powwows, and especially intertribal powwows, are described by Alexie as social gatherings whereby Native Americans assert their ipseity–or idiosyncratic "indigenous identity" (304)–and claim a sense of "self-esteem," helping them try "to be unashamed" and "leave the Clan of the Ashamed" (422, 452). French sociologist Didier Eribon would call this process getting rid of the stigma of "hontologie" or "logic of shame" interiorized by communities considered as minor or inferior by the "invisible court" of the dominant society and its normative template (*La société comme verdict* 50-51, 71-72, 152, 247, 252; interview 67). Getting dressed as Native Americans during the powwows, such as wearing shawls or moccasins, gives the participants the sensation of wearing an "indigenous armor" (392) which would protect them against "self-denigration" (306), and help them live in an "anti-Indian world" (286).

Moccasins can be seen as the symbol of a will to survive, adapt and go forward, move out from one's "racial isolation" (285). Alexie quotes his little sister's words who criticized him for "always making up stuff from the past" and who said, as he complained about being seen as "a liar," that "If the moccasin fits, then wear it" (13).

This sentence is an adaptation of the proverb "If the shoe fits, wear it," which idiomatically means that a person should accept a criticism made by someone else. It can also be literally read as an encouragement to create the moccasins that would fit the new world henceforth dominated by the Whites. He alludes to his personal example, using the verb "compensate" three times to express his own ability to survive in "the white world" (302). Though admitting that he can be regarded as a "cultural anomaly" (310), Alexie feels like the child of American culture and of his tribal culture, "equally the child of Jesuit and Salish cultures" (434) endowed with "Salish/English brains" (535). Though this code-switching, or the "paradigm" of "walking in two worlds" as Smith puts it (34), can be disturbing, Alexie considers this twofold ability as a form of empowerment that helps him, like many other Native Americans, survive through a process of reversing colonialism, "taking back most of the good things that were stolen from us and grabbing some of your good things, too" (450-451).

In the latter sentence, Alexie manages to articulate a sense of loss due to a lethal colonization with the feeling that something survived in spite of the multifaceted genocide that befell the indigenous peoples. Before colonization, Native America had never been the "desert" or "vacant soil" described by the Western settlers. On the contrary, it looked like a thriving multiverse that had been "widowed" and turned into a "graveyard" by the newcomers. The multidimensional losses implied by colonization make Native America appear as a "Paradise

Lost." Summoning intimate experiences of loss and grief, especially the decease of his mother, Alexie compares colonization to a cancer that has damaged all the aspects of Native societies. Colonized America is *the* desert, an "*un*world" or an *un*livable word from which Native Americans are *un*welcome. However, even in this levelled universe, a miracle is possible: through the control of tears and a sense of humor; through the spirit of resilience and survivance embodied by the salmon; through the healing process made possible by the powwows that help Native Americans regain a feeling of spiritual and corporeal pride; through the moccasins as a metaphor of being able to move forward, even in a disrupted world.

"What constitutes a hero? What constitutes a victory?" wondered Christina King in her comment on her documentary *Warrior Women* just some months before these notions were discussed through the lexical field of war and fighting when the corona virus appeared. As far as the notion of desertification and Native American peoples are concerned, these notions can also be applied to the ways Native Americans responded and still respond to the colonizing process. "Fight back" (453) and "reverse colonialism" (451) are possible options, and they can work. Victories are possible, as shown by the regeneration of the Elwha River in the state of Washington, where the Spokane and Coeur-d'Alene reservations are also located. Between 2011 and 2014, the Elwha Dam (built in 1913) and the Glines Canyon Dam (built in 1926) were destroyed, which has directly led to the quick regeneration of an ecosystem that existed before their constructions, as Sarah Laîné demonstrates in her 2019 documentary *États-Unis, la libération du fleuve Elwha*. The first beneficiaries of these concrete removals were the salmon, but also the Salish-speaking Lower Elwha Klallam tribe which has been able to find back the flourishing milieu it has been living in "since time immemorial" as indicated on the tribal website. Backed by environmental associations, the Elwha tribe fought and took legal actions for decades with a successful outcome. This case exemplifies that desertification is not necessarily a fatality, that ways to rehydration are possible. "I want to reverse this earth" and "give this shit a whirl," Alexie entreats in Chapter 127 (446-447), wondering if "any potential world" exists where he could give birth to a new version of his own mother who will explicitly display her love for her children. He dreams of "a time machine" that would help him fulfil his desire. Bringing humans back to life is not possible yet. Surviving through adaptation, restoring a milieu, are possible. In spite of the tremendous effects of dispossession and genocide exposed by Alexie in his autobiography, a glimmer of hope appears possible. The "candlesticks" of hope that bring light "in the midst of this outer darkness" would not be the "European churches" anymore that Cotton Mather talked about in *Magnalia Christi Americana* in 1702 (Miller 65); they would be embodied by the salmon and their tenacious spirit, their undaunted will to go back to their native places despite all the impediments blocking their way. They are still here, like the Native Americans are still here. They continue to feed the Natives' bodies and souls. Salmon and Native Americans share a common milieu, a

common existence, a common destiny; they also share the same tears as those etched on the sculpture of a female Chinook salmon erected in front of the Elwha tribal office center: if tears have to be shed, they can be tears of joy.

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