

Truth, Reconciliation, and Amnesia: *Porcupines and China Dolls* and the Canadian Conscience

Keavy Martin
University of Alberta

The events of the workshop again made the news that afternoon.... In one week, Chief David, James and Jake would be known all over the NWT. In two weeks, they would be forgotten.

Robert Arthur Alexie
Porcupines and China Dolls

IN ROBERT ARTHUR ALEXIE'S 2002 NOVEL *Porcupines and China Dolls*, three former residential school students shock the fictional hamlet of Aberdeen, NWT, when they disclose the sexual abuse they suffered as young boys under the care of the institution. The people have gathered this day for a healing workshop to address the suffering that alcohol has been causing in their community; the rising action of the novel is devoted to describing this dysfunction, as the narrative follows the main character, James Nathan, through his daily routine of drinking, casual sex, and suicide attempts. But when James and his friends Jake and David—now in their forties—finally put a name to the nightmares that haunt them, they begin the process of taking control of their lives and ending the cycles of abuse. As David says to the assembled people: "I'm tired of runnin'. This is where it ends. Right here 'n right now. This is where we make the change for ourselves 'n for our children. I will run no more!" (198).

KEAVY MARTIN is
Assistant Professor of
Aboriginal Literatures at
the University of Alberta.

She is at work on a
book-length manuscript
*Stories in a New Skin:
Approaches to Inuit
Literature in Nunavut*
and is also involved
in a collaborative
project to re-edit
the prison writings
of Anthony Apakark
Thrasher.

The characters' attempts to "face their demons" then becomes literalized, and what follows is an almost-apocalyptic battle scene, as beady-eyed, reeking demons begin to crawl out of the walls and ceiling. The men become Warriors; they grow to impossible heights, and their voices are so mighty that "the roof of the community hall blew off and scattered to the four winds" (204). Armed suddenly with lances and swords, they take their bloody revenge on the "demons, dreams and nightmares" that have been tormenting them (196). The community joins in the epic struggle, and in an orgy of pop-culture references, the victims of residential schools are re-empowered:

James Nathan was like a knight in shining armour. He was like Kevin Costner in *Dances With Wolves*. He was like Crazy Horse charging into battle. He was like Geronimo at his best.

Young girls dreamed of marrying him. Young boys dreamed of becoming him. Elders dreamed they were him and cried for the good old days. (205)

Alexie's readers will recognize this scene as the cathartic climax of the healing narrative—even if it is hyperbolic beyond even what Sophocles could imagine. By finally telling their stories in a public setting, the victims seem to have purged themselves of the hurt that has already claimed many lives in Aberdeen. As one of the elder women has told them, "It's gettin' rid of it through talkin' 'n cryin' that's gonna help you. If you don't get rid of it, it'll kill you like it's done to so many of our People" (105). After the battle is over, a cool, cleansing wind sweeps through the hall, and the people soon begin to mark the re-emergence of some of their traditions: they travel out onto the land to carry the body of an abused former student to the Old People—cremating him in the old way—and after decades of obeying the Church's regulations, they witness the return of the drum. Through storytelling, ceremony, and song, the people stitch their community back together again.

It comes as a surprise, then, when James wakes up the morning after his disclosure and has the following exchange with his girlfriend:

"You okay?" Brenda asked.

"Yeah," he lied. He got up and made coffee. *Snow*.

"Whatcha gonna do today?" she asked.

"Check for caribou." *Maybe blow my brains out too*. "You?"
(219)

Despite the climactic events of the previous day, things seem to have returned to normal. Sure enough, only a few pages later, James attempts suicide again, and he will try it several more times before the novel ends. The event of the community's "healing," after all, occurs only two-thirds of the way through the book, and rather than arriving at the expected denouement and hopeful, happy ending, we watch the characters continue to struggle, drink, and die. The continuation of the story at this point is radical and strange; Alexie flouts his readers' expectations regarding the preordained progress of a healing journey. Life, he suggests, goes on, and often not in the way we hope for. Despite the characters' powerful attempts to put their pasts behind them, they are unable to find a reliable cure for memory. History, it seems, cannot be so easily dissuaded.

This paper explores the desire for closure that governs not only novels like Alexie's but also national discourses around Aboriginal issues—in particular, the legacy of residential schools. While healing and reconciliation are certainly desirable occurrences, I will argue that these concepts can also entail a fixation upon *resolution* that is not only premature but problematic in its correlation with *forgetting*. The danger is that the discourse of reconciliation—though rhetorically persuasive—can at times be less about the well-being of Aboriginal peoples and communities than about freeing non-Native Canadians and their government from the guilt and continued responsibility of knowing their history. Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls*, however, succeeds in derailing these teleological narratives. Although the telling of the survivors' stories is linked to the process of healing, the narrative also works paradoxically to keep wounds open, as the characters continue to stumble under the weight of their history and the readers are required to bear witness. Novels like Alexie's thus work to problematize or resist the amnesia that so often accompanies movements toward reconciliation.

Slaying the National Demons

On 11 June 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper told a story much like James Nathan's to the House of Commons, assembled Aboriginal leaders, and other survivors of residential schools. He described the abuse experienced by many former students, and he recognized this trauma as a source of the ongoing suffering and dysfunction in many Aboriginal communities. This high-profile acknowledgement—both of a brutal history and of the state's role in it—was figured as a key factor in the movement "towards healing, reconciliation and resolution of the sad legacy of Indian Residential Schools" (Harper). Several of the Aboriginal leaders present

confirmed this point: Mary Simon, President of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, stated that “[T]his apology will help us all mark the end of this dark period in our collective history as a nation.” Phil Fontaine, then National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations—and the man whose public testimony of residential school abuse was a major factor in increasing national attention to the issue of reparations—declared that “Canada has come of age today.... The common road of hope will bring us to reconciliation more than any words, laws, or legal claims ever could. We still have to struggle, but now we are in this together. I reach out to all Canadians today in this spirit of reconciliation.”

In other words, the event of the apology repeatedly drew attention to its own significance—a performative tactic geared, perhaps, at creating a sense of progress or impending change. Indeed, each of the speakers on that day showed a preference for metaphors of journeying, of stepping forward, and of moving ahead. “You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time,” Harper said, “and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey.” Such figures of speech are now customary in the discourse of healing that has developed in response to the disclosure of the abuse prevalent in the residential school system (Episkenew 10–11). As James B. Waldram points out in a 2008 publication of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, “The dominant metaphor in our research describes healing as a journey, sometimes articulated as following the ‘Red Road,’ the ‘Sweetgrass Trail,’ the ‘Way of the Pipe’ ... or the ‘Road to Wellness’ (6). Jo-Ann Fiske explains that “Roadways and pathways evoke the sense of journey that compresses the lifelong quest for recovery and personal transformation.... [These] references to pathways offer a sense of the tangible nature of the healing journey” (51). At the official apology, then, this road to recovery became common ground for the assembled speakers, both federal and Aboriginal—and, by extension, for the members of the broader Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal public, who were invited into the process or “journey” of reconciliation. Despite our differences, the speeches suggested, we are all walking the same path; we are all working toward a common goal.

As a sign of his government’s commitment to forward movement, the Prime Minister acknowledged the state’s ongoing complicity in the harmful legacy of the residential school system, noting that “the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation.” Harper’s language here is telling. Absence as an impediment, as a void that forms a barrier: this complex figure of speech hints at the equivocal nature of the apology, as progress is allegedly spurred on by a temporary movement

toward the past—a revisiting of past wrongs, or an acknowledgement of things that many would prefer to forget. This is the same contradictory logic that informs psychological talk therapy, Catholic confessionals, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), now underway. In order to heal, to be forgiven, or to reconcile, we must first re-open wounds, recount sins, and resurrect conflicts. In order to forget, we must remember.

Since the apology, most of the media coverage of the TRC has focused on the disputes and eventual resignations of its former commissioners. But under the new leadership of Justice Murray Sinclair, the TRC held its first ceremony on 15 October 2009, with Governor General Michaëlle Jean as its honorary witness. Its mandate is to provide a forum for survivors to tell their stories and to educate the public about this history (“Our Mandate”). It remains to be seen, however, how Canadians unaffected by the residential school system will respond. Will they act—as the Commission would like them to—as witnesses? Will they attend public events and make use of the educational resources that are being created for them? Or will they react with disinterest or possibly even with frustration that the events are still ongoing? After all, it would have been easy to mistake the high-profile apology as the climax of this particular story. Continuing repercussions and further testimony make for a cumbersome denouement; in the inconvenient way of history, they do not fit tidily into the plot.

As a non-Aboriginal person, I do not have any family members who were victims of the residential school system. Still, many of my relatives and friends tuned in for the apology or caught pieces of it on the news, and many demonstrated a shift in awareness after the fact. “Those schools,” one said, “they were worse than I knew.” Like me, many Canadians were never taught about federal Indian policy in high school, and as a result they are often unable to contextualize the social problems affecting Aboriginal peoples that they encounter in the media and on the street. As Roland Chrisjohn (Oneida) argues in his 1997 study *The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada*, this may well be a strategic omission on the part of the government—designed to bolster the state’s legitimacy (1). After all, as I now witness in my own classroom, the discovery of the nation’s genocidal history does little for the self-esteem or national pride of mainstream Canadian students; in fact, it often propels them into crisis.

And it is not only the youth who struggle; in the summer of 2009, as I stood in line waiting to buy the new edition of *Porcupines and China Dolls*, a well-meaning elderly woman struck up a conversation. “What’s it

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about?" she asked, indicating the novel. "It's about residential schools," I said, a bit simplistically. "Oh, that," she said, turning away, "I can't even hear about that." Alexie, no doubt familiar with this kind of response, writes a similar scene into the novel, as Brenda, James's erstwhile girlfriend, faces the day following the healing ceremony: "She was surprised by James's disclosure, but she decided not to bring it up. If he wanted, he would talk about it. *Besides, I can't deal with it. Not now 'n maybe never*" (220). For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, the prospect of having to face the past can be terrifying and at times even traumatic. Indeed, the homepage of the TRC contains the following caveat: "This web site deals with subject matter that may cause some readers to trigger (suffer trauma caused by remembering or reliving past abuse)."

The apology, however, despite its candid account of the abuses of the system, was far more palatable than the histories recounted by Chrisjohn, Alexie, and others, as it moved swiftly from atrocity and aftermath to the possibility of reconciliation. This word, "reconciliation," is intoned throughout the official discourse—in speeches, in the titles of reports, in the mandates of organizations—as well as in informal discussions amongst Canadians. With its connotations of peacemaking and of the setting aside of differences, "reconciliation" has become a kind of chant or chorus—an anthem to Canadian identity and ideals. And while this repetition may indeed function to create an impression of the restored peace or friendship denoted by the term, the idea of "reconciliation" is also, I fear, in danger of acquiring the meaninglessness of a refrain. What precisely is required for reconciliation to occur? And what will this happy state look like? In public discourse, the precise details tend to be omitted—perhaps because they are too difficult to determine, too contentious to declare, or because they may detract from the rhetorical power of the performance. While this ambiguity or lack of a firm definition may be the very thing that allows the concept of reconciliation to have such broad appeal, the resulting multiplicity of interpretations may in fact work to prohibit the very commonality that the term tries to evoke.

For example, let us consider the way in which the idea of reconciliation, when articulated in public discourse, is easily, frequently, and perhaps purposefully misunderstood as *resolution*—a term which also evokes the end of conflict but which is less clear about the extent to which it entails an ongoing relationship or responsibility. The commitment to "resolving" issues—whether they be land claims, grievances, or social discord—is a key concept in the federal discourse about Aboriginal peoples. As Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) declares on its website, the depart-

ment is “responsible for addressing and resolving issues arising from the legacy of Indian Residential Schools” (“Indian”). The branch responsible for this is known as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada’s Resolution Sector, formerly the Department of Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada. With its dual signification of “putting an end to” and “determination,” the term “resolve” works subtly to reassure the public of the government’s commitment to solutions and progress. Interestingly, the original sense of the word—from the Latin *resolvere*—refers to loosening, dissolving, or untying. Implicit, perhaps, in the idea of resolution, is the sense of a removal of ties or a separation—a distancing—and even an ending of obligation. And while the term “reconciliation” was predominant on 11 June, it is the idea of resolution that Canadians tend to be very enthusiastic about.

After the apology aired, many were hopeful. “Is it enough now? It is over?” they asked, “Can we finally move on?” Such remarks rarely make it into reputable print sources; however, they are common enough around dinner tables and in the “Comments” sections of internet media sites (where they often take on a less-than-compassionate tone). As residential school survivor Karen Chaboyer testified to the *Toronto Sun*: “You’ve read them, the hate and the racism being tossed at us.... We’re being called whiners. We’re being told to ‘get over it,’ to ‘move on.’ I’d like for them to walk in our shoes for generations, and then have to read those kind of comments” (quoted in Bonokoski).¹ Indeed, many Canadians, when forced to confront the unpleasant realities of their nation’s colonial past and present, express a yearning for the *end* of the story—or for a new chapter in which colonizer and colonized will be able to start over. Again, it seems that they are more interested in reaching a point where the wounds will

1 It is almost impossible to browse the comments following online news stories regarding residential schools without encountering sentiments of the following kind (by one “Amped,” a reader of the *Winnipeg Free Press*):

The native people of Canada need to move on with this issue rather than use it as [a] crutch/excuse for all the ills in their lives. Other ethnic groups (ie) victims of the Holocaust, have experienced worse atrocities and have been able to move on and succeed at life. Also, what is the purpose of the residential school truth and reconciliation commission? Open up wounds and stir the pot? The government acknowledged and apologized for what occurred. Those who were sent to residential schools, mistreated or not, were duly compensated. (quoted in Simard)

While I do not assume this commentator to be representative of all public opinion in Canada, experience tells me that such opinions are far from uncommon.

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have healed and the country will have reached that nebulously defined state of having atoned for its sins and reconciled with Aboriginal peoples. The actual work or *process* of reconciliation seems to be less interesting, and less compelling, than that promise of absolution.

Peter Harrison discusses this national desire for closure in his article “Dispelling Ignorance of Residential Schools” (151–60). “Typical comments,” he notes, include questions like ‘*Why can people not just get over it?*’ and ‘*Is it not time to just move on and let bygones be bygones?*’” (154–55, 158). “This opinion,” he says,

is dismissive of the trauma experienced by many Survivors of residential schooling and underestimates the difficulty of coping with the ongoing impact of such trauma. It is the naive view that somehow a page can be turned and all will be well—a matter of pulling oneself together and getting on with things. Anyone who has ever grieved or suffered trauma knows how enormously wrong such statements are and how they reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the human condition. (158)

This sense of needing to “get over it,” I would add, seems to extend beyond the particular history of residential schools to Aboriginal grievances in general. Casual discussions of lands claims and Aboriginal title, for instance, return inevitably to the idea that dispossession happened a very long time ago—or that it was a justified case of the “survival of the fittest”—and that what is really “holding Aboriginal people back” is their insistence upon remembering the past.² These kinds of opinions, of course, are based on a very vague or misguided understanding of colonial history and the ways in which it continues to impact some lives and benefit others. “Moving on”—or forgetting—is a luxury not everyone can afford.

Canadians who understood the apology as a solution or an ending to the legacy of residential schools may have been hearing primarily the echo of their own desires rather than the literal sense of the speeches. None of the leaders were so impolitic as to declare the process to be over; while they certainly did posit the end points of “healing, reconciliation, and resolution,” they were careful to emphasize that the apology represented an initiation to the process of reconciliation, not an announcement of its conclusion (Harper). As NDP leader Jack Layton put it: “This apology must not be an end; it must be a beginning.” Mary Simon agreed: “Let us not

² See, for instance, Tom Flanagan’s *First Nations? Second Thoughts* or Frances Widowsdon and Albert Howard’s *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation*.

be lulled into an impression that when the sun rises tomorrow morning the pain and scars will miraculously be gone. They won't. But a new day has dawned, a new day heralded by a commitment to reconciliation, and building a new relationship with Inuit, Métis, and First Nations."

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation is likewise careful to qualify its definition of the healing process: "[T]here seems to be *no end point to the journey*. No one is ever completely healed. No one speaks of being cured in the same way biomedicine uses this concept. Even those who have been on the healing path for many years and who have become therapists themselves must struggle to remain on the path" (Waldram 6, emphasis added). However, when this personal discourse is translated into a national context—when the journey of Aboriginal individuals and communities toward healing is rerouted onto the national expressway toward reconciliation—is this caveat about the lack of an end point still viable? Will the Canadian public and its government agree to remain on this reconciliatory journey in perpetuity? Can they conceptualize a journey without an end or—like the donkey following the carrot—do they require the promise of the achievement of the goal in order to partake in the process? In the context of the Aboriginal healing movement,³ the metaphor of journeying seems to exist in part to *prevent* the unhealthy focus on the conclusion of the healing process;⁴ in the Euro-Western framework, however, "journeying" seems to become tinged with Enlightenment-derived connotations of progress.

Reconciliation and healing are important emotional and political goals, just as they are important narrative devices. Inevitably, they involve stories of advancement, or improvement—teleological narratives, with an often-disproportionate focus on the inevitable end of the story. And while I am certainly not advocating that Canada should not be trying to improve its record, or that attempts to address our colonial legacy should cease, I am concerned about the implications of reconciliation as an unproblematic objective. As Roland Chrisjohn (Oneida) and Tanya Wasacase

3 I use this phrase to refer generally to the series of diverse healing initiatives—many of which are linked to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation—that exist across the country (or did, before the 2010 termination of the AHF's funding). Marie Wadden, author of *Where the Pavement Ends*, also refers to this assortment of programs as the "Aboriginal recovery movement."

4 Naomi Adelson and Amanda Lipinski quote a (unnamed) traditional healer: "I don't think there is such a thing as being totally healed. I think that you are going to deal with your issues ... I think you can function better if you are healing everyday, so you are healing for the rest of your life. That is why I call it a journey, because it is a journey" (28).

(Cree) write, reconciliation is a “warm and fuzzy” term which is in need of greater critical analysis—especially because it assumes the pre-existence of a harmonious period in the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and European settlers, which the process of reconciliation will hopefully restore (222).⁵ Taiaiake Alfred (Kanien’kehaka) is likewise critical of what he calls the “pacifying discourse of reconciliation” (182):

Without massive restitution made to Indigenous peoples, collectively and as individuals, including land, transfers of federal and provincial funds, and other forms of compensation for past harms and continuing injustices committed against the land and Indigenous peoples, reconciliation will permanently absolve colonial injustices and is itself a further injustice. (181)⁶

Alfred identifies an important concern regarding the latent suggestion that “reconciling” has more to do with Indigenous people coming to terms with and accepting their dispossession, rather than with significant changes—or sacrifices—being made by non-Aboriginal Canadians (183).⁷

Roger Epp problematizes the term further by highlighting a troubling aspect of the impact of the discourse of reconciliation on national memory. “Solemn offers of reconciliation,” he says,

however sincere, however eloquent, are still framed within a liberal, settler political culture, fundamentally Lockean in its philosophical fragments: forward-looking, suspicious of history, or, more likely, indifferent to it, and incorporating into

5 “[B]efore two parties can *reconcile* they must, at some earlier time, have been *conciled*” (Chrisjohn and Wasacase 221). Some might argue, however, that the early days of the fur trade and of treaty-making—the period which the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples refers to as “Contact and Cooperation”—could constitute such a time (*Report*).

6 Notably, Phil Fontaine’s 11 June declaration that “The common road of hope will bring us to reconciliation more than any words, laws, or legal claims ever could” seems—problematically—to be making the opposite point: that the details of land claims, rights, and restitution are of lesser importance than the spirit of reconciliation.

7 Sam McKegney, author of the 2007 study *Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community after Residential School*, reiterates this critique:

[I]f these reconciliation and healing strategies neither fundamentally challenge the power imbalance between Euro-Canadian political authorities and Indigenous communities, nor arrest the paternalistic position of non-Native Canada vis-à-vis the First Nations, the programs designed to address the residential school legacy will never facilitate meaningful Indigenous empowerment. (179–80)

its imagined social contract *an almost-willful amnesia about whatever might be divisive*. (126, emphasis added)

In other words, reconciliation inevitably involves an eventual forgetting, even as its processes ask us to remember. Indeed, the “amnesia” that is promised in the discourse of “moving on,” or of “putting the past behind us,” is, I believe, a major part of what made the idea of reconciliation so appealing to Canadians on 11 June 2008. It seemed to offer the possibility of starting over or of absolution. Arguably, the apology itself demonstrated a kind of therapeutic amnesia; in working to create a sense of its own significance, it downplayed the occurrence of the 1998 (Liberal) apology or “Statement of Reconciliation,” delivered by then–Minister of Indian Affairs Jane Stewart. After all, the remembering of that event—or of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP)—would interfere with the narrative of the 2008 apology, not to mention the current Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The desire for reconciliation and resolution, as the 1998 apology demonstrates, is not a new arrival on the political scene, even as current initiatives attempt to convey the impression that Canada is now ripe for reconciliation.⁸ No doubt this same sense of readiness or requirement was felt in 1990, when the Oka crisis drew national attention to Aboriginal grievances and soon prompted the establishment of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. It was also felt earlier, in 1969, when the Trudeau government released its *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy*—the infamous “White Paper.” In that document—whose proposed amendments were overturned by strong opposition from Aboriginal leaders and organizations—the government declared that it

believes that its policies must lead to the full, free and non-discriminatory participation of the Indian people in Canadian society. *Such a goal requires a break with the past*. It requires that the Indian people’s role of dependence be replaced by a role of equal status, opportunity and responsibility, a role they can share with all other Canadians. (*Statement*, emphasis added)

Via a series of shrewd rhetorical manoeuvres, treaty rights are here transformed into non-equal status, becoming an obstacle rather than

⁸ As John Ralston Saul writes in his contribution to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s 2009 publication *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Journey*, “Travelling around the country over the years, and in particular, over the last two months ... I have sensed that people are now ready for reconciliation” (311).

a benefit—a mark of discrimination rather than evidence of a series of historical agreements between nations. In an argument still heard today, the past is purported to be a *hindrance* to Aboriginal peoples rather than a source of strength.

The White Paper, however, was undeniably geared toward an idea of reconciliation. In strongly moralistic language borrowed—as Anthony Hall points out—from the American civil rights movement, it declared that “This Government believes in equality. It believes that all men and women have equal rights. It is determined that all shall be treated fairly and that no one shall be shut out of Canadian life, and especially that no one shall be shut out because of his race” (Hall 497; *Statement*). Yet the state’s proposed “break with the past” was one of the principles to which Aboriginal leaders objected (*Statement*). The document, with its progressivist model of a continually improving liberal state, located the source of the problem—the “burden of separation”—“deep in Canada’s past and in early French and British colonial policy” (*Statement*). Ironically, it was in these “early” policies that Aboriginal sovereignty and land title was arguably acknowledged.⁹ Yet the political climate of 1969 allowed these rights and obligations to be conveniently rejected as separatist and discriminatory—ones from which an improved, tolerant, and egalitarian state must turn away.

Ernst Renan observed in 1882 that “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (11). Canada in the twenty-first century is no exception to this rule. Prime Minister Harper himself demonstrated it in September of 2009 when, fifteen months after delivering the official apology, he declared to the international community that Canada has “no history of colonialism” (quoted in Barrera). In strategically forgetting, however, we condemn ourselves to rehearsing the same increasingly unconvincing speeches of repentance and hope and to making the same errors. As the state continually attempts to reconcile with Aboriginal peoples by leaving the past behind—as it seeks the comfort and virtue of oblivion—it fails to notice that every new Indian policy risks echoing the one that governed the residential school system itself: the goal of finally “get[ting] rid of the Indian problem.”¹⁰ So although “reconciliation” and “healing” may require an eventual distancing from

9 For instance, in the 1763 *Royal Proclamation*, “which reserved a large share of these new territories for the Aboriginal populations and placed strict controls on the conveyance of these territories to third parties” (Mainville 11).

10 The infamous words of Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs (1913–1932). Quoted in Stonechild 22.

the memory of trauma and abuse, Canada must ask itself whether or not oblivion is something with which it can—or should—be comfortable.

The Failed Pursuit of Oblivion

Porcupines and China Dolls begins by showing us the death of its main character. “Two hours later,” the novel begins, “he stood alone beside the highway in the Blue Mountains like he’d done so many times before” (1). We have not yet been told what happened two hours earlier, but it must have been bad, very bad: as James looks to the sky, “hate, rage, anger, and sorrow ... burst from his tormented soul, and ripped a hole in his chest and were given a voice. It sounded like a million deaths rolled into one” (1).¹¹ One death is what this scene swiftly comes to as James, hearing no answer from the heavens, retrieves and loads his gun:

With no hint of hesitation he got down on one knee, put the barrel in his mouth and pushed the trigger. He watched the hammer fall and closed his eyes. He tensed and waited for the explosion. It came. He heard it: metal on metal. It was the loudest sound he’d ever heard. It shook his entire body and deafened him.

He took a deep breath, dropped the gun and exhaled. He heard it: the peace and the silence.

He waited for his ultimate journey to hell. (2)

After this disturbing glimpse of the future, the novel begins, and it proceeds in a more or less linear fashion. Alexie traces the history of the Blue People of Aberdeen—likely based on his own Tetlit Gwich’in community of Fort McPherson, NWT—as they make the transition from life on the land to life in town. Beginning in the early 1920s, we learn, all Blue Indians have been required to hand over their children to the authorities to be educated at the mission school. We see James Nathan and his schoolmates Jake Noland and David William entering the hostel as young children in the early 1960s; we watch their parents grieve. Soon we meet James as an adult, and by his black leather jacket and hell-bent attitude we recognize him as the man we watched die a few pages earlier.

11 Other readers may understand the unnamed figure in this opening scene to be Michael—the former student who was driven to suicide a few years before the main action of the plot. This is certainly a possibility. However, even if it does depict Michael’s (and not James’s) death, I believe the scene still functions in more or less the same way, as James bears a striking resemblance to the figure whose (apparent) death opens the book, and the language use to describe James’s final suicide attempt is identical.

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And so the initial death scene haunts James—or his audience—throughout the novel. His ending has already been written, and no matter what he does we know it is only a matter of time before he takes that final drive out to the mountains. As a novel, then, *Porcupines and China Dolls* seems to lean toward its conclusion. It is helped in this by James himself, who likewise is constantly seeking his own ending, as he wonders if today is the day that he will “do it.” Suicide attempts are routine for James; almost every other day finds him with a gun pressed under his chin, willing himself to end the nightmares. This death drive, meanwhile, runs parallel to the healing narrative that builds throughout the novel, as James and the other survivors begin to face what happened to them. “When will it end?” James asks, “How long do we carry the hate, the anger, the rage ’n the sorrow?” (181). Readers of *Porcupines and China Dolls* may be asking themselves the same thing; as they bear witness to James’s ever-widening downward spiral, they grow to expect—or even to require—a release from this conflict. Narrative conventions demand such a catharsis, and the finite body of the text seems to promise it. Inevitably, the novel will end, and with it must come the liberation and relief of a story concluded. Yet although we might expect the forces of death and healing to work in opposition, their strange concurrence here becomes meaningful; while healing may constitute a triumph over the trauma of the past, and death a failure, both can be read as teleological. As we have seen, particular interpretations of healing assume that the past, once dealt with, will be left behind; the victim will no longer be tormented by unwanted reminders—he or she will achieve the luxury of forgetting. The quest for healing—like the death drive—can equal the pursuit of oblivion.

In Alexie’s novel, however, the quest for healing, as we have already seen, is never fully successful; the author does not allow his readers the comfort of watching his characters recover. The forward movement of their small personal victories and temporary relief from the memories of the past are always counteracted by renewed despair, further tragedy, and sometimes simply the inactivity or indifference of everyday life. “What happens now?” Chief David asks aloud at his kitchen table, after the momentary excitement of the healing ceremonies has passed (224). Characters must continue with their lives, which refuse to conform to convenient narrative patterns, as lives often do. In the same way, when at last the terrifying vision of James’s ending takes shape before us, his story—surprisingly—continues:

He took a deep breath, dropped the gun and exhaled. He heard it: the peace and the silence.

He waited for his ultimate journey to hell.

After a few seconds, he wondered if it was over. *Is this it? Is this death?* He opened his eyes and saw the same mountains and the same sky. He looked down at the gun, and then looked for his body. He looked for the blood. He looked at his truck, then at the highway.

“Fuck!” he shouted to the heavens. “Fuck you all!” (304)

The novel ends, then, with the withholding of an ending. James—neither dead nor healed—is forced to face the unpleasant, tedious, and exhausting continuation of a life which, like the plot, everyone expected to end much earlier. Alexie’s one concession is to allow James the woman who he loves; together, he and Louise face the burden of carrying on, and the narrator finally releases us: “James’s journey had come full circle. The future was unfolding as it should” (306).

The protagonist, in other words, has been unable to author either of the endings that he imagined for himself. Unable to forget, and unable to die, he must submit to the reality of a life path which does not conform to the usual fictional trajectory. Through this eschewing of endings, of resolution, and of conclusions, I would argue, *Porcupines and China Dolls* adds an invaluable contribution—or complication—to current discussions of reconciliation. The end points of healing, or of closure, here remain continually beyond the grasp of readers and characters alike, and denied this state of grace they are forced to continue to grapple with the challenges of the *process* of healing—or simply of continuation. Government rhetoricians and average Canadians alike have much to learn from this inconclusivity; as Alexie demonstrates, this push for closure is in many ways a longing for oblivion—for the luxury of forgetting and for the absolution of amnesia. In the context of the official response to the trauma of residential schools, it seems that by giving voice to our unpleasant history the state hopes to be able to put that history to rest. Reconciliation, it is assumed, cannot be possible when we are surrounded by continual reminders of past atrocities—hence the self-aggrandizing rhetoric of the apology and the cathartic process of the TRC. After these climactic confrontations of our oft-hidden past, our narrative should logically progress into a period of denouement—a tying up of loose ends, a settling of historical dust. The healing narrative, therefore, is invoked on a national scale to permit a sense of closure, and contentment. And this emotional release from the

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guilt accrued by colonial history, as I have suggested, is privileged above any kind of actual progress toward a functional or just society.

The reading of *Porcupines and China Dolls*, however, forces us to re-examine our expectations of the national healing narrative—and perhaps to align them with the wisdom of the reality of individual healing processes. As Christopher Fletcher and Aaron Denham explain:

Healing is underpinned by the idea that vigilance over self in relation to others, vigilance over the decisions one makes, and vigilance in one’s awareness of and ability to empathize with others, are the precursors to a healthy and productive life.... This way of thinking about healing upends the concept of an identifiable end point to the healing process (if one is healing, it would be expected that at some point one would be “healed”) and substitutes *an unbounded process of social interaction centered on mutual caring that can, according to participants, coexist with a great deal of personal pain.* (104, emphasis added)

Rather than searching for the end of this particular story, then, let us turn instead to the messy, quotidian details of the present: the complaints, the confusions, the contradictory claims. Let Canada face itself and its history without the promise of the eventual liberation from this self-critique; let us recognize that with each new apology or federal solution to the problems created by the residential school system, the nation is already exhibiting the painful symptoms of the healing journey, as it staggers, makes headway, and repeatedly falls off the wagon. This humbling state of neverending atonement may be one to which we simply have to grow accustomed; after all, as the history of federal Indian policy demonstrates, the desire for closure—for an end to the problem—has only ever led to further error and injustice.

I am not arguing here that survivors should somehow not be allowed their own healing and even their own forgetting. The decision to forget or to remember, to heal or to continue grieving, is entirely under the jurisdiction of the keepers of these stories. On a national scale, however, I believe that we need to consider carefully the extent to which witnesses are allowed to partake in this relief. If we bracket the frantic desire for closure, or catharsis, which too often accompanies the reading or hearing of Aboriginal stories, we create the possibility that the telling of such stories be about filling in—rather than widening—the gaps in our national history. This is part of the importance of residential school literature, and—ironically—of storytelling initiatives like the Truth and Reconciliation Com-

mission. Although ostensibly directed toward healing and closure, they in fact function to ensure that scars remain visible—that historical wounds continue to seep. As Jake Noland declares to the assembled community members—each grappling with the burden of his or her own memories—“Healin’ is a journey—there is no end!” (Alexie 201).

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