A Journey through time and space: Dual Identity as a response to collective trauma in Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* and Claire Light’s *Abducted by Aliens*

In Sherman Alexie’s *Flight*, and Claire Light’s *Abducted by Aliens*, we a presented with two different representations of generational conflict as well as unique responses to collective trauma through the individual experience of two narrators who are not directly affected by the experiences in which the acknowledged traumas derive. Both authors use devices common to speculative fiction that break from reality to defamiliarize our present-day issues of nationalism and identity; time travel is used in *Flight* in order for the narrator to bridge together the histories and disconnections between his dual ancestry, while space travel and alien abduction are used in *Abducted by Aliens* so that the narrator can become the generational bridge for her family in response to the experience of losing history. Both the novel and short story combine supernatural elements with a compressed view of historical events to recognize and come to terms with historical and family trauma. Dual identity becomes a response to collective trauma in Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* and Claire Light’s *Abducted by Aliens*. In this essay, I will discuss how trauma, directly or indirectly experienced, shapes identity in both works.

Upon first read through*, Abducted by Aliens* seems to be just as the title suggests, an incoherent story about being abducted by extraterrestrials, but if we look more closely at contextual clues, we can identify the story as an allegory for the experience of Japanese internment during WWII. Executive order 9066, signed by president FDR in 1942, "ordered the removal of resident enemy aliens from parts of the West vaguely identified as military areas" (history.com). This meant that people of Japanese descent were to be moved from their homes and sent to temporary housing until internment camps were quickly built. The American government claimed they were being cautious of spies for the Japanese government among their residents, but to remove an entire race of people in this way is simply horrendous; racism and discrimination played a huge factor in the decision to remove them. Light's story is one of terrorization and trauma. Her protagonist is a young man who deals with internment via disillusionment. The narrator, Imouto, a Nisei, recalls the stories that her brother told to her when she was a child. Light decision to have the brother’s memories and experiences of internment told in the form of an alien abduction narrative at first seems to take away from the true story, but upon further thought, shows the unique individual response to a major trauma. The significance of Light’s decision to make Imouto the narrator instead of her older brother is the imagination required in order to recall a hidden history. It is common that family members who have experienced a form of trauma chose to hide that part of their lives, whether it be out of shame or fear, to protect their loved ones.

In Light’s story, history has not been written down until Imouto, the only family member not to have directly experienced internment, decided to write down the stories her brother had told her. “As far as I am aware, neither my brother nor anyone else ever write his stories down. This was, again, the influence of my father, who felt that transcription equaled substantiation…” (Light 1). Here we can see that fear of remembering trauma in any form, oral or written, is explicitly avoided because writing it down would make it real. Imouto’s father goes as far as “siniciz(ing), the angeliciz(ing) our family name, as if to cover our tracks” (Light 1). Fear and shame cause the covering up of racial and ethnic identity, which in turn creates a double consciousness among the minority group through its identification with the colonizer.

The disillusionment of the brother is an example of how dislocated one can become from their own identity when a trauma goes unacknowledged or covered up out of the illusion of protection, and we can also see a similar type of dislocated dual identity in *Flight.* Certain events can drastically affect the mind of a young individual, so it is no surprise that Imouto’s brother’s only form of expression is done by transforming his trauma through the use of a speculative device such as alien abduction. Although the story is episodic, with many stories about space travel, we are given hints to the brother’s true awareness through small sections that paint a clear picture of life in an internment camp. One of the biggest ‘real” moments in the story is when,

“Suddenly, I was looking into my mother’s face. She placed a spoon into my mouth as my sister Emiko walked past holding a schoolbook. Behind her, gaps in the unfinished planks showed stripes of blue daylight. A hasty job. Two blankets hanging from a clothesline made a wall. A bitter, dry wind crossed my teeth, and the grit of sand. My eyes focused, my mother’s eyes widened, but then I found myself asking my question to Ufluuuk’s mid-region: “Mother, where are we?’” (Light 3)

Here we can clearly see the small quarters within a hastily built camp to house Japanese Internees. It is one of the few glimpses we are given of this lost history. The narrative of space travel and abduction is also used to reflect a desire for place and safety. "In fact, my desire was for place, not movement; place, not novelty; place, not placement" (Light 4). Space and time becomes fragmented for those who have experienced trauma, therefore it makes sense that the speculative nature of Light’s story would reflect that fragmentation within the mind of an individual who has experience said trauma.

A child’s experience is filtered through their parents, and when history is not passed on, it becomes more and more difficult to identify with one’s culture, especially when a trauma such as internment has affected the entire collective psyche of the minority group. Assimilation as the result of fear causes the alienation from one’s own culture, creating a dual identity, both of which seem alien to the individual, and that is why it is important to acknowledge and record one’s experiences no matter how traumatic they are, or else risk losing history all together. Imouto’s significance in the story is to “bridge the gap between ideas. I myself am the bridging of a gap, conceived before my family returned from the camps but born only after the return, bridging the time before and after” (Light 4). She must acknowledge the trauma and use it to inform the present for her family. She must use imagination to reclaim parts of history that indirectly affects her life and the lives of the collective group that has not directly experienced this trauma. “As they get older, they de-realize this and go back to a state of recognizing signs and symbols directly, as if there is one all-time true story” (Light 4). This quote is meant to acknowledge the fact that there is no one true story, but many individual stories within a collective experience of trauma that must be acknowledged to properly attempt to understand the impact of trauma on the collective group.

In Alexie’s *Flight,* the narrator, Zits, does not have parents to filter his perceptions of history and collective trauma, but history is lost on him just as it is lost on the family of Imouto. Everything he knows about native Americans has been filtered through the colonizer. We learn that Zits has been abused by several men in his life, including one of his foster fathers and his aunt’s boyfriend, and this abuse, this direct and individual trauma, contributes to his use of humor and violence in order to cope with his dissatisfaction with life and the injustices that have been done to him. This also contributes to his desire for an appropriate father figure. “Everything I know about Indians… I’ve learned from television” (Alexie 12). Zits has a difficult time identifying with either side of his dual identity, “I’m not really Irish or Indian. I’m a blank sky, a human solar eclipse (Alexie 5), because he has no one to inform him of either. He goes on to say that “A social worker… once told me I had never developed a sense of citizenship” (Alexie 5), and we can see this disconnection as the result of his easy indoctrination by the character Justice. Zits’ confused sense of identity and desire for an appropriate father figure is his gateway to violence and senseless killing. He clings to Justice because he seems to know about some parts of Zits’ ancestry, and he craves this knowledge more than he realizes. “He *understands* me… I fall in love with him. Not romantically… No, this kid is some kind of Jesus… I really get the feeling this white kid could save me from being lonely” (Alexie 24). He idealizes Justice and looks to him as a savior figure, but it could be argued, a temporary father figure as well. When Zits’ asks where Justice got his name, he says “I gave it to myself… but I wish I’d been given my name by Indians. You used to give out names because people earned them” (Alexie 30). This response can be seen as another way for Zits to connect himself to Justice through Justice’s knowledge and appreciation of Native American culture and traditions, but Justice’s naming himself can also be viewed as a violation and disrespect of these traditions because he did not earn his name, and its connotation is inverted. He believes in killing randomly for a greater purpose, for a greater sense of historical revenge, which is completely senseless. “Is revenge a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle?” (Alexie 77). This can also be part of the greater context of the text which is a criticization of nationalism after the events of 9/11. Alexie’s use of speculative elements is another way to make this greater commentary of the fallacy of American Nationalism while discussing and comparing it to the history and atrocities of colonization.

Zits’ eventually changes his mind, “I had wanted to kill, but now I just want to stop” (Alexie 88), once he has seen the horrors of killing and revenge. When he’s in the body of the young Indian boy whose throat has been so mangled that he cannot speak, the Battle at Little Big Horn breaks out. “I feel the anger building up inside of me. I feel need for revenge… Or maybe I’m only feeling *my* need for revenge” (Alexie 76). This fictionalized battle is inserted by Alexie to give Zits’ a connection to the idealized hero Crazy Horse as a way for him to unlearn his idealization of Native Americans through the lens of the colonizer, and instead to see Crazy Horse as a person much like himself. “He’s alone. He’s always alone. He watches us. He is not participating. Yes, he killed dozens of soldiers during his fight. And he killed Custer. But then he rode away to watch the rest of it. Alone” (Alexie 77). Just like Zits’, Crazy Horse is always alone, and just as Zits’ has been betrayed by people who were entrusted to protect him, Crazy Horse will be murdered by his old friend Little Big Man. Through this experience and his next experience as Gus, the old Irish soldier, Zits’ learns that not all Native Americans are the same. There is good and bad in everyone. Everyone is capable of anything, but it takes a strong person to know right from wrong, and to act accordingly. “It’s Indians down there. And I’m an Indian. But we’re not all the same kind of Indian, are we?” (Alexie 87). Just as Imouto shares the individual experiences of her brother, and that history is a collection of individual experiences, not just one collective truth about a minority, Zits has learned that not all Natives are the same.

Alexie uses the speculative device of time travel to shift Zits’ identification through multiple perspectives and time frames, as well as to aid in his coming to terms with his heritage and indirect historical trauma. Time travel is used in *Flight* so that the narrator can bridge together the histories and disconnections between his dual ancestry, and to inform our understanding of how identity is shaped by the collective trauma of colonialism. At the moment of Zits’ death in the beginning of the novel, he is thrown through time, learning about history, collective trauma, and how to empathize. His shifting results in his learning to accept his dual identity, as well as to understand that not all Natives are the same. Zits learns that he cannot blame one group from his own trauma completely. There is always individualized accountability that plays a role in one’s life. He is placed into five different people’s bodies, and in each he learns that there is always going to be a disconnect within different cultures, but you must be able to see the good and bad within each in order to attempt to fully understand others and one’s self. Zits’ identity is shaped by indirect trauma that he does not fully comprehend as the history is filtered by the dominant culture. His journey through time helps to change him for the better, and build his ability to trust that not everyone will hurt him. When Zits is in the body of Gus, he learns that violence is not the answer to all his problems. “I’m not much of a hero” (Alexie 100). It’s significant that he helps to save Small Saint and Bow Boy from being killed by the other soldiers because this means he has started learning to take control of and value in his life and the lives of others. Like Imouto’s retelling and imaginative informed recollection of history, Zits’ time traveling is another form of reclaiming histories and acknowledging the effects of collective trauma on the social psyche of a collective group, while also learning to have accountability in your own life. Zits’ journey is used to show us the specific individualized experiences of trauma of five different people, the sixth being Zits’ himself.

Through time travel we can see how trauma shifts and informs different periods of time, as well as how it informs the future. “Losing time: That’s all I know how to do now” (Alexie 140). Indirect trauma is a huge theme in the novel, as Zits’ father blames the colonization of Native Americans for his issues. Alexie acknowledges this in the novel when we are shown Zits’ father wearing a “T-shirt, emblazoned with a black-and-white photograph of the Apache warrior Geronimo and the ironed on caption FIGHT TERROISM SINCE 1492” (Alexie 133). Alexie wants to inform us that colonization is in fact a form of terrorism, and the collective trauma associated with it still affects native Americans today, but he also wants us to understand that a collective trauma that indirectly affects one’s life should not be an excuse or a device for blame at the time. There must be accountability in one’s own life, no matter the indirect effects of historical trauma. Alexie’s *Flight* is a novel about accountability, domestic terrorism, and historical collective trauma. He shows us how this can affect and inform an individual’s identity, and he also wants us to understand that violence as a retaliation for violence is a never-ending cycle. “Is there really a difference between that killing and this killing? Does God approve of some killing and not other killing? If I kill these soldiers so that Small Saint and Bow Boy can escape, does that make me a hero? I don’t know. How am I supposed to know? I don’t even have a good guess” (Alexie 105).

Both the novel and short story combine supernatural elements with a compressed view of historical events to recognize and come to terms with historical and family trauma, Japanese internment in *Abducted by Aliens*, and the intertwined histories of Colonialism and Nationalism in *Flight.* Dual identity becomes a response to collective trauma in Sherman Alexie’s Flight and Claire Light’s Abducted by Aliens. Both narrators have been indirectly affected by the traumas experienced by their families and ancestors, and this collective trauma shapes identity in both works, but we must come to understand that indirectly experienced trauma cannot become an excuse for lack of accountability. Individuals have a responsibility to themselves and to the past to make sure that a collective trauma is never forgotten but also that it should not be used as the justification for actions that are harmful to the self or harmful to society. The use of speculative elements in both works is used to defamiliarize and sharpen our understanding of present day issues, while reminding us never to forget the collective traumas of the Japanese and Native American people.

References

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