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Exploring the Representation of History and "Slow Violence" in *Philadelphia Fire* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

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After connecting history to urban spatiality in Teju Cole's Open City, this paper develops Rob Nixon's articulation of "slow violence" to demonstrate how John Edgar Wideman and Sherman Alexie's novels depict issues of authenticity in storytelling, highlighting the limitations of representing the effects of "slow violence" on the cultural, physical, and economic welfare of marginalised communities in the aftermath of major violent events.

In Teju Cole's novel *Open City* the narrator, Julius, is asked by a tourist how to get to 9/11. Or rather, the tourist actually requests the directions for ". . . not the site of the events of 9/11 but to 9/11 itself, the date petrified into broken stones" (Cole 52). In this line we read a city capable of embodying history through spatiality. Cole conveys a palimpsestic metropolitan structure that represents the recent past through omission as much as through inclusion, thus imbuing historical events with a physical presence. *Open City*'s representation of New York after the attacks poses questions about how 'acute' historical moments are understood by the collective mainstream consciousness of contemporary America and, consequently, the ways historicity is represented by the media. Historical events are often incidents of violence or destruction, understood to exist as a singular temporal moment, a 'site' that one can return to in order to feel physically connected to an episode in history such as a battlefield or, in the case of the Twin Tower attacks, 'ground zero'. The inherent irony that Cole's narrator highlights is that beneath the buildings and monuments still present in the city there exists forgotten histories concealed by constant urban growth; progress that, as Julius testifies, disguises barbarism. New York embodies history "written, erased, rewritten" (Cole 59), aligning its palimpsestic spatiality with textual form, specifically the power to 'write' history into visibility.

The impulse to return to a recent, petrified moment of historicity is defined by Frederic Jameson as a "defamiliarized" present, creating a distance that allows reflection on the current moment as if it were already historicised ("Nostalgia for the Present" 284). If Julius's pursuit of distance from recent history renders the present as a historical subject, then the intersection of spatial modes complicates this phenomenon when depicted through literary forms. Rob

Nixon articulates these effects as "slow violence", occurring ". . . gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Many of the groups most at risk of being erased from the historical representation are also those most susceptible to the phenomenon of "slow violence". This article will examine two contemporary American novels that, like *Open City*, are concerned with textual and spatial representations of historical violence. John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* and Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* harness postmodern aesthetic techniques, such as irony and pastiche, to highlight the limitations of representing the effects of "slow violence" on the cultural, physical, and economic welfare of marginalised communities in the aftermath of major violent events, such as fire and genocide.

In *Open City*, Julius's first-person narration makes New York's erased history visible through a reportage style that is more concerned with the textual quality of his own subjectivity than the way these invisible histories are depicted by the media. However, it is an important point of departure when understanding how Wideman and Alexie depict the failure of the news cycle to represent "slow violence" and the ways their textual responses manifest as spatial imagery. As an environment the city is a regenerating space constructed of centralised, mainstream representations of history that conform to the self-generated image of an evolving, future-orientated landscape. A phenomenon that Karolina Golimowska argues ". . . shows the space as one that lacks memory and does not preserve anything from its past for next generations" (18). When events are memorialised in a city, as demonstrated in Cole's novel, they privilege action over aftermath. As a function, the architectural embodiment of history works even when those 'monuments' are spatially absent. The site of 9/11 is notable for memorialising the event through empty space. However, it is essential not to conflate absences with erasures. The visibility of historic events in the city landscape is mirrored by a comparable focalisation in print and visual media. Alexie's *Lone Ranger* calls attention to the privileging of these events over continuous oppression by exposing a news media that historicises the present through a preference for what is current and incendiary. In the collection's titular story, the narrator wanders vagrantly inside memories of his previous life in Seattle. On the reservation, he picks up a week-old newspaper and reads the headlines, "There was another civil war, another terrorist bomb exploded, and one more plane crashed and all aboard was presumed dead" (187). The paper, already a week out of date, has historicised a repetitive and circular present in which violence reads as inevitable. Found on the floor, its authority as a

textual document is treated by the narrative with irreverence; by disregarding an assumed hierarchy, the narrator is rendered ironically triumphant, simultaneously diminishing the mainstream narrative whilst highlighting the tragic reality of his own invisible suffering. We can understand historical authenticity, or "historicity", as a concept problematised by David Harvey's assertion that we elevate "cultural artefacts and events" above capitalist institutions, likely because of resistance to postmodern discourse that conflates human experience of history with commodified modes of representation, condemning both as "inauthentic" (93). Yet, it is precisely this conflation that makes "slow" violent effects visible as canonised history is no longer privileged. We see a similar depiction of media representation in *Philadelphia Fire,* where television images of tragedy form a circular, indistinguishable narrative, ". . . news is cycled and recycled endlessly on this network" (101). Disaster, when visible, is easily historicised, yet it is this visibility that allows it to be reduced to a series of dominant, recurring images, an endless cycle of spatially and temporally isolated apocalypses.

Cultural apocalypse, the thematic undercurrent of *Lone Ranger*, is suited to literary postmodern discourse as the very advent of the term "postmodern" was considered semiotically and theoretically apocalyptic in its genesis (Jameson "Introduction" xvi). Alexie's collection departs from conventional dystopian tropes—a structure of pre-event and post-event narratives, examples of which can be located in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)—to contend with an apocalypse that is still taking place. Alexie's short stories are told by several members of the Spokane reservation in Stevens County, Washington. Made up of twenty-two parts, the narratives in *Lone Ranger* are interconnected and narrated through devices such as dream sequences and flashbacks, conveying themes of generational trauma, addiction, nostalgia, friendship, and mythology. The stories represent the erasure of Native American culture through literary postmodern techniques, including pastiche and fragmentation, in a structure that conflates and criticises both traditional and contemporary modes of storytelling. Gordon Fraser's assertion that *Lone Ranger* reaches beyond a simple "renewal of oral traditions" to critique late-capitalism through "iconoclastic" forms makes sense only if we understand the text as dissolving the boundary between mass culture and Native American cultures to find ways of representing oral storytelling through postmodern textual modes (600). *Lone Ranger* attempts this through an ironic dismantling of conventional form, merging oral and textual narratives into a fragmented and temporally discontinuous collection that can be read linearly or as isolated stories. It is tempting, yet ultimately perfunctory, to discuss orality and textuality as binary opposites. Gerard Delanty argues that we should see the conception of culture,

including marginalised cultures, as relational and in a constant process of "self-constitution" (640). We must avoid forming a distinction between "old", "dead", or "traditional" culture, characterised as coherent, frozen, and "authentic", and contemporary culture, regarded as fluid and inherently "inauthentic". Delanty contends that the dominant culture in any society should not be the only one that is considered adaptable and fluid (640). When applied to these texts, we might regard both Native and African American culture as existing in their respective states of flux, and it follows that their representation through established cultural modes would encourage innovation.

Alexie's prose demonstrates a regenerational impulse by writing a narrative that critiques its own capacity to authentically depict oral traditions. In the story 'A Drug Called Tradition', the narrator and his neighbours are laughed at from above by their ancestors for taking money from the institutions that oppress them (13). The ancestral possession of the trees on the reservation is a textual rendering of history through spatiality that repudiates the city-dominated monumentalising previously examined. Rather than concealing marginalised history beneath urban architecture as a palimpsest, *Lone Ranger* raises it above the landscape, becoming a disembodied, surrealist manifestation of heritage. We see a rejection of the binary understanding of the Indian reservation as a relational space that exists in opposition to the contemporary city landscape, repudiating the idea that Native culture is 'fixed' or 'dead'.

Lone Ranger is less concerned with moments of literal apocalypse than it is with highlighting disaster that is oppressive, systematic, and continuous. In 'The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore', we see this conveyed through circularity; an ironic, tragicomic turn in formal composition demonstrated by a repeated conversation (43, 50). These acts of storytelling become temporal signposts, narrating the downfall of the reservation's latest basketball star. Oral storytelling imbues symbolic immortality on its subject— "A reservation hero is always a hero" (48)—and yet, the loss of this youthful infallibility symbolises the vulnerability of the oral form through which the myth is established. This effect is encapsulated by the narrator's memory of examining a series of images inside first-aid manuals before a basketball game:

> These books had all kinds of horrible injuries. Hand and feet smashed flat in printing presses, torn apart by lawnmowers, burned and dismembered. Faces that had gone through windshields . . . we kept looking, flipping through

> photograph after photograph, trading books, until we all wanted to throw up. (46)

If "immortality" can be established through the circulation of oral histories, then it can be destroyed by a document that invokes colonial violence through an image of a printing press. By privileging a hegemony of textual and visual representation over verbal storytelling, the passage demonstrates a disintegration of an oral culture that memorialises through self-reflexive mythologising. In the visual images, we see a fusion of historical and contemporary violence: the cadence of "burned and dismembered" reads as archaic, an echo of Native Americans suffering under colonial powers, whereas the recurring windshield motif recalls the vandalism that signals the basketball star "going bad" as a response to the lack of an optimistic future for his community (49). Fraser elucidates this mingling of imagery when he writes, "For a Spokane or Coeur d'Alene Indian, the apocalypse is not a potentiality; it is an ongoing reality and a remembered past" (601). The inextricable relationship between past and ongoing violence in Alexie's prose articulates a critique of the erasure of Native history from mainstream discourse, a lack of representational parity that Nixon attributes to our appetite for stories both provocative and immediate:

> Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunamis have a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match. (3)

Nixon highlights the textual potential of these events, particularly the way they entice the consumer to keep turning pages. The impulse to create representations of tragedy, particularly when they are collectively experienced and remembered, raises issues of authenticity, ownership, and exploitation that Wideman explores through the experimental structure of his novel.

In *Philadelphia Fire*, a writer named Cudjoe attempts to document a recent tragedy misrepresented by mainstream media by writing a book about the event. In doing so, Cudjoe historicises the present, an impulse that Jameson argues provides the necessary distance from temporal "immediacy" for these events to be framed relationally and historically ('Nostalgia for the Present' 284). It would be false to assume that Wideman's novel is centralised by its titular event, a real police bombing against an African American activist community in Philadelphia, as much of the narrative takes place at a distance from the action in fragmented

sections, raising the question of whether Cudjoe's impulse to historicise the event is compensation for his lack of temporal and spatial proximity. Madhu Dubey contends that *Philadelphia Fire*'s oscillation between focalisation and distance is symptomatic of the condition of postmodern writing, stating that "Mobility and simultaneous occupation of several different places are necessary . . . because no place remains still long enough to permit a stable spatial or temporal perspective" (72). This instability is conveyed by the fact that Cudjoe's primary experience of the fire comes through television images, a mode previously established as cyclical and cynical, "A city burns on the screen. Any large city. Anywhere in America . . . We watch. Wonder whose turn it is now. Whole city blocks engulfed. It must be happening in another country. A war. A bombing raid" (Wideman 100). *Philadelphia Fire* highlights the way these images are recycled, making us question whether Cudjoe's response to the fire is authentic, and, by extension, if the text we are reading could ever be authentic.

At the end of the novel, while attending a memorial for the victims of the fire, Cudjoe wonders if the half-burnt commemorative candles will be saved for the memorialisation of the next tragedy, "Will they be recycled next year, same time, same station" (198). Note the absence of a question mark; aesthetically, the narrative omits many of them, implying that questions regarding authenticity are beyond rhetorical, they are unanswerable, as is the question of whether the fire can be authentically commemorated through the social document that Cudjoe writes. Both the postmodern city and Cudjoe's book become, to use Harvey's term, '"consumption artefacts"', objects which embody the tension between fixing history as a static memorial and embodying the flux inherent in both urban environments and fragmentary narration (Dubey 58). By rendering history as temporally and spatially fluid through a narrative that is equally unstable, *Philadelphia Fire* questions whether, as a textual document, it conforms to modes of mainstream representation or critiques them by making these complexities visible.

Issues of authenticity arise when examining degrees of proximity to historical events. Does experiencing a disaster from a distance make it less legitimate than being at the temporal and spatial epicentre? Such tension is an anxiety of historicity and it has direct implications for the ways the media represents such events. *Philadelphia Fire* exemplifies these concerns through metafiction, such as when the narrative self-reflexively repositions its thematic centre over halfway through, telling the reader that the novel's "true focalisation" is not the fire, but rather an attempted staging of *The Tempest* (Wideman 132). Jean-Pierre Richard reads this shift in focus from historical event to literary text as a device that typifies postmodern

discontinuity, a technique that ". . . helps generate added energy and proves a powerful incentive to the reader's imagination" (609). However, Richard overlooks how "de-centring the narrative moves the discourse away from a critical event towards its aftermath and subsequent representation. Disputing narrative convention creates the conditions necessary to make visible Black histories not represented by these conventions, or as Dubey surmises, introduces "disruptive formal strategies" which ". . . flaunt narrative realism and yet purport to render authentic racial culture" (49). The result is formal fragmentation, a "splitting apart. . . always out of time, away from responsibility, toward the word or sound or image that is everywhere at once, that connects and destroys" (Wideman 23). The text is self-reflexive, conflating all modes of representation—visual, textual, and so on—in a postmodern repudiation of hierarchy and of the distinction between high and mass culture, a formal experimentation in alignment with Delanty's assertion that "Culture does not merely transmit, but interprets and transforms that which it communicates" (640).

If *Philadelphia Fire* interprets and transforms, then it also appropriates. Wideman's novel aestheticises different perspectives, stories, and vernaculars, and, like Alexie's *Lone Ranger*, questions how to authentically represent oral histories. At the beginning of the text, Cudjoe makes an audio recording of Margaret Jones's testimony about the fire. He preserves her personal vernacular, yet there are limitations to this representation. By transcribing the recording and integrating it into the narrative, Cudjoe has the opportunity to manipulate her story, fast-forwarding when he grows impatient or discontented (16). Margaret Jones's character functions as a repudiation of authority, particularly the capitalist institutions that Cudjoe's book represents. Her critique falls primarily on the news media but extends to include the commodification of any story; by extrapolating untruthfulness as inauthenticity, she insinuates that Cudjoe is stealing from the dead through the production of a commodity object. Aligning her loyalties with King's political ideologies, she refuses to conflate social 'progress' with commodity acquisition, and her scepticism of the system distances her from her own community when she complains that "Carl worked at Ford. My sister Anita a school-teacher. Doing real good in Detroit . . . living the so-called *good life*" (14, 16). On the surface, these jobs are positive roles within a consumer society: the creation of white goods; educating the next generation. However, they achieve this social "progress" by relocating to the suburbs. The city, a focal point for converging representations of history, is paradoxically unable to sustain a narrative for African Americans that exists anywhere but the present. There is no future opportunity for the black youth of Philadelphia. Many end up in a circular pattern of poverty

and imprisonment (36). Conversely, Margaret Jones's children are dislocated from their heritage, their origin portrayed as a literal 'ground zero' for the bombing in 1985, a historical 'site' they feel compelled to return to because there is no deeper sense of "authentic" heritage available to them (14). Margaret Jones critiques social progress as temporal stasis, conformity that fails to acknowledge suffering nor improve the overall welfare of African Americans in a post-slavery society. She questions how the struggles of her community can be represented by forms of media that are created by, and capitulate to, the culture that oppresses her.

Lone Ranger questions the authentic representation of "slow violence" by utilising repetitive motifs, aligning with Delanty's interpretation of culture as continuous and autoethnographic (640). Diabetes, like alcoholism, is a constant presence in the text, finally acknowledged in "Witnesses, Secret and Not" when the narrator remarks "We ordered what we always ordered: a Whammy burger, large fries, and a Big Buy Diet Pepsi. We order Diet since my father and I are both diabetic. Genetics, you know?" (217). Here, the question mark functions differently than in the narration of *Philadelphia Fire* by problematising presumed knowledge. It questions whether the condition is really hereditary, dependent on the lottery of genetics, or if their diabetes is passed down through historic and systematic disregard for basic welfare for Native American communities. The text politicises the circularity and inevitability of their food choices, implying that the narrator's diabetes is hereditary only in the sense that the son will inherit the oppression the father has been subjected to his entire life.

In 'Witnesses', we see an example of how the "slow violence" experienced in the Indian reservation is spatially juxtaposed with the city. Temporally, the reservation is "about an hour" from Spokane, but the drive is undulating and treacherous; the unevenness of landscape is partly symbolic, father and son crossing through farmland, past an airbase, before plunging literally downwards into a valley (215). The passage evokes the infamous 'Valley of Ashes' in *The Great Gatsby,* a road that, in theory, should connect West Egg to Manhattan, yet serves as a wasteland of spiritual aridity. In 'Witnesses', dust serves a different function, yet connects to the narrator's sense of disillusionment as in *Gatsby*. As he and his father drive through the streets of Spokane, they see "Indians passed out in doorways" (215), self-destructing between two spatial existences: their cultural heritage within the reservation and the promise of a better life in the regenerative ideology of the city. Those who move there either return defeated or struggle to survive, the urban environment leeching life from the Indians and functioning as a parasitic cultural hegemony (187). The connection between cultural erasure and physical disintegration can be located in spatial descriptions of the city, ". . . Spokane has a lot of those

air inversions, where this layer of filth hangs above the city and keeps everything trapped beneath it. The same bit of oxygen gets breathed over and over, passed through a hundred pairs of lungs . . .” (215). Here, the dust of Fitzgerald’s ‘Valley of Ashes’ becomes a racialised metaphor, a “brown” smog that penetrates the bodily autonomy of city residents. It is an ironic, tragic sense of community, one connected not through culture, but through pollution caused by systematic neglect.

In *Philadelphia Fire*, the image of dust is rendered in similar, yet more overtly catastrophic imagery when Margaret Jones contrasts her lived reality with Cudjoe’s distanced, secondary account—the latter much in the vein of Julius’s distant observations of erased history in the streets of New York in *Open City*. We hear, in Margaret’s memory of the fire, a smell: “Don’t need a book . . . Anybody wants to know what [the fire] means, bring them through here. Tell them these bombed streets used to be full of people’s homes. Tell them babies’ bones mixed up in this ash they smell” (Wideman 19). In this line, the consequences of historical disaster are literally depicted as a substance that, like the pollution in *Lone Ranger*, penetrates the body’s surface and blurs the distinction between community, city, and history. Thematically, “babies’ bones” juxtaposes ideas of human potential with pointless destruction, a prevalent concept when thinking about the effects of “slow violence” on both the Native and African American communities. When confronted with the notion that people can inhale death, that it can pass through living bodies, the reader is reminded that the consequences of historical oppression permeate the body long after the fact. The passage transcends the tension between a fixed historical event and the effects of “slow violence” by showing, through spatial imagery, that the city is a location suffocated by both.

When Cudjoe records Margaret Jones’s testimony, the act is associated with detonation, “Does she think he’s stealing from the dead? Is he sure he isn’t? Tape’s ready. He pushes the button”, and the image identifies his narrative with “crisis-ridden discourses” of historical violence that “contour the post-modern black literary imagination” (Wideman 10, Dubey 49). “Pushing the button” recalls the moment of the bombing, appearing to critique the sincerity of Cudjoe’s project by expressing the act as a “page-turning” historicisation of the present. However, although his questioning of Margaret Jones focalises on the fire, the overall narrative of *Philadelphia Fire* does not. The novel’s formal fluidity mirrors the instability of the urban environment for the Black community in the wake of slavery and contrasts with the fixed, vacant site of the 9/11 memorial in *Open City*, highlighting the discrepancy between textual depictions of ‘acute’ and ‘slow’ historical violence. This fundamental tension between

interpretations of historicity is why the fire on Osage Avenue is not the text's 'ground zero'. There is no historically authentic 'site' upon which to return, either spatially or temporally, for closure. As the narrator in 'Witnesses' observes, after experiencing a car crash that never happens, "I'm always asking myself . . . if standing right next to a disaster makes you part of the disaster or just a neighbour" (Alexie 214). It is precisely this distance that characterises a historicist perspective, and indeed, the narrator would likely find it easier to represent the near-accident in mainstream media than his own health conditions. The effects of "slow violence", like diabetes, are not easily recognised from a spatial distance. Yet, both *Lone Ranger* and *Philadelphia Fire* demonstrate that temporal distance, while amplifying 'slow' violent effects in the aftermath of genocide and slavery, also allows the space for the creation of innovative, postmodern texts that problematise the lack of visibility of marginalised histories.

When Cudjoe listens to Margaret Jones's testimony, he states, somewhat ironically, "I want to do something about the silence", meaning the erasure of black people from mainstream representations of the tragedy, but he intends to change this narrative within the parameters of capitalism (19). Margaret Jones's scepticism of his authenticity highlights textuality as a device of capitalism, remarking "A book, huh. A book people have to buy", and her reaction functions as the critical problem in both Wideman and Alexie's novels regarding the representation of "slow violence" (19). Through the decentralisation and decolonisation of what we consider to be 'authentic' aftermaths of historic events, we begin to recognise the subtle, chronic effects of disaster. However, one cannot simply "write" these marginalised histories into visibility. They are not buried beneath the city, depicted as a forgotten palimpsest as they are in *Open City*, but a lived reality (Cole 59).

Writing, as these novels demonstrate, does not adequately capture the form, potential, or nuances of non-dominant modes of storytelling. Wideman and Alexie's textually innovative novels spatially and temporally decentralise narratives around historical violence, complicating the cultural focus on cyclical images in the news to encompass the repetitive effects of "slow violence" in the lived experiences of marginalised communities in contemporary America. By highlighting a lack in the mainstream media representation of the effects of "slow violence" on the cultural, physical, and economic welfare of marginalised communities, Wideman and Alexie demonstrate a dynamic and provoking unification between temporality, spatiality, and text. This essay has demonstrated the potential applications of Rob Nixon's terminology on representations of marginalised groups in American postmodern literature and further exploration of the ways "slow violence" interacts with oral tradition and marginalised dialects,

particularly in *Philadelphia Fire*, would make for rewarding and expansive inquiry on the effects of colonialism on Black vernaculars.

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