FEATURE

A River of Reconciliation

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Good afternoon and welcome. I'd like to thank the organizers of the Chinese Remembering conference for inviting me to speak today; I greatly admire them for taking on the long-term project to address the massacre of Chinese miners on the Snake River in 1887 and its aftermath. I'd also like to say Qe' ci' yew' yew'— thank you— to the Nez Perce people whose ancestral land we stand upon today, and I think it's important that we remember that. Thanks also to all of you for coming to this important conference and for sharing this time with me. I am especially honored to be here today because I was born and raised here in Lewiston, Idaho and consider myself both a product of its public schools, and my extraordinary parents, Pat and Johnny Johnson, to whose memory I dedicate this talk today.

I want to talk about several facets of trauma and reconciliation today and highlight how I see this 5year long conference as a remarkable, local intercultural effort to address human rights abuses with courage and sensitivity, and how it may inspire us to face other local human rights abuses as well. I must admit I never imagined I would be standing here decades after having moved away from Lewiston, speaking publically on such an important subject, and I am humbled, excited and frightened by this prospect. And although much of my research has been on and with Nez Perce people, I've come to realize how truly multicultural a place Lewiston was in the 19th Century. And I've come to realize that to understand Nez Perce history here we need to understand Chinese history. This is not to say that all histories or human rights abuses are alike, as they are not. A singular event like the murders of the Chinese miners on the Snake River is not like apartheid in South Africa or the theft of Nez Perce lands and the ensuing system of forced dependency on the US government. But seeing a larger picture of a time and place helps us to realize that the violences that occurred here locally are also profoundly national and connected to other injustices of expansion, exploitation and racism in the West.

Nez Perce Indians depicted in early drawing

Today I'm going to share some insights I learned from reading about formal international Reconciliation projects, but before that I want to share some of my thoughts as I prepared for this presentation. To my surprise, I realized that I am implicated in the massacre of the Chinese miners at Deep Creek, although I'm neither a descendant of the victims nor

the murderers. I'll try to explain. I told you I'm a product of the Lewiston public schools. The education I received in them prepared me to excel in college and to survive graduate school, and for that I am very grateful. But my education here definitely had gaps, that will explain why today I am a professor of American Indian Studies and American ethnic literatures and cultures who is deeply committed to a pedagogy of justice.

After graduating from Lewiston High School and several years working as a musician, I moved from Idaho to Seattle and eventually graduated from the University of Washington. From there I moved to New Orleans to attend graduate school. It was in graduate school at Tulane University that I really began to reflect on my experiences growing up in Lewiston in the 1960s and 70s, and in particular, on the local history I was taught—especially about the Nez Perce Tribe. My doctoral dissertation asked how Nez Perce tribal nationhood and sovereignty were represented by both non-Natives, and Nez Perces themselves, for example in newspapers, narratives, poems and performances. I realized that, in a nutshell, the message I received in my early education was that the Nez Perces had been a powerful, noble and courageous tribe with a famous and eloquent chief in the 19th Century, but that they were now none of those things at all; they were dissipated, powerless and poor—only a mere shadow of what they once had been, and apparently because of their own actions—I received no information about the Nez Perces' forced dependency and poverty caused by U.S. government policies.

It was during my dissertation research in the 1990s that I learned that Lewiston was settled by whites illegally as a result of trespass on the Nez Perce Reservation, which was subsequently reduced in size to accommodate settlers. Wow! This came as such a shock. I was born here! How could I not have known this? What else have I not been told, I wondered. What I learned about the way I was taught history regarding the Nez Perces, and what I did not learn about the massacre of Chinese miners, or any history of the Chinese in this area that I can recall, both creates and perpetuates amnesia, specifically, historical amnesia. It's a way of teaching history very selectively and has the effect of revealing some events and stories and obscuring or omitting others. The experiences of certain groups are included, and others are left out. The more apparently ethical experiences of the included groups are portrayed, while the unethical ones are omitted. It's no wonder we have a difficult time understanding each other.

Of course this teaching method was and is not unique to Lewiston, it happens all over this country. But when we learn history this way we receive an incomplete and skewed picture of the world and our place in it. We're ignorant of so much, deprived of the opportunity to engage in discussion about important subjects, or to explore ways to solve current problems that result from these painful yet omitted histories. There are theories about why so much history that would portray the U.S. and us light-skinned people in an unflattering light is omitted from textbooks and classrooms. The predominant theory is that inclusion of them would undermine patriotism. But that asks for patriotism based on partial truths and ignorance; on sugarcoating the complexity of human interaction, and a blatant denial of reality in a multi-cultural society. It's also an insult to the intelligence of students. In my more than 15 years in the classroom teaching American race relations, students overwhelmingly tell me that they feel cheated by not having been taught "the truth" about American history regarding race and they are distressed by hearing these stories for the first time in college.

Fortunately groups whose voices are suppressed by the mainstream society do have ways of telling their stories so that buried histories are recorded, revealed and considered. In her book Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory, Nancy Peterson claims that many writers from underrepresented groups use fiction and poetry to tell the stories that are repressed and omitted in traditional histories. According to

Peterson, ethnic American writers tell history through literature because "what really happened" is often so excruciatingly painful that to articulate these events as American history would be to invite utter disbelief". These works act as narratives of historical witness, testifying to experiences that must be recorded, shared and learned from. Included in this literature are the words of Chinese immigrants imprisoned on Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay from 1910-1940 who scratched poetry on the walls of their cells to articulate their experience. These works connect readers to places and events they cannot reach in any other ways. We are able to feel history and begin to understand much more about the people around us. The miracle of literature is that it allows us to stand in the shoes of others; to become aware of the inner lives of characters, the inner lives of others, and the inner lives ourselves. Literature allows us to consider our relationship to people and places in a new light. We begin to see that we are connected to one another in unexpected ways.

So this is why I said I consider myself implicated in the Deep Creek Massacre, as a citizen of this place and someone who loves it very much; and as an educator who is committed to the pedagogy of justice and problem solving. You could say that this conference is akin to the classes I teach: we listen closely to the stories that many do not want told and many do not want to hear. We listen, we face our fears of feeling pain, guilt, helplessness and responsibility. We consider, we struggle, we develop empathy and compassion, because we come to realize that these people could be OUR MOTHERS, OUR CHILDREN, US! WE'RE LIKE THEM! We implicate ourselves because we realize we are connected with others whose experiences may be very different from our own. We learn that we must strive to recognize our connectedness if we are to live in ways that are ethical, moral and sustainable. Because unjust, inequitable relationships are not healthy or sustainable.

I'd like to switch gears now and share with you some insights I learned from

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Reconciliation After Violent Conflict, a handbook compiled from truth and reconciliation efforts in places including Africa, Cambodia, Ireland, and Guatemala. Canada currently has a Truth and Reconciliation effort underway to apologize for the thousands of Native American children it removed from their families and sent to boarding schools over a one hundred year period. And yes, the U.S. also ran a compulsory American Indian boarding school system and no, unlike Canada, the U.S. has not made a formal apology to American Indians and a Truth and Reconciliation process is nowhere in sight.

However, I've learned a tremendous amount about both trauma and how to heal from it from Native people, and especially through contemporary Native writers whose stories and poems often function as narratives of historical witness and healing. Crucial to recovery from trauma is telling the story of the trauma and having it heard and acknowledged by others. This happens in literature, film, art and in interpersonal communication. It is the basis for Truth and Reconciliation Councils, such as those convened in South Africa and Canada. I'd like to spend a few moments sharing with you what I have learned about formal Truth and Reconciliation and other community healing efforts before returning to the Chinese Remembering project.

First, the Handbook defines reconciliation as something that prevents, once and for all, the use of the past as the seed of renewed conflict. It consolidates peace, breaks the cycle of violence and strengthens newly established or reintroduced democratic institutions. As a backward-looking operation, reconciliation brings about the personal healing of survivors, the reparation of past injustices, the building or rebuilding of non-violent relationships between individuals and communities, and the acceptance by the former parties to a conflict of a common vision and understanding of the past. In its forward-looking dimension, reconciliation means enabling victims and perpetrators to get on with life, and, at the level of society, the establishment of a civilized political dialogue and an adequate sharing of power.

Reconciliation is not an isolated act, these experts stress, but a constant readiness to leave the tyranny of violence and fear behind. It is not an event but a process, a difficult, long and unpredictable one with various steps. Each move demands changes in attitudes, for example, tolerance instead of revenge, in conduct, such as joint commemoration of all the dead instead of separate, partisan memorials, and in the institutional environments, such as integration of people together. Above all, the approach must be that every step counts, that every effort has value, and that in this delicate domain even a small improvement is significant progress.

The Handbook's definition of healing is any strategy, process or activity that improves the psychological health of individuals following extensive violent conflict. Strategies, processes or activities aimed at rehabilitating and reconstructing local and national communities more broadly are also integrally linked to this process. Healing is not only about assisting individuals to address their psychological health needs in an isolated way, but is dependent upon and integrally linked to repairing and rebuilding communities and the social context. This implies restoring a normalized everyday life that can recreate and confirm people's sense of being and belonging.

How to achieve healing? This requires healing the wounds of the survivors; some form of redistributive or restorative justice; historical accounting via truth-telling; and reparation of the material and psychological damages inflicted on the victims. The South African slogan was "revealing is healing." The experts claim that silence and amnesia are the enemies of justice; and that contrary to popular belief, time does not heal all wounds.

The Handbook introduced me to a study that sheds light on a major barrier to healing and reconciliation that has relevance to the challenges I face in my own teaching of American history and culture. It's called the Magnitude Gap. The Magnitude Gap was revealed by German scholar Roy Baumeister when he compared the perspectives of victims and perpetrators on the importance of the violence that took place, on the intensity of emotions, on the duration of the effects of the events, and on the moral evaluation and interpretation of what happened. The differences between the two such perspectives revealed a "Magnitude Gap":

1. Offenders tend to undervalue the significance and consequences of their acts, while victims understandably feel the full weight of their suffering. This disconnect is a major obstacle on the route to reconciliation.

2. The Import of the act is far greater for the victim than the offender; perpetrators have less emotion about their acts than do the victims; the experience of violence fades faster for perpetrators than victims; events seem less wrong, less evil to perpetrators than they do to victims.

I experience the Magnitude Gap in my classes. One of the greatest challenges in my teaching is helping majority culture students to become aware that they are members of the group that benefited from the dispossession of and discrimination against other American groups. The advantages that come with being a member of the majority group and the disadvantages that usually come with being a member of a non-majority culture group in the US are invisible to many without careful education and the use of critical thinking skills. And thus the importance of educational conferences such as this one.

I want to move back to healing efforts in the reconciliation process. The experts say that apologies are important but they must come with accountability: While apologies can indeed add significantly to the reconciliation process, many victims find incomplete apologies insulting, thus actually creating a further obstacle to reconciliation. I've thought about how an apology works in a case like the massacre we discuss today. Who are survivors? Who makes an apology and who receives it? No apology can ever be complete, and yet we offer it. We're in a double-bind in that we demand the impossible in cases of reconciliation of horrific violence.

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Another part of the healing requires the perpetrators' integration back into the community, as continued exclusion threatens the overall integration and reconciliation of the society. In this instance, the perpetrators were allowed to remain a part of the community. It is heartening to learn that last years some descendants of the killers attended the conference.

Tomorrow the Chinese Remembering project will dedicate a memorial to the victims of the Chinese massacre victims, so I want to include some thoughts on symbolic forms of healing. *The Handbook on Reconciliation After Violent Conflict* states the healing value of symbolic acts, objects and rituals lies in the way they can help concretize a traumatic incident, serving as a focal point in the grieving process. Such symbols are most effective if they are personalized and culturally relevant. They can also have a wider community-or-society level benefit, as markers to remind society of the lesson of the past which need to be carried into the future.

However, if symbolic acts are not linked with the delivery of truth, justice and social change, they run the danger of being seen as a strategy to "buy off" the survivors. I hope that students will learn about this massacre and take field trips to see this memorial so this history becomes tangible for them. Thus the monument may be a powerful conduit in the delivery of truth, justice and social change.

If we are to put the Deep Creek Massacre into the context of other national human rights offenses, "History has shown that social reform is the best medicine; for victims of war and atrocity this means public recognition and justice". Healing requires sustained efforts to integrate the suffering of the past into the present. This is where I believe public schools can and should assist in the project of social reform and deep social change. Gregory Nokes' book and the historical novel Deep Creek could be taught along with a trip to the massacre site. Students could then write their own stories of the event. This may foster reconciliation.

According to *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict*, reconciliation requires finding a way to live that permits a vision of the future; the (re)building of relationships; coming to terms with past acts and enemies; a society-wide, long-term process of deep change; a process of acknowledging, remembering, and learning from the past. The past must be addressed in order to reach the future. Reconciliation is the means to do that. Empathy comes with the victims' willingness to listen to the reasons for the hatred of those who caused their pain, and with the offenders' understanding of the anger and bitterness of those who suffered. Truth-telling is also a precondition of reconciliation because it creates objective opportunities for people to see the past in terms of shared suffering and collective responsibility. More important still is the recognition that victims and offenders share a common identity, as survivors and as human beings.

In addition, History teaches us also that, in the long run, a policy of amnesia is a serious obstacle on the road from a divided past to a shared future. Amnesia is the enemy of reconciliation because: it refuses victims the public acknowledgement of their pain; it invites offenders to take the path of denial; it deprives future generations of the opportunity to understand and learn from the past and to participate in the building of a lasting reconciliation.

I want to move now to some closing thoughts related to the title of my presentation, "A River of Reconciliation: All My Relations Are Here." Of course the Massacre of the Chinese miners occurred on the Snake River, and as Lyle pointed out to me, the river has been a conduit for your healing ceremonies over the last four years. Water is so necessary and fundamental to all life. I have heard Nez Perce elder Horace Axtell talk many times about the sacredness of water and the respect in which it is held. It is the lifegiver and the life sustainer. The healer and cleanser. I like to think of the power of rivers, their ability to endure and persist. How mighty and deserving of our respect. How dependent we are on rivers for our survival. How connected we are to them because of our necessary relationship with them.

And this brings me to thoughts about relationships and relations. About the whole concept of relationality that I have learned from American Indian thinkers. When I first began thinking about this talk I thought about the importance of tolerance and respect for others in the context of justice and human rights. These are necessary to prevent tragedies such as the Massacre we gather here to address. But tolerance, though important, strikes me as inadequate, as we must do more than tolerate each other. I believe that we must recognize that our difference, our diversity is the very thing our existence depends upon. And that we are in fundamental ways in a relationship with each other and with non-humans as well. We humans sometimes forget that we are part of nature and

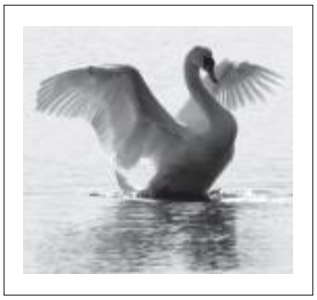
not separate from it, and that nature teaches us the importance and necessity of diversity.

When I think of cultural reconciliation, I think about the forming of a "beloved" community that truly recognizes our need for one another. I hope we will grow our capacities for empathy and compassion as we learn to respect and care for all our relations, human and non-human, such as the river that is so fundamental to our survival. As I have been taught, we are spiritual beings struggling to be humans. Spiritual beings doing the difficult work of becoming humans. I see the murders of the Chinese miners, the theft of Nez Perce and Native American lands and culture, slavery and racial and ethnic discrimination all as human acts and policies distanced from spirit. I see a recognition and embrace of spirit and the sacred—which of course has a diversity of meaning for different folks—as necessary for healing and reconciliation, for the creation of justice, and for the sustainability of us humans and the Earth who we depend upon for continued life.

The Chinese Remembering Conference has been about creating a beloved community of care, compassion and justice. It is a remarkable model for others to learn from and to emulate. It has brought groups together who have had—and to varying degrees continue to have—very painful relationships over a long period of time. It has had the audacity to reject the status quo. To reject amnesia. To prioritize justice. The participants have had the courage to risk discomfort and pain. The Reconciliation After Violence experts stress, "every act toward reconciliation, no matter how large or how small, is hugely significant in the process toward healing." So we know this conference is valuable and makes a difference.

These experts also stress that social justice is the foundation of lasting healing, and social justice is a work in progress. I would ask that all of us do as this conference has done, and reject the status quo that allows injustice and suffering to be ignored, unacknowledged and unaddressed. I ask that we all prioritize social justice. I ask that we each take what we have learned through this Chinese Remembering Conference and use it to make lasting positive change in all our spheres of influence: our homes and families, our schools, our churches and our communities.

I'd like to conclude this talk with a poem entitled "The Swan," by American poet Mary Oliver:



The Swan

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air –
An armful of white blossoms,
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
Biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
A shrill dark music - like the rain pelting the trees - like a waterfall
Knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds –
A white cross Streaming across the sky, its feet Like black leaves, its wings Like the stretching light of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?

Thank you very much for listening; I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this historic conference!

Works Cited International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2003.
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Oliver, Mary. "*The Swan*," 1992.

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