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Kill the Storyteller: Rejection of Culture in  
The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven

With a quick grin, a friend once said to me: “I hate Indians, but I love India Indians!” We laughed as he wound slowly through the crowded powwow away from me. He stopped at a drum of stretched and tanned buffalo skin and started the bear dance with a single strong strike. My friend has played the drum and sang the songs for a very long time. His father is an elder and spiritual leader of the tribe. When he tells me that he hates Indians he is not joking. No one is joking about that. This dichotomy, this balance of admiration and contempt, is not evidence of conflicting feelings or self-loathing; it is simply fact. Another friend once said: “I love all my brothers and sisters and cousins, but they’re still a bunch of no good Indians.” We laughed about that too. Not because it was a joke, but because there was nothing else to do about it. That night, when my friend got done playing the drum and someone else took his spot, he said “Come on, let’s go party! This is a goddamn powwow! You think we can find some new girls around here?” We kept laughing. There’s never anyone new at the powwow.

This is a divide in tribal culture that is exemplified in the works of Sherman Alexie; particularly in his short story collection The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. In the book we see characters struggling with Indian pride and identity while rejecting traditional beliefs and culture. There is a sense of internalized racism in the stories. Many of the characters are fiercely proud of their heritage as Indian, and yet oftentimes wish they were anything but. Consider the rejection of Thomas Builds-the-Fire by the tribe who is tired of his stories, or the hope placed in Junior as he leaves the reservation that he could escape his heritage and become something else. The characters of the novel struggle with their connection to their culture and

exhibit self-destructive tendencies because they want to escape the grips of a racism imposed by both the outside world and themselves.

Consider the case of Victor's father. We first see him in the opening story of the collection: "Every Little Hurricane." In the story, Victor's parents host the largest party in reservation history on New Years Eve, and nine year old Victor acts as a witness to the first self-destruction Alexie presents to the reader. At the party we are given glimpses into a metaphorical hurricane of emotion and pain for the people of the reservation. We see Victor's uncles Adolph and Arnold drunk and fighting, hurting each other because there is no one else to blame. People at the party watch the situation unfold but do nothing to stop it. One passage reads: "'They're going to kill each other,' somebody yelled from an upstairs window. Nobody disagreed and nobody moved to change the situation. Witnesses. They were all witnesses and nothing more" (Alexie 3).

Later on the reader sees the uncles thinking about how poor they were as children, when they would hide a box of crackers in their room so that they could have something to eat. At the same time his father remembers "the time his own father was spit on as they waited for a bus in Spokane" (8) before passing out drunk with Victor's mother. These events are described as a hurricane, "a metaphor for the various chaotic forces that disrupt the broader Native American society" (Slethaug 132). As the book progresses we see that these events are a precursor to his father's ultimate fate and his constant desire to escape his own life.

In the third story of the book the character of Victor's father is revisited and we see his alcoholism as a constant and driving force in his life. Victor describes himself as a reservation mixed drink, conceived when his mother and father were drunk, and says "my father needed me just as much as he needed every other kind of drink" (Alexie 27). As his father's marriage

begins to deteriorate, he continues to drink and starts to practice escape when he buys a motorcycle. He rides the bike for hours listening to Jimi Hendrix, and drinks when he doesn't ride, and in this way he is able to keep himself from thinking—from remembering. In these ways Victor's father escapes his heritage, his family, his home; he is not affected by the centuries of persecution his people have faced, or by the poverty and despair of the reservation.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire tells Victor a story about his father, and in it he brings to light the forces driving the man. He says "Your father's heart is weak. He is afraid of his own family. He is afraid of you. Late at night he sits in the dark. Watches the television until there's nothing but that white noise. Sometimes he feels like he wants to buy a motorcycle and ride away. He wants to run and hide. He doesn't want to be found" (Alexie 61). Eventually Victor's father finally does ride away: he goes to Phoenix and dies there alone, having finally escaped his own culture and heritage, and the reminders of that past that he sees in his own family. To Victor's father the people of the reservation are reminders of the pain of his own life. He is afraid of them, and so he escapes them.

Victor himself follows much in his father's footsteps. Throughout many of the stories we see him fall to alcoholism as well. One particular instance in Victor's life completely illustrates his struggles against himself and his drinking. In "Amusements," Victor sees a character named Dirty Joe passed out drunk at an amusement park. Thinking it would be funny, Victor convinces an attendant to place Dirty Joe on a roller coaster. This is only possible because Dirty Joe is drunk and unable to stop it, which underscores the internalized racism prevalent in the book. Victor takes advantage of and hurts Dirty Joe because he is a drunken Indian. Victor himself is an alcoholic, and so in treating Dirty Joe this way, he might as well treat himself in the same way. Victor takes advantage of someone else for exhibiting the same characteristics that Victor

himself does, and in doing so demonstrates clearly the way that the residents of the reservation hurt themselves even more than the white people who point and laugh when Dirty Joe vomits after his ride.

Eventually Victor stops drinking and shifts the source of his addiction to Diet Pepsi, as reflected by Junior in "Somebody Kept Saying Powwow," who says of Victor "He's on the wagon now but he used to get so drunk" (Alexie 204). In this small victory for Victor there is a glimpse of hope. We can see that "despite the many personal and cultural obstacles, a resolution of sorts may be possible, if the broader picture can be brought into focus" (Slethaug 134). As the main character of many of the stories, Victor's story shows us that redemption is possible, but we must also be realistic and realize that even after he stops drinking Victor's life is mainly spent on his porch drinking Diet Pepsi. In "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore," Victor and a friend sit on a porch drinking Pepsi and discussing young basketball players on the reservation. Through the course of the story we see one player fall from grace as he picks up the bottle, and at the end of the story Victor says of another young player "God, I hope she makes it all the way" (Alexie 53). Victor continually puts his hopes in the next generation instead of himself. He has stopped drinking and displayed a glimmer of hope in that way, but the young people of the reservation continue to fall in the same way that he did, and often without the small redemption Victor has.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire is a storyteller. He considers his stories the one thing by which his life is measured (Alexie 72). Perhaps the most striking incident in the stories of Thomas Builds-the-Fire is in the collection's second story, "A Drug Called Tradition." In the story Victor and Junior pick up Thomas who is walking along the road, and the three plan to try a new drug. Victor invites Thomas to come with them and mocks him simultaneously, saying "Jump in

with us. We're going out to Benjamin Lake to do this new drug I got. It'll be very fucking Indian. Spiritual shit, you know?" (14). This is only the first of many instances of Thomas facing mockery and alienation for the way he attempts to hold on to his culture. Thomas immediately attempts to tell a story, but Victor stops him and makes him promise not to tell any stories until he has taken the drug, because everyone is sick of all of his stories. Thomas tells a story about Victor stealing a horse in the moonlight, and a story about the three of them searching for visions, for their adult names. Victor responds by saying "You don't really believe that shit?" (21). Throughout the book, Victor refuses to listen to Thomas and bullies him, as Victor tries to hide from his heritage and Thomas tries to accept it, because "for Victor, those stories register cultural loss" (DeNuccio 89).

Eventually, the tribe listens to Thomas one last time in "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire." Thomas, on trial for no particular crime, uses his testimony to tell stories of horses and warriors, and manages to reach out to the rest of his tribe. Some of the Indians in attendance break down in tears, and one yells out "Thomas, we're all listening" (Alexie 99). Thomas is eventually led away for the murders of two soldiers one of his characters fought in battle, and in this sense he is punished for his own culture literally, while the rest of the tribe is punished for the same things by poverty, alcohol, and anger. All the same, the trial presents a moment of hope and clarity for Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and though there are no signs that the other members of the reservation take his words to heart and accept their culture, there is at least that brief moment in which he is heard. The people of the reservation continue to battle within themselves, but Thomas shows that self-acceptance, cultural identity, and freedom of cultural and historical constraints is possible.

Throughout the stories we see again and again the struggle of Indians against the outside world, and more often against themselves. Victor's father succumbs to fear, alcohol and the consequences of both by running away from the reservation and his people. Victor himself follows in his father's footsteps before deciding to stay sober, but still is not ultimately rewarded with confidence or connection the tribe. Thomas stands firm in his beliefs and is shunned for it again and again, until he departs with a few small glimmers of faith. Hope is a common theme in these stories. There is pain, suffering, and sadness, but there is also humor, joy, and a glimmer of belief that shines through. Although the history of the Indian people is dark and the shadows of their persecution still hover sometimes perpetuated by themselves, there is still a faint light of hope.

#### Works Cited

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