

48. Fighting here or in Heaven? Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

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Abstract

Confined within the borders of reservations Native identity suffers not only from the traumatic experiences of poverty, unemployment, broken families, alcoholism and oppression but also from systematic racist practices and stereotyping, which reduce the American Indian identity to noble savages, bloodthirsty warriors, prophetic shamans, or drunken outcasts. In resistance to Anglo-American attempts to erase Native identity many American Indian writers such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, and Gerald Vizenor tried to preserve Native American tribal culture and history, and remedy the traumatized Native identity. This paper focuses on how Sherman Alexie in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, standing apart from other Native American writers, portrays the Spokane Indian reservation life with a critical and cynical viewpoint on contemporary Native American's problems such as poverty, unemployment, hunger, drug addiction, alcoholism, and violence. The paper also discusses the insight Alexie brings to the Native identity problem through his critical reading of both the Native history/tradition and the white culture, and his critique of both the 'positive' and the negative stereotyping of the American Indian. The study is based on the premise that Sherman Alexie creates, borrowing from Homi Bhabha's terms, an 'interstitial space' in his answer to the question: how will the Native identity be constructed, based on the American Indian tribal culture, or the dominant Anglo culture, or is there an alternative way?

Keywords: Native American, American Indian, representation, cultural identity, stereotypes

Mücadele burada mı, ebediyette mi? Sherman Alexie'nin *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* romanı

Öz

Rezervasyon alanları içinde sınırlandırılmış Yerli kimlik, yalnızca travmatik yoksulluk, işsizlik, parçalanmış aile, alkolizm ve baskı deneyimlerinden değil, aynı zamanda Amerikan Kızılderili kimliğini asil vahşilere, kana susamış savaşçılara, peygamber şamanlara veya sarhoş dışlanmışlara indirgeyen sistematik ırkçı uygulamalardan ve basmakalıp deneyimlerden de muzdariptir. Anglo-Amerikalılar'ın Yerli kimliğini silme girişimlerine karşı, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, James Welch ve Gerald Vizenor gibi birçok Amerikan Kızılderili yazarı, Kızılderili kabile kültürünü ve tarihini korumaya ve travmalı Yerli imgesini düzeltmeye çalıştı. Bu yazı, diğer Yerli Amerikalı yazarlardan ayrı olarak *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* romanındaki Sherman Alexie'nin Spokane Indian rezervasyon hayatını yoksulluk, işsizlik, açlık, uyuşturucu bağımlılığı, alkolizm ve şiddet gibi çağdaş "Amerikan Yerlisi" sorunlarına eleştirel ve alaycı bir bakış

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açısıyla resmediş biçimine odaklanır. Bu makalede ayrıca Alexie'nin Yerli tarihi / geleneği ve beyaz kültürü eleştirel okumasıyla Yerli kimlik sorununa getirdiği kavrayış ve Amerikan Yerli kimliğinin hem olumlu hem de olumsuz basmakalıp okumalarına eleştirisi ele alınmaktadır. Çalışma, Sherman Alexie'nin, Homi Bhabha'nın terimlerinden yola çıkarak, şu soruya cevabında bir 'geçiş alanı' yarattığı öncülüne dayanıyor: Yerli kimlik Amerikan "Amerikan Yerlisi" kabile kültürüne mi yoksa baskın Anglo Amerikan kültürüne mi dayalı olarak inşa edilecek, yoksa alternatif bir yol var mı?

Anahtar kelimeler: Amerikan Yerlileri, temsil, kültürel kimlik, kalıp yargılar

Introduction

Ever since the arrival of the whites in the American continent colonialists tried to eliminate the Native presence not only by physical battles but also by systematic attempts to destroy the indigenous identity of the survivors. The dominant Anglo-American policy removed Natives from their homelands, assimilated American Indian children in schools by repressing their languages and by judging their physical appearance, outlawed their tribal religious practices, and even officially certified the American Indian identity by blood measurement to see how closely related they are or are not to white people. Confined within the borders of reservations Native identity suffers not only from the traumatic experiences of poverty, unemployment, broken families, alcoholism and oppression but also from systematic racist practices and stereotyping, which reduce the American Indian identity to noble savages, bloodthirsty warriors, prophetic shamans, or drunken outcasts. In resistance to Anglo-American attempts to erase Native identity many American Indian writers such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, and Gerald Vizenor tried to preserve Native American tribal culture and history and remedy the traumatized Native identity. Similarly, the short story collection of Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, portrays the Spokane Indian reservation life with a critical and cynical viewpoint on contemporary Native American's problems such as poverty, unemployment, hunger, drug addiction, alcoholism, and violence. Although some critics like Louis Owens believes Alexie "simply reinforces all of the stereotypes desired by white readers: his bleakly absurd and aimless Indians are imploding in a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing" (Owens, 1998, p. 79), Sherman Alexie neither provides an essentialist view of Native identity, nor totally dismantles the concept of identity with a postmodern attitude; instead without falling into the trap of sentimentalism he provides a critical reading of both the Native history/tradition and the white culture, questions and challenges both the 'positive' and negative stereotyping of the American Indian, and offers the recovery of Native identity through his ironic humor and storytelling.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, originally published in 1993 by Atlantic Monthly Press, is Sherman Alexie's first book of prose that brought him public appearance and wide appreciation. The book is comprised of twenty-two stories each interconnected with recurring characters, especially Victor Joseph, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and Junior. Placing his characters on the Spokane Indian Reservation "the geography of Alexie's fictions (the seedier parts of Seattle, or, more usually, the basketball courts, Powwow Tavern, and HUD houses of the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington) tends now to be desacralized, drained of any predetermined narrative significance" (Dix, 2001, p.156). Just like our fragmentary experiences in a postmodern era, his characters are isolated and alienated beings collecting bits and pieces together from their pasts. Alexie's narrative technique is accordingly fragmentary; borrowing from Gérard Genette's terms, his narration alters between paralepsis and paralipsis (Genette, 1988, p. 66) forcing the reader, like his characters, to collect bits and pieces of the narrative. Like Lester A. Standiford's description of American Indian view of experience as "a continually flowing river where

chronological time loses significance, where events leap out of context to recur and grow “in the mind’s eye,” where the seemingly concrete quality of history proves illusory and relative to each perceiver,” (Standiford, 1982, p. 188) Alexie punctuates linear time with flashbacks, dreams, surreal imagery, and diary entries. He deploys personal experience of his characters together with Native American history and provides multiple points of view by constantly shifting the narrative. Similar to the fragmentary experience of the modern self the information given is dispersed and the reader should hunt this information in order to bring them together like a jigsaw-puzzle.

Representation of Native identity

The book’s title is inspired from a popular radio and television show of the 1950s in which the white Lone Ranger is accompanied by the American Indian Tonto to fight against ‘the evil’ in the Wild West. As it is clear from the title, throughout the whole book Sherman Alexie emphasizes the role of colonial discourse that still persists in the popular culture in constructing the Native identity. Detached from their tribal pasts his characters got caught in between the stereotypical representations of Native identity presented by the popular culture either as noble savages, warriors, or drunkard idles. What is most striking is that these representations of the “American Indian” identity gain truth value for the Native when s/he considers his/her tribal past, traditions, and subjectivity from the colonialist’s perspective. Alexie exemplifies this phenomenon through a vivid description of his personal experience with Tonto when he was a child:

I was a little Spokane Indian boy who read every book and saw every movie about Indians, no matter how terrible. I’d read those historical romance novels about the stereotypical Indian warrior ravaging the virginal white schoolteacher. [. . .] And I just as often imagined myself to be a cinematic Indian, splattered with Day-Glo Hollywood war paint as I rode off into yet another battle against the latest actor to portray Gen. George Armstrong Custer. But I never, not once, imagined myself to be Tonto. I hated Tonto then and I hate him now (Alexie, 1998).

As he further goes on criticizing the popular culture’s effects on prescribing the American Indian subjectivity, Alexie draws attention to how far these representations are from real experience of the modern American Indian, but eventually how they come to be their real identities:

I don’t know a single Indian who would leave a chocolate bar as an offering. I don’t know any Indians who have ever climbed to the top of any mountain. I don’t know any Indians who wade into streams and sing to the moon. I don’t know of any Indians who imagine themselves to be Indian warriors.

Wait –

I was wrong. I know of at least one Indian boy who always imagined himself to be a cinematic Indian warrior.

Me.

I watched the movies and saw the kind of Indian I was supposed to be (Alexie, 1998).

Likewise, in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* the story “Family Portrait” describes Junior’s family members and their tendency for storytelling. The story emphasizes the constructed nature of all histories and identities. Colonial past caused so much pain that American Indians have also constructed themselves a past to justify their feelings. Using television as a metaphor for the effects of ongoing colonialism in popular culture Alexie comments on how the image tailored for the American Indian has been produced and reproduced constantly and have attained truth value:

“The television was in the window of a store in Coeur d’Alene. Me and all the guys would walk down there and watch it. Just one channel and all it showed was a woman sitting on top of a television that

showed the same woman sitting on top of the same television. Over and over until it hurt your eyes and head. That's the way I remember it. And she was always singing some song. I think it was 'A Girl on Top of the World.' "

This is how we find our history, how we sketch our family portrait, [...] That is the story by which we measure all our stories, until we understand that one story can never be all. (Alexie, 1994, p. 197)

Alexie believes modern America is still under the influence of colonialism: "[T]his illusion of democracy in the country—it's the best country in the world—but this illusion allows artists to believe that it isn't a colony. When it still is" (Fraser, 2001). And stereotyping is part of the colonial discourse in the modern American society; as such, American Indians are not only suffering from material losses, but also from a traumatic experience of cultural stigmatizing. Alexie believes, as a result the American Indian constructs his/her identity through 'blood memory,' according to him there is no way of knowing what an American Indian identity is, except through their pain. (Nygren, 2005, p. 157) Thus, within this loss and pain the American Indian accepts stereotypes just as much as the white community. Homi Bhabha explains how colonial discourse constructs the colonial identity as a reality:

[C]olonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism (Bhabha, 2001, pp. 70-71).

Sherman Alexie believes one of the real dangers is the fact that American Indians take many stereotypes as a reality:

[Y]ou can never measure up to a stereotype. You can never be as strong as a stereotypical warrior, as godly as a stereotypical shaman, or as drunk as a drunken Indian. You can never measure up to extremes. So you're always going to feel less than the image, whether it's positive or negative (Nygren, 2005, p. 158).

For that reason, Alexie makes use of irony and satire to criticize both the positive and negative stereotyping of the "American Indian" identity in his works. It is too late to be warriors in the old way now (Alexie, 1994, p. 63), the new reservation heroes never finish high school, or never finish basketball seasons (Alexie, 1994, p. 47), and the ones who are even able to give up alcohol becomes addicted to the products of the consumerist culture:

"I am thirsty," Adrian said. "Give me a beer."

"How many times do I have to tell you? We don't drink anymore."

"Shit," Adrian said. "I keep forgetting. Give me a goddamn Pepsi."

"That's a whole case for you today already."

"Yeah, yeah, fuck these substitute addictions." (Alexie, 1994, p. 50)

Due to his ironic undertaking of the subject Alexie is placed under attack from critics such as Louis Owens, Cook-Lynn, and Gloria Bird. In a comment on Alexie's *Reservation Blues* for instance Bird says, "Stereotyping native people does not supply a native readership with soluble ways of undermining stereotypes, but becomes a part of the problem, and returns an image of a generic 'Indian' back to the original producers of that image" (Evans, 2001, p. 51). These critics believe literary reproduction of American Indian stereotypes has damaging effects for the construction of American Indian identity; however, they seem to disregard the moral concerns of the author in his use of irony for the recovery of

American Indian cultural identity. As an answer to these criticisms Alexie emphasizes his critical approach to American Indian experience and identity:

It's the difference between writing with imagination about an imaginary world and writing with imagination about a real world. I try to write with imagination about a real world. A world in which I grew up, the world that I live in now. I just get tired of this spiritual talk Indian artists get up there and do. [...] I think there are three stages of Indian-ness: The first stage is where you feel inferior because you're Indian, and most people never leave it. The next stage is feeling superior because you're Indian and a small percentage of people get into that and most never leave it. At the end, they get on realizing that Indians are just as fucked up as everybody else. No better no worse. I try to be in that stage. I go through all three. At any given point in the day I could be in any of the three, but I try to spend most of my life in the third stage. (Alexie, 1999)

The Native identity and image that have been distorted by centuries of European and white American oppression and false representation necessitate the restoring of the "American Indian" past and cultural recovery of the tribal self as part of an act of decolonization. However, claiming an innate goodness in Native identity and praising of the tribal past beyond reality in literary representations would be essentialism, and as Sean Teuton indicates, "Although this theoretical position reclaims intrinsic Native self-worth on its own terms, essentialism also mystifies Native identity beyond self-reflection and potential for change and thus limits the possibility of the continued development of persons and communities" (Teuton & Welch, 2001, p. 628). Sherman Alexie regards this literary essentialism as another way of stereotyping, and takes a critical stance in his works holding on to his own experiences as an American Indian:

I'm not talking about four directions corn pollen mother earth father sky shit. I'm not talking about that stereotypical crap about being Indian. There's always a huge distance between public persona and private person. In my art I try to keep that as narrow as possible. I try to write about the kind of Indian I am, the kind of person I am and not the kind of person or Indian I wish I was. I think all too often -- especially Indian writers because that's what I know -- what they write and who they are are so different, so completely different that it ends up -- (Alexie, 1999)

Creating romantic images of Native Americans with a hyperbolic emphasis on a glorified past is simply essentialism perpetuating the oppressor's discourse. In other words, developing extreme emotional bonds with the tribal ways and detaching the Native from modern context may similarly contribute to the colonial discourse in its construction of American Indian identity.

Sherman Alexie's treatment of Native identity

Postmodernism criticizes essentialist view of cultural identity and subjectivity construction as it always inevitably brings about power relationships; therefore, the idea of the self must be deconstructed as a whole. But the question is if subjectivity is deconstructed, how could American Indian culture be recovered? Postmodern approach on Native identity does not provide a solution to the development of Native culture. Sherman Alexie, on the other hand, shows history can be taken as a ground for the American Indian identity without falling into essentialism; neither the Anglo-American culture nor the Native tribal past can fully explain alone who the modern American Indian is, and s/he does not have to be determined by the single force of one; what Alexie offers as a point of exit for the problem of identity of the American Indian, at this point, resembles Bhabha's concept of 'interstitial space' that he develops from Renée Green's stairwell metaphor:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial

passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy: (Bhabha, 2001, p. 4)

In a way Bhabha's concept of 'interstitial space' finds its equivalent in Alexie's 'skeletons' metaphor in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Through two young characters, Victor and Junior, Alexie searches for the answer of a single question throughout the novel: how will the Native identity be constructed, based on the "American Indian" tribal culture, or the dominant Anglo culture, or is there an alternative way? Alexie's storyteller character, Thomas Builds-the-Fire puts forth a useful image as an alternative:

There are things you should learn. Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you. [...] Now, these skeletons are made of memories, dreams, and voices. And they can trap you in the in-between, between touching and becoming. But they are not necessarily evil, unless you let them be.

What you have to do is keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons. [...] Your past ain't going to fall behind, and your future won't get too far ahead. (Alexie, 1994, pp. 21-22)

What Alexie suggests through Thomas is to harmonize the past and the future in the present in order to establish an individual and tribal subjectivity. Skeletons stand as a metaphor for a basis, an intersection point on which the American Indian self is constructed. The American Indian should never disregard his/her past; s/he must restore and reinvent the past for the recovery of tribal selfhood. But the future also lies forward and it also cannot be disregarded, which is to say relationships and knowledge within a culture are always changing, adapting to new relations; therefore, cultural identity is not drawn from a rigid collection of essential truths but, rather, is continuously constructed by the members of the community. Jerome DeNuccio makes use of Bakhtin's theory to explain Alexie's skeletons:

Thomas's image of the skeletons suggests that Indian subjectivity is dialogic, an interplay of perspectives and points of view that Bakhtin describes as "a plurality of unmerged consciousness" (26). The self is positioned in a social space replete with memories, dreams, and voices that invite attention and response, that must be accommodated and negotiated if the self as an individual and a tribal subject is to emerge (DeNuccio, 2002, p. 87).

Alexie's narrative strategy is also in line with his image of skeletons. By punctuating linear time with flashbacks, dream sequences, and surreal imagery he negotiates past, present, and future both structurally and thematically. The text itself merges the contemporary culture with history. Reflection on the past through postmodern techniques creates a postcolonial text with a critical perspective on both the colonial past and the present. "Walking in step with the skeletons" then suggests paying attention to what the tribal past calls for and keeping the self always in a state of becoming rather than fixing it in rigid definitions. Thomas's image of the skeletons finds its repercussions throughout *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, since lots of characters cannot succeed in walking in step with their skeletons, that is to say, most of them are stuck in 'the now' without being able to find a meaningful base on which to construct their identities.

Starting with the opening story, "Every Little Hurricane" nine years old Victor witnesses the pain, suffering, and joy of American Indian life while he is listening from his basement room to the sounds of people from Spokane Reservation having a New Year's Eve party at Victor's parents' house. Victor's witnessing comes full circle at the end of the novel with the final story, "Witnesses, Secret and Not" by which the reader also becomes a witness of the American Indian culture and life as presented by Sherman Alexie. While Victor's parents are hosting the party, the narrator portrays a hurricane which is actually a metaphor for Victor's painful memories of alcoholism, poverty, and hunger prevalent in the

Spokane Indian community. As the stories go on with painful memories and accounts of "American Indian" experience, it becomes more understandable of how these people are stuck in the present. Without a connection to their tribal past the characters get lost and alienated in the dominant Anglo culture unable to construct a base for their subjectivity. In "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock" Alexie handles the issue of hippies trying to be "American Indians" ironically, and Victor's father becomes a representative of the assimilation of the American "American Indian" culture, "On a reservation, Indian men who abandon their children are treated worse than white fathers who do the same thing. It's because white men have been doing that forever and Indian men have just learned how. That's how assimilation can work" (Alexie, 1994, p. 34). The detachment from Indian cultural past perhaps most painfully depicted in "Amusements" in which Victor comes across Dirty Joe lying drunk at a carnival. To give Dirty Joe "a lesson" Victor and Sadie puts him on a roller coaster; when a crowd of white people gathers and laughs, Victor realizes the offense he causes to his own people. In that sense him seeing his own distorted image on crazy mirrors is highly symbolic of the effects of colonialism that distorts his American Indian image to the extent that it makes him an "Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty" (Alexie, 1994, p. 58). Alexie gives further examples throughout the book of how their cultural identity is distorted, how "American Indians" have become reflections of stereotypes, and how white people have induced their own social norms such as misogyny, sexism and homophobia. Viewing such a scene Alexie says in "The Only Traffic Signal On The Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore":

It's hard to be optimistic on the reservation. When a glass sits on a table here, people don't wonder if it's half filled or half empty. They just hope it's good beer. Still, Indians have a way of surviving. But it's almost like Indians can easily survive the big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land rights. It's the small things that hurt the most. The white waitress who wouldn't take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins (Alexie, 1994, p. 49).

What offends and humiliates the American Indians most is the disregard, the reduction of their identity to stereotypes. The question is still the same: how will they survive the "small things," that is how will they resist destruction and assimilation into white culture and be able to construct an independent "American Indian" identity? Is there not any hope for the American Indian in that sense?

While Thomas and Victor are going to Phoenix, Arizona to claim the cremated remains of Victor's father, Thomas explains his source of hope and resistance:

We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are the stories which can change or not change the world. It doesn't matter which as long as I continue to tell the stories. My father, he died on Okinawa in World War II, died fighting for this country, which had tried to kill him for years. My mother, she died giving birth to me, died while I was still inside her. She pushed me out into the world with her last breath. I have no brothers or sisters. I have only my stories which came to me before I even had the words to speak. I learned a thousand stories before I took my first thousand steps. They are all I have. It's all I can do (Alexie, 1994, pp. 72-73).

The stories which came to Thomas before he had the words to speak are the colonial narratives that have been imposed on his tribal people; Thomas displays a resistance to these stories with his own counter narratives. Homi Bhabha expands on a polarity Edward Said detects at the height of Orientalism: "It is, on the one hand a topic of learning, discovery, practice; on the other, it is the site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsessions, and requirements. It is a static system of 'synchronic essentialism', a knowledge of 'signifiers of stability' such as the lexicographic and the encyclopedic. However, this site is continually under threat from diachronic forms of history and narrative, signs of instability" (Bhabha, 2001, p. 71). Said defines Orientalism as a kind of narrative which is far from Oriental reality and draws

attention to the power of counter narratives, the accounts of the oppressed, as a threat to the dominant Orientalist account. And it is obvious that Thomas's, in other words Alexie's, stories have such subversive force. What Alexie offers through Thomas is an act of recovery as an act of the imagination which is "the only weapon on the reservation." Thus, the formula for the survival of American Indian identity appears: Survival = Anger $\times$ Imagination (Alexie, 1994, p.150).

In a way the reader witnesses how stories can be a remedy for the recovery of cultural identity when Thomas tells Victor one of his stories during their trip to Phoenix. Through this story Victor learns that his father wanted them to "take care of each other," that is, to recover their sense of community. Thus, his trip to Phoenix to take his father's ashes becomes a symbolic voyage for Victor by which he rereads his past and tribal bonds and reaches a reconciliation with his father/history. Jerome DeNuccio accordingly interprets one of Thomas's stories as "a point of continuity with the past, a fusion of 'historical memory and subjectivity'" (Said 158) that never 'stops,' that, like the mythic phoenix, will always "rise," a continual story of self that is emerging "from the ash of older stories (98)" (DeNuccio, 2002, p. 95). In other words, the form of Alexie's question changes, but the content remains the same: Is it possible to create something out of the ashes? Is it possible to do something more than opening the old wounds? Alexie answers back in another story: "Imagine a story that puts wood in the fireplace" (Alexie, 1994, p. 153). To make it clear, in the story "Imagining the Reservation," Alexie begins by quoting an American novelist, Lawrence Thornton, saying "We have to believe in the power of imagination because it is all we have, and ours is stronger than theirs" (Alexie, 1994, p. 149). Here, imagination is regarded as a survival tactic; it is used to rewrite history through the stories about the contemporary situation of the American Indian in the reservations. The picture portrayed in the stories might be bleak and of a struggling community, but it creates an alternate history and it has the power to keep the 'fire' in the 'fireplace' burning since a creative expression of anger is necessary for the survival of the American Indian. Imagination is everything to the Native identity; a healing power, an escape, a remedy. Something other than digging for the old pains has to be done, and it is creating out of the ashes, that is, rewriting history.

Conclusion

In a later story, "All I Wanted To Do Is Dance," the reader sees Victor, after returning to the reservation from Seattle, find his "one determination," which is 'fancydancing.'

Dreaming, drumming, dancing, storytelling, reinventing the past and inventing a future - these are the activities which connect Victor and Thomas to their ancient roots, traditions, and rhythms; bring new possibilities into existence; and give them a sense of structure, order, and meaning in the midst of the fluid, chaotic present. [...] They are the activities that form resistance to assimilation and that, by implication, allow Tonto to fight the Lone Ranger and establish his own space, his bit of difference, in the American myth of assimilation (Slethaug, 2003, pp. 135-6).

If Victor's search for identity is symbolic of American Indians in general, it means Alexie has scattered his small pieces of hope hither and thither as the storyteller of Tonto and created a symbolic space for Tonto the stereotype to fight Lone Ranger not in heaven but within this material world.

Sherman Alexie neither totally abandons the concept of identity for the representation of the American Indians nor presents an essentialist portrayal of Native identity. The problem with fixed identity positions is the fact that they reinforce power relationships. However, totally dismantling identity as a concept might be problematic in terms of recovering the American Indian culture. In this case, Alexie chooses history as a ground for identity construction avoiding essentialism. The contemporary American

Indian, in his representation, is not based solely on Anglo-American culture or the tribal past of the Natives. Instead, Alexie creates an 'interstitial space' for the Native identity that is not fixed but a more flexible, fluid blend of two historical cultural backgrounds. In Alexie's depiction of his characters and narratives, it is seen that fighting against the fixed, stereotypical identity positions for the Natives; and hence, undermining power relationships is possible within this hybrid space.

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