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Thomas Builds-the-Fire as a community builder: a character analysis of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Smoke Signals*

Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is a collection of short stories woven together to paint a picture of life on the Spokane Indian reservation. Alexie tells stories of alcohol abuse, emotional pain, and basketball in a way that the reader can relate to it and in some ways, laugh at it. He also tells a hidden story, in which the characters each contribute something different to their community. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, one of the more memorable characters to show up, contributes a more traditional sense of "Indianness" to the reservation community, though he seems to be rather disliked by many of the other characters of the book. This is also evident in the film version, *Smoke Signals*, which follows "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona,"—one of the stories Thomas stars in—from the book. Thomas comes up in three main stories of the book: "A Drug Called Tradition," "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," and "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire. The stories all define

Thomas as a storyteller, and through his stories he seems to bring people together, whether it be in a positive or negative way, as a community.

The notion of “community” can be understood in several different ways. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “[o]ften applied to those members of a civil community, who have certain circumstances of nativity, religion, or pursuit, common to them, but not shared by those among whom they live;” (7c) it also calls it “[a] body of nations acknowledging unity of purpose or common interests” (7e). While these definitions satisfy the word in a literal sense, the Oxford English Dictionary does not explain the word’s figurative meaning, something I attribute to the difference the word’s meaning has to all different groups of people.

A study done on community partnership between a non-Native American community and a Native American one, specifically the Suquamish Tribe, makes it clear from the beginning that any kind of project or intervention being forced from one community onto another will ultimately fail unless it is “sensitive to the culture and traditions of the tribes and communities with which [it was] working with” (Austin et al. 284). This idea applies to more than only Native American communities; if another country came into America and tried to change something, there is a really good chance American people wouldn’t just come quietly and hand over their traditions. Any change implied from one community to another requires compromise

and sensitivity to culture. Culture and tradition can be said to be extremely important parts of a group's emotional understanding of community.

Victor and Junior, two of the main characters in the book, invite Thomas to try out a new drug with them after his party becomes less about him and more about the free alcohol in the story "A Drug Called Tradition." It is pretty evident in the beginning of the story that Victor doesn't particularly like hearing Thomas's stories when he tells him he can only tell stories after he's taken the drug, which is because he thinks they'll be more entertaining if they're drug-induced (Alexie 2005 14). The Indian nature of Thomas's drug-induced stories bring the three of them together through the humor of them, though Victor and Junior still think Thomas "got dropped on his head and...he's magic" (Alexie 2005 20). He also brings people together with the party itself, as after he got a bunch of money because of a land inheritance, he decided to spend it all on the "second-largest party in reservation history" (Alexie 2005 12). The party brings the reservation members together, even if it is only in the interest of free beer.

Jerome DeNuccio gave a close analysis of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* in his article, "Slow dancing with skeletons: Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*." He goes in depth into the end of "A Drug Called Tradition," when Thomas tells Victor and Junior not to slow dance with their skeletons and then the following story explains what that means. It explains basically that your skeleton is the past when it's

behind you and your future when it's in front of you; "Indians, thus, are always 'trapped in the now,'" which doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing, but if you stop or slow down, you risk severing "the necessary relation between the structure of experience that at any one moment has shaped each life and the structure of ongoing time to which that life must continuously adapt and in which it develops" (DeNuccio 86). In other words, you risk losing the life you would have had if you had kept up your natural pace. The idea resembles the Butterfly Effect very closely; it also closely relates to the Native Slipstream of alternate realities. These words of wisdom from Thomas end up influencing Victor and Junior in a positive way, pushing them to stop the drugs and trust in Big Mom.

Joseph Coulombe analyzes Alexie's use of humor in his article, "The Approximate Size of His Favorite Humor," an article named for one of Alexie's stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Coulombe puts great emphasis on the use of humor in Thomas's stories and explains the importance of stories in community and the equal importance humor has in stories. Coulombe quotes Kenneth Lincoln, "[s]torytelling brings people together; it engages them collectively in giving and receiving the events of their lives. In such storytelling times, people occupy space with focused attention; they enter their common world more fully" (Coulombe 5). He then goes on to state that the humor in these stories adds another dimension to the "communal territory" created by the stories (Coulombe 5). I don't think Thomas means to be

humorous in his stories when he's telling them, but it is very present, and it seems to have a positive impact on the community and the people in it.

Thomas helps Victor get to Phoenix, Arizona to pick up his father's ashes, money, and pick-up truck in the story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." Victor says Thomas is "a storyteller that nobody wanted to listen to. That's like being a dentist in a town where everybody has false teeth" (Alexie 2005 61). While on the road, Thomas tells several stories and surprises Victor sometimes because he actually listens. Some of the stories actually even make Victor feel better about his father, like the one when his father found Thomas at Spokane falls and took him out to Denny's but never told anyone so he wouldn't get in trouble (Alexie 2005 69). Though Victor is hurt that he never knew that, he also seems to feel less conflicted about his father as well.

Alexie worked with Chris Eyre to put on the film version of the "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," titled *Smoke Signals*. The movie uses the plot from the story and expands it to film length, adding things as needed. In the movie, Thomas is not quite as influential as in the book because there is a female character who brings Victor to his senses rather than it being Thomas. However there are some subtle things Thomas says that identify and even ridicule modern Indian culture, which signifies that he feels the community could do better. For instance, the line "[t]he only thing sadder than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on

TV” is humorous, however it also calls attention to the conforming of Indians into mainstream non-Native American culture (*Smoke*).

Kedong Lui and Hui Zhang refer to Thomas as a trickster figure in their article, “Self- and Counter-Representations of Native Americans: Stereotypical Images of and New Images by Native Americans in Popular Media,” while explaining the many functions humor has in Native American media. He says that “humor has healing power. It is ‘an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds’...and ‘a ceremony [which is] used to drive away personal and collective demons’” (quoted in Liu and Zhang 114). Thomas’s humor in his stories not only heals people, but he also heals the community and its culture.

Sherman Alexie tells Joanna Hearne in an interview about how the movie *Smoke Signals* has added things to Native American pop culture, most of which coming from Thomas’s character in the movie. Alexie has “met 90 guys named Victor, who cursed at [him], because they spend their entire lives getting ‘Hey, Victor’ from every Indian they know” and when he does readings in “Indian country,” he always gets a few people wearing “Fry Bread Power” t-shirts. Thomas’s character in the movie has helped reunite all different Native Americans, rather than just the Coeur d’Alene reservation (the reservation used in the movie in place of the Spokane reservation) (Hearne 6).

Thomas leaves the book in the story “The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire,” in which he is put on trial and then sentenced to two life terms. He was originally arrested because a noise he made

allegedly made the police chief's wife leave him, and then when the judge was on his way they put him on trial, though they never decide what he's being prosecuted for until he sentences himself by way of story. He tells the story of a war in which he is a soldier and he kills two soldiers from the other side, and the prosecutor makes him out to be a racial murderer. During the trial, as he is telling all these stories for the first time in two decades, he actually has a lot of supporters and he moves many people to tears. One woman is actually so infuriated that she takes physical action against the bailiff. I think this story is a kind of turning point for the reservation. Thomas's supporters rally together and try to get him freed, though he is ultimately still sentenced to two lifetimes in Walla Walla State Penitentiary. When he gets on the bus he starts telling stories to the other inmates, thus beginning a possible transformation of the prison community as well.

Maggie Bowers analyzes the United States judicial system and how it has dealt with reservation life in the past and continues to deal with it now. It highlights how the injustices of the U.S. system are reflected in Native American literary works, one of those works being "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. The reasons Thomas was on trial in the first place make it very clear how bothered people on the reservation were becoming by Thomas, so they fished out reasons to get him sent away, so as not to bother people with his stories anymore. The court itself even seems to believe Thomas has power over people with his words, as Bowers says, "Here the narrative is strongly satirical and portrays a role reversal where

the US court is seen to assume some of the beliefs of Native American culture, including the power of words to ‘make things happen,’” (Bowers 463). No one, not even the court, can deny that stories have power, especially when they come from Thomas Builds-the-Fire.

A common theme in the stories of Sherman Alexie’s book *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is the whole idea of community breaking. In most of the stories there is something falling apart, including ones that don’t feature Thomas Builds-the-Fire. I think “The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore” does a pretty good job of capturing the failures that seem to keep happening. The story follows Victor and Adrian, who sit on their porch drinking Diet Coke all day people-watching. They first observe Julian Windmaker and his friends walk by and they talk about how Julian was the best basketball player on the reservation, and he knows it. Later in the story Julian starts drinking and ends up on Victor’s floor sleeping off a hangover. Then it starts over with a girl named Lucy, which foreshadows that she will fall the same way (Alexie 2005 43-53). This story captures the essence of what’s happening to the reservation. People are falling, turning to alcohol, losing their dreams. This theme is prominent through most of the stories in the book, and Thomas helps the characters to either get through it, forget about it, or overcome it with his stories.

Alexie wrote a letter in response to a story from *L.A. Weekly* about how the one-named author Nasdijj was a fraud, explaining that he believed it since his story “The Blood Runs like a

River Through My Dreams,” seemed to have stolen the character Thomas Builds-the-Fire. I did not realize until reading this letter exactly who Thomas was, I thought he was simply a character who liked to tell stories. However according to Alexie, Thomas was “an autobiographical character...who suffers a brain injury at birth and experiences visionary seizures into his adulthood” (Alexie 2006). It seems to me that his disorder actually benefited himself as well as the community around him. Though his stories are thought to be simply because he wants to be a “real Indian,” it’s actually very interesting that it’s a brain disorder. The fact that the only one on the reservation who still told stories, the one no one ever wanted to listen to, happened to only have those stories because of visionary seizures makes me wonder what the reservation would have been like if Thomas had never suffered that brain injury.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire is a rather complicated character. Being a traditional storyteller because of his brain disorder, he seems the closest to his Indian heritage compared to the other characters on the reservation. I believe his stories contribute a great deal to the Spokane community in the book because he brings people together whether it be in happiness over his stories or in anger.

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