

Oral Storytelling and Rhetorics of Co-creation: Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto
Fistfight in Heaven*

I. WHAT THEY SAY

In her article, "American Indian Intellectualism and The New Indian Story," Elizabeth Cook-Lynn critiques new American Indian publications in general, and Sherman Alexie's work specifically, because they do not "suggest a responsibility of art as an ethical endeavor or the artist as responsible social critic"; she considers this "a marked departure from the early renaissance works" (68). Cook-Lynn establishes a dichotomy between literature of the Native American Renaissance and potential "trash and fraudulent pop," emphasizing that "reviews of these works have been published generally on the entertainment pages of newspapers rather than in scholarly journals" (68, 72). Recent criticism implies that what Leslie Silko calls "academic, postmodern, so-called experimental influences" in her critique of Louis Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* somehow betrays the "Native American oral tradition, which is by definition a shared, communal experience" (Castillo 15). I disagree with this criticism. Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, which critics repeatedly pit against literature influenced by oral tradition, achieves the same end of creating meaning socially. It looks different, but it functions in the same way as traditional oral narrative.

Allusions to popular culture within Alexie's works have been considered, at best, "gimmicky appliqués," and at worst analogous to "writers who 'prey' upon their culture to produce works written in colonial tongues" (Evans 54, Bird 48). In her discussion of Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, Gloria Bird claims that "alluding to popular culture as a literary strategy does

not serve as either parody or a serious interrogation of popular culture. It is a way of carrying the story from one subject to another” (47). She argues that Alexie uses these allusions as a literary device that lacks sophistication. Bird’s criticism suggests that what she considers to be a “cut-and-paste” literary construction “distorts, debases, and falsifies Indian culture and literature at the same time that it reinforces mainstream notions of Indian stereotypes” (Bird 51, Evans 49). This claim presupposes that American Indian culture excludes popular culture, or at least that American Indian engagement with popular culture is a deviation from what is culturally *natural* to American Indians. Certainly, Alexie’s work does not fit into this model of mutual cultural exclusivity. Indeed, it is more engaged in renegotiating our assumptions about how American Indian people relate with popular culture.

Furthermore, Bird faults Alexie’s use of allusions to pop culture because “[It] is a self-referencing medium. Audiences need to be informed and pop-culture-sophisticated to ‘get’ the messages that flood the TV and movie screens” (47). I agree with this observation; however, instead of considering textual self-reference as redundantly “self-conscious of [the text’s] own constructions” (48) and semantically exclusive, the lexicon of pop culture functions as a tool that facilitates communal experience and cross-cultural communication. Alexie doesn’t throw in a few allusions to film as cheap entertainment. The self-referential quality prompts readers to think critically about recurring tropes of American narratives. This process of reflection challenges paracolonial narratives of dominance. The text appears to play with images from popular culture, but what appears kitschy is actually pretty elegant rhetorical work.

The need for cultural literacy plays an important role in the storytelling process, and as a

result non-Indian readers relate to American Indian culture outside of the habitually objectifying parameters established by the process of colonization.

II. WHAT THE AUTHOR DOES

The title of the collection and the final image from “Junior Polatkin’s Wild West Show” (of Junior walking off into the sunset) specifically situate the text in direct conversation with not only popular culture, but more specifically, with hallmark images of the Hollywood Western. Alexie recontextualizes motifs of the American Western in order to confront the antagonistic relationship between American Indian culture and popular culture, pointing out how popular culture perpetuates colonial power dynamics through the retelling of stories.

One way that Alexie revises the Western is by relocating it. The text stages the Hollywood Western at a university in Spokane, Washington and The Lone Ranger and Tonto in heaven. Through the act of retelling this ubiquitous narrative genre, Alexie implies criticisms and highlights the possibility of alternative revisions.

More importantly though, Alexie confronts the culturally divisive issue of oppression within an American Indian cultural lexicon and epistemology. He uses storytelling as a way of making meaning *with* others instead of just learning *about* others, which is a culturally Indian epistemological framework that’s grounded in the oral tradition. Furthermore, he uses a rhetorical strategy (that I will unpack below) that establishes an in-group with the reader. This is significant because by sharing the process of meaning-making, he makes connections through rhetorical collaboration across cultural boundaries. His work actively engages cooperative and

egalitarian relationship building with non-Indians. But he engages in this way while also challenging the power dynamics between Indians and non-Indians.

III. HOW HE DOES IT

Alexie's subtextual arguments rely on the reader's knowledge of popular culture, as Bird points out. This shared knowledge and experience of pop culture plays an important role in the logic of his stories. We make meaning from his stories through a logical process called enthymematic reasoning. This type of reasoning depends on what the storyteller leaves out (that the listener-reader has to contribute) in order to draw conclusions and make meaning. That's the important role that pop-culture-sophistication plays. It's the missing rhetorical piece that the reader has to contribute to make sense of it all. From here on, I'll use Gloria Bird's term, pop-culture-sophistication, to refer to the communal experience of popular culture and the knowledge that results from it.

Because it is co-creative, enthymematic reasoning determines the audience's inclusion in or exclusion from a group. The first discussion of the enthymeme occurs in *The Rhetoric* where Aristotle calls it a "sort of syllogism" in his explanation of logical inference, and continues that it is "in general, the most effective of the modes of persuasion" (5). In his article "Cross-Cultural Mediation," John Scenters-Zapico explains that the enthymeme differs from the syllogism in that it "must use as few propositions as possible to make its point" (499). While a syllogism includes a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion, an enthymeme includes only one component, and "readers or listeners most likely fill in the missing information" (499). While "syllogistic reasoning [is] a deductive logical argument whereby one statement (a conclusion) is

inferred from two others (the premises),” the enthymeme may only provide the conclusion and implies one or both of the unstated premises (Knight 226). Therefore, the enthymeme necessitates an understanding of the unstated premise in order to infer its meaning. This unstated premise “can be supplied by the intertextual network of experiences and associations shared by people” (500). In other words, shared experience provides the missing components of the enthymematic line of reasoning. If a person shares the experience and has whatever particular knowledge is needed, then she shares a sense of inclusion with the rhetor and fellow listeners; if the person doesn’t have that shared knowledge, then she is excluded.

Humor—like ceremonial events—works this way. It’s easy to see the in-grouping and out-grouping happen when people share an inside joke. A listener either knows the omitted premise, she “gets” the joke and consequently shares a sense of inclusion with the teller and others who “get” it, or she does not know the omitted premise, missing the joke, and in that case experiences a sense of exclusion. We use this type of logic to make social divisions and manage community membership.

Scenters-Zapico clarifies the enthymeme a little more:

A contemporary definition of oral and written enthymematic understanding rests on the following assumptions: first, the process is composed of the knowledge people share; second, shared knowledge serves as a vital base that has the potential to help people discover meaning in other contexts (500).

Within this paper, pop-culture-sophistication is “the knowledge people share,” and present-day American Indian subjectivity is “the other context” (500). Therefore, I suggest that pop-culture-sophistication “has the potential to help [readers] discover meaning” with and about Alexie’s representation of American Indian consciousness (500). He uses knowledge of pop culture to critique and work against the dominance of pop narratives.

Because enthymematic reasoning is predicated upon a coded system of symbols, and non-Indian readers have access to that system, communication within the shared lexicon creates a rhetorical team. Much in the same way that people who all speak one language feel part of a larger cohesive linguistic group, Alexie’s stories establish a semiotic group that includes the author/text and readers. The storytelling process creates a cross-cultural collective body.

Because the enthymeme is “reasoning from doxa,” the examination of enthymematic argumentation reveals the unspoken assumptions of a given group (Walker 171). *Doxa* refers to the beliefs and assumptions that are so deeply ideologically ingrained that they go unuttered and, hence, unexamined. It is the schema of a particular group used to understand the world. So, if we look closely at this line of reasoning, and identify the missing premises, we can understand unexamined aspects of an ideology.

If an enthymematic turn is effective, it reveals the elements of ideology or worldview that go unquestioned between the rhetor and listener. For example, readers must know the Lone Ranger and Tonto in order to understand the irony of their fight. Similarly, by making jokes or using this type of reasoning, Alexie must also include himself in the group consensus on doxa--just like a person who tells a racist joke is presumably as much of a racist as the person who laughs at it. This is really where Alexie gets into problematic territory. To make a joke

about stereotypes of American Indians, he must participate in the symbolic order that produces it, which is to say, narratives of dominance. However, to participate in this symbolic order does not definitively imply collusion. Indeed, this is what makes his humor so skillful. Alexie manages to engage narratives of dominance in order to deconstruct them. He includes himself in the group consensus, which establishes the mode of inclusion that has been criticized as his compliance with narratives of dominance—of betraying his tribe. However, he simultaneously exploits that element of community orientation to deconstruct that very body of assumptions. Alexie capitalizes on the readers' knowledge of the Lone Ranger and Tonto—creating this sense of community through the agreement on doxa—in order to expose its fabricated and unrealistic nature.

IV. IN THE BOOK

The two characters featured in the title of the collection, the Lone Ranger and Tonto, famously represented on radio and television as loyal companions for nearly twenty years, duke it out in heaven. Because Alexie rewrites the Lone Ranger and Tonto as contenders, our collective knowledge of pop culture about the two characters fills in the missing components of the logic. Pop-culture-sophistication provides the major premise: the Lone Ranger and Tonto are companions; Tonto is the unquestionably loyal sidekick. Alexie provides the minor premise: the Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. Logical deduction provides the multiple possible conclusions: the Lone Ranger and Tonto aren't companions; instead, they are opponents.

This reasoning revises their relationship and implies contention between the two. The image changes Tonto's original role as the archetypal "good Indian," that Vine Deloria describes

as “the Friendly Indian Companion . . . everything that the white man had always wanted the Indian to be [. . .] a little slower, a little dumber, [. . .] a silent subservient subspecies of Anglo-Saxon” (200). If we read heaven as an ideal space, and the two as contenders, we could further the interpretation to suggest that in a perfect paradise, these guys would be going for blows—as if they’d wanted to do that the whole time they existed in popular media. This interpretation, then, connotes the expanse of time during which abuse continues unabated (the decades in public broadcast and the centuries of colonization), the desire to defend oneself, and the violent--yet implicitly fatalistic--confrontation. We learn about the subjectivity of marginalized peoples.

In order to arrive at an interpretation, the reader must rely on both the textual evidence and pop-culture- sophistication.

In his revision, Alexie foregrounds the inadequacy of this archetypal representation of American Indian people, revises racist stereotypes, and opens up conversation about alternative, more human notions of Indian identity. During the popular western radio and television series, “Tonto never rebelled, never questioned the Lone Ranger’s judgment” (201). By transforming Tonto from the character who “cemented in the minds of the American public the cherished falsehood that all Indians were basically the same—friendly and stupid” into an Indian who opposes stereotype and white dominance, Alexie offers a moment of defense for Indian people (200).

Similarly, the final short story “Junior Polatkin’s Wild West Show” features an American Indian college student who recursively imagines his life as a Western in which he stars as a gunfighter, resituating the filmic genre in time and place. Our shared knowledge of Western film

convention completes the omitted premises of the enthymeme and concludes that cinematic representation constrains American Indian subjectivity. Junior sees himself as “a gunfighter with braids and a ribbon shirt. He wouldn’t speak English, just whisper Spokane” (232). He stages himself as the hero of the Western. Pop-culture-sophistication provides the major premise: Hollywood Westerns do not star Indians; they star white men and feature Indians usually as extras, frequently as obstacles or a menace, and always stereotyped. Alexie offers the minor premise: Junior is an American Indian and the central hero of the Western. Logical deduction provides multiple conclusions: Junior cannot star in a Western (his own life); popular narratives that include American Indians deny their subjectivity. The conclusion that he can’t star in his own life gestures toward internalized racism—or the subjugated person’s belief in the power structure that oppresses him. Because film conveys the experience of the protagonist, and we know that Westerns do not feature American Indian protagonists, the text undermines Junior’s dreams from the beginning. He’s defeated before he even starts. From *his own* perspective he is marginalized. Since Junior equates his own life with a Hollywood Western, the text suggests that conventions of American Indian representation subjugate Junior in his own life. Junior’s equation of film and life emphasizes that limiting representations of Indian people restrict self-imagining and ultimately self-definition and determination.

Alexie interrogates the integrity of American Indian identity as it is represented in popular culture and foregrounds a conflicting impasse in American Indian self-conceptualization. The text illustrates both Junior’s reality and his translation of that reality into a cinematic rendition, suggesting a split in Junior’s cinematic and actual subjectivity. The chasm that the text emphasizes between the individual self and the collective/social self suggests the impossibility of

American Indian subjectivity to reconcile the cultural role of Indians with the individual sense of self. The text suggests that the current way that American Indian culture figures into popular culture—as tokens, sidekicks, souvenirs, and filmic characters—prevents any real identification or representation. The representation of American Indians in popular culture necessitates the mutual exclusivity of being and belonging. The only way for the Indian individual to belong in dominant culture is to be something that he cannot be. Junior cannot both belong to the group and also be a self-determined free agent.

V. STORYTELLING AND RELATIONSHIP

Alexie adapts enthymematic reasoning, a convention of oral tradition, to literature. Oral tradition “provides a theory of reading . . . where ‘authentic’ reproduction” occurs, “and yet [has] a normative function” that “defines cultural and personal borders” (Wilson 134, 140). American Indian oral tradition and literatures weave together stories and voices both old and new, and therefore “may be termed a dialogic tradition” (134). Traditional storytelling rejects a hierarchy between old and new stories. These stories work together to inform, define, and revise the present. Moreover, they are “retold and remade by each generation,” constantly modified by storytellers (134). Silko describes storytelling as concerned with “communal truth [that] lived somewhere within the web of differing versions, disputes over minor points, [and] outright contradictions” (qtd. in Wilson 135). In this way, storytelling “continually re-creat[es] meaning in the present,” and defines a truth created by the group (135). This communal truth generates self-knowledge and a defined relation of the individual to the community.

Therefore, the adaptive nature of storytelling implies that identity, too, is provisional and

not absolute; it can be modified and re-invented through creative, shared dialogue.

In the process of storytelling, the participants “cut out the ‘noise’ of other languages that they possess [. . .] teas[ing] a consensus out of various, sometimes conflicting points of view” (Wilson 135). Instead of emphasizing the participants’ incompatible differences, the unifying language provides for understanding of and communication through shared qualities. The attempt of the participants to “‘hear’ the voice and subjectivity of the other . . . result[s] [in] a fragile moment of clarity,” which, the whole community experiences in storytelling (Wilson 136). Traditional storytelling unites members of the tribe or community by co-creating a mental model of a world.

Because Alexie uses a line of reasoning that necessitates cultural knowledge inclusive of American Indians and non-Indians, he asserts his criticisms within a symbolic order that does not discriminate along cultural or racial lines. Alexie’s mode of storytelling actualizes a co-creative encounter free from a hierarchical power structure—an egalitarian and collaborative mental model. Making meaning with his stories requires the equal contribution of logical premises both by the reader and by the text/author. This process is both cross-cultural and democratic. Given that many of Alexie’s readers are non-Indian, in his process of storytelling, the individual contributions of logical premises by non-Indian readers are equally important to the production of meaning as the premises contributed by the American Indian text/author. Therefore, the production of meaning is collaborative in a democratic sense in that the readers’ contributions are equally important, and as necessary, as the text/author’s. The rhetorical transaction engages non-Indian readers and the American Indian text/author in a non-hierarchical cooperative relationship. The fact that readers build something with the story revises the historically

exploitative relationship between groups of people.

The community that the text negotiates is one between the reader and the text or author. The text's allusions to the generic conventions and icons of the West necessitate knowledge of popular culture, which derives from a shared cultural experience: "social transactions that make up the enthymeme mean nothing if people cannot locate and understand them" (Zapico 500). Alexie's criticisms can only be understood by a reader who is "pop-culture-sophisticated," thereby establishing a language dependent upon "the intertextual network of experiences shared by people" (Bird 48, Scenters-Zapico 499). Because Alexie removes popular culture phenomena from their original context (mainstream, dominant culture) and relocates them within an indigenous context, the re-invention of meaning involves, indeed demands, integrated cultural experience and therefore, in-grouping. Therefore, pop-culture-sophistication is composed of cultural premises that unite readers with Indian ideology because Alexie's conclusions are based on a cultural code that is inclusive. This aspect of the text opens a space for cultural dialogue.

Because the reader must become more active in the construction of meaning and must enter into a sort of bond with the text in that process, the distance between the reader and the text/author shrinks into a more intimate relationship. For example, when Junior walks into the sunset, presumably into a happy ending, readers already know how impossible it is for Junior to go through those motions. Readers' understanding of dominant narrative's rules creates the story's sense of hopelessness. Alexie does not have to describe Junior's state of despair because readers deduce that from the single premise offered by the text. The reader must enter into a conversation with the text in a way that does not allow a detached, observational treatment. Only through the collaboration between Junior's story and the reader's experience can readers

understand the despair caused by entrapment in this oppressive symbolic order.

Therefore, the narrative operates along the same lines as an oral interaction. One must engage instead of absorb. Meaning is not given, but built through the contribution of logical premises. The ethnological gaze accumulates meaning by studying the object, but the collaborative engagement produces meaning by shaping a communicative relationship with the subject. If, in the experience of oral storytelling, the narrative significance is born out of the telling, retelling, revisions, corrections, and contributions of each member, the mode of enthymematic storytelling transfers this collaborative relationship from between people physically to somewhere between the author, the text, and the mind of the reader. However, the same manner of collaboration occurs in the particular logical arrangement from a written page.

By laughing at his jokes or recognizing his use of irony, the reader/author collaboration reinvents the relationship between non-Indian readers, texts, and living stories. Junior's hopeless state differs from the trope of the vanishing Indian in that readers are forced to recognize their own compliance in his despair. The sense of hopelessness is born out of the readers' contributions of premises.

VI. RELATIONSHIP TO AMERICAN INDIAN RENAISSANCE TRADITION

Alexie chooses not to revise and retell traditional indigenous stories in the mode of Silko and Momaday; instead, he revises and retells the traditional stories of, and with, contemporary America. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* not only refers to popular culture, but uses the communal knowledge of the Western to bring new meaning to the present.

While Alexie's storytelling technique looks absolutely different from what has preceded

him in the genre of American Indian literature, his ever-changing and evolving element—what is criticized as moving against the conventions of oral tradition—brings dynamism and life to the genre. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Alexie uses traditional storytelling in a way that looks unconventional because it is more invested in broadening the in-group than it is in defining an out-group.

Certainly, Renaissance works like *Ceremony* move readers into unknown epistemological territory, teaching readers to make meaning by drawing interpretive links between myth and life. However, entering that territory in *Ceremony* is a shock. The first words that readers encounter are in the Laguna language. The reading experience is alienating and challenging to non-tribal readers; however, the reader does learn to navigate and engage Laguna epistemology. The Renaissance method asserts a strong and abrupt manifestation of American Indian experience. In *Ceremony*, the non-Indian reader is out of place and does not belong in the text, which clearly connects the American Indian Renaissance with American Indian Movement politics of the 1970s.

If newer Indian stories followed the conventions of Renaissance works, they would misrepresent the contemporary cultural-political environment. The historical times are changing, and the stories that we tell must change with the times. Therefore, Alexie's stories' lack of resemblance to Renaissance writing—his incorporation of stereotype and popular culture matched by his neglect of traditional myths—comes as a positive indicator of the dynamic nature of American Indian storytelling and the tribes that produce it. The same movement between known and unknown contexts that occurs in *Ceremony* occurs in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* *Fistfight in Heaven*. Silko's myth-life connection and webbed plot structure orient readers within

an Indigenous way of knowing, just as Alexie's humorous jabs at popular media connect readers with Indigenous subjectivity. The methods by which this border-crossing take place are simply changing.

If, as Gerald Vizenor argues, the most dangerous cultural act for American Indian writers is conforming to the static expectations of the Indian as simulated by dominant culture, then Alexie's reinvention of storytelling keeps the oral tradition vibrant. The notion of an inclusive symbolic economy may be politically problematic in that it does not assert a discrete tribal symbolic order or a discrete dominant white symbolic order. The fluidity of cultural boundaries carries with it anxiety about the stability of cultural identity. However, the shared mode of making meaning does not posit a dissolution of distinctive cultural identity or experience. Surely, the legitimization (through recognition and dialogue) of culturally distinct subjectivities reinforces notions of integrity. The ethnological gaze of scientific objectivity, while it appears to establish markers of cultural identity, actually erodes the realities of cultural identity in much more profound ways through the museumification—the pinning down and filing away—of Indigenous identity. Alexie's storytelling strategy does seem to suggest, however, that despite cultural differences, there is something that we share: the human capacity to communicate across artificial barriers and see that, beyond race, we are subjects with the ability to understand and engage each other humanely.

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Sherman Alexie. Book. The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. Add to My Books. Documents (7). To ask other readers questions about The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, please sign up. Popular Answered Questions. (222). At what point is the storytelling and the memory a new creation and what is the cost of this memory and this creation? Imagination--the key component of both this kind of memory and of storytelling--he seems to say, is both a burden and a tool. ...more. flag 17 likes · Like · see review. I find Sherman Alexie a remarkable and special writer because of how he blends sharp humour with the realism of life as a Native American, on a reservation. His humour is so self-aware and not too serious to be a satire, such that I can actually enjoy thinking about the real political and cultural issues behind each story. Poet, novelist, and screenwriter, Sherman Alexie has helped to reshape conventional images of Native Americans through his lyrical, yet blunt portrayals of life on the reservation. Born Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr. His first book of prose, a collection of linked stories titled The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, published in 1993, was highly praised and won Alexie a wide audience. Alexie adapted the book into a feature-length film called Smoke Signals in 1998, which won awards from the Sundance Film Festival. Every Little Hurricane. This first story of The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven introduces Victor, his parents, and his uncles, Arnold and Adolph, who are quarreling during a New Year's Eve party when Victor is nine years old in 1976.