

# **Native American Spatial Imaginaries and Notions of Erasure in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven***

**By Nina Rothberg**

What is the experience of a people suffering “cultural erasure”? The term, invoked by Priscilla Wald in “Terms of Assimilation: Legislating Subjectivity in the Emerging Nation,”<sup>1</sup> refers to the legal and social exclusion of Indians and African-Americans in the nineteenth century by a homogenous Anglo-American body politic. Wald, Peter d’Errico, and Maureen Konkle in their respective studies<sup>2</sup> each highlight how nineteenth century U.S. law barred Native Americans from claiming natural property rights or cultural recognition. Based on the doctrine of European supremacy, the belief that Native Americans were innately inferior to whites was upheld in U.S. courts throughout the nineteenth century. Wald observes that Indians, like African-Americans, were judged as “neither citizens nor aliens, and therefore not legally representable.”<sup>3</sup>

In the *Cherokee v. Georgia* case (1831), in which the Cherokees sued the state of Georgia for imposing its laws on their territories, Supreme Court Chief Justice Marshall defined the Cherokee tribes as “domestic, dependent nations.”<sup>4</sup> D’Errico identifies this

“existence of Native Americans ... as self-governing groups, rather than simply as individuals”<sup>55</sup> as differentiating Indians from other U.S. minorities. In *Cherokee v. Georgia*, Marshall declared that the Indian nation’s “relation to the United States resembles that of a ward to his guardian.” Marshall’s usage of the term “dependent nation” together with his ward-guardian analogy undermine the concept of Native American sovereignty in the same moment that the very idea is put forth. In *Cherokee v. Georgia*, Marshall ultimately ruled that the Cherokee nation was indeed subject to Georgia state law and had no right to file suit against the state of Georgia.

However limited, the version of sovereignty allotted to Native Americans in the nineteenth century gave rise to the fear in whites that Indians, who Marshall in *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823) conceded were “brave and as high spirited as they were fierce,”<sup>56</sup> might rise up and demand their independence, wreaking havoc on Anglo-American structures of domination. Konkle notes, “The problems of Indians conceded autonomy could be resolved by their disappearance, which was effected in the production of knowledge about their inferiority and imminent extinction.”<sup>57</sup> Konkle concludes that the U.S. tried to make Indian peoples disappear as a solution to the perceived threat they posed as subordinate yet semi-sovereign peoples.

This struggle against a history of cultural erasure defines the Indian consciousness described in Sherman Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*. The novel, published in 1993, emerged more than twenty years after the American Indian Movement, the first national, large-scale organization devoted to advocating the rights of Native Americans, and more than a century after the *Cherokee v. Georgia* ruling. The central problem facing *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven* is how to carve out a new literary space capable of recuperating a communal Indian consciousness that has

suffered five hundred years of violent subjugation under Anglo-American imperialism. What kind of a literary form might speak for a traditionally oral-based community that has been culturally bound and gagged? The novel's central protagonist, Victor, addresses this problem when he asks, "How can we imagine a new language when the language of the enemy keeps our dismembered tongues tied to his belt?"<sup>8</sup>

In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*, Alexie consistently depicts Indian cultural history as a disaster zone, a highway that spans 500 years of remembered road kill. The collective Indian consciousness, the true hero of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*, stands by the side of the road, immobilized, watching. The Indians, referred to several times in the novel as "eternal survivors,"<sup>9</sup> witness each minor and major accident not individually but rather as links in a long chain of disasters and misfortunes that every Indian knows by heart. "One Indian doesn't tell another what to do," remarks Victor. "We just watch things happen and make comments."<sup>10</sup>

Alexie's novel occurs at the intersection where reservation culture, white urban capital culture, and the world of Indian mysticism/myth meet. The first setting, the reservation, is defined by starvation, stasis, and suffering. The reservation is the site of cultural paralysis, where there is nothing to do but get drunk or laugh as a way of self-medicating. Drinking and laughing become coping mechanisms for handling the recurring pattern of brief hope leading to irreversible failure, like the pattern of Indian basketball stars like Julius who rise for an instance of fame only to rapidly crash and burn. The reservation is a site of communal pain, which causes Indians either to turn on one another and fight, watch each other cry, or get high. "It's hard to be optimistic on the reservation," Victor muses. "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.”<sup>11</sup>

Clocks, watches, escalators, televisions, the police, 7-11 culture, white women, Seattle, commodity cheese, and careening roller coasters of consumerism define the second space, the white man's world. This is the world of artifice and trickery, through which the Indian passes as outsider, clown, and victim. In the novel's "Indian Education" chapter, Victor feels he is losing himself when he kisses a white woman who embodies this second world—the colonialist/capitalist siren out to court, contain, and ultimately stamp out Indian identity. Victor recalls, "On the day I leaned through the basement of the HUD house and kissed the white girl, I felt the good-byes I was saying to my entire tribe ... I was saying good-bye to my tribe, to all the Indian girls and women I might have loved, to all the Indian men who might have called me cousin, even brother."<sup>12</sup>

The third space in the novel embodies the hallucinated oral/historical memory-field of the Indian peoples. This third space acts as a kind of haunted cultural backyard where the drugged-up symbols of Indian heroism, myth, and massacre are summoned up by drums, fancy-dancing, buffalos, coyote, and leaping salmon in an intoxicated blur of dream-vision. This place of nonlinear, atemporal, spiraling visions is Thomas-Builds-the-fire's world, the world of spoken and remembered stories, of Latah Creek and Wounded Knee, a place of collective cultural unconscious, where equations of anger and imagination equal a kind of cultural survival. Thomas is at once the scapegoat, hero, and exile of this world.

The overlap of these three cultural imaginaries forms the identity of the Indian consciousness in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*. Structurally, the novel mimics the conditions of the third imaginary in that it does away with conventional literary linearity, employs multiple narrators, and layers dream images upon

disembodied voices. The novel is at the same time peppered with expressions from commodity culture, the second world, the white man's sphere, proving how the language and imagery of commodity cheese and television, like the white woman's kiss, have pervaded and altered Indian identity. Similarly, images of inner-reservation struggle, emblematic of the first spatial imaginary, the reservation as imploding island, emerge as evidence of internalized reservation frustration and despair, taking on the form of Indian-on-Indian violence—Adolph punching Arnold, Victor beating up Thomas. Hence the novel reflects a *mélange* of themes, images, and languages from each of the three spheres described.

The Native American identity in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven* finds space for expression in the third spatial imaginary, the collage-dreamscape of Indian imagination. At the same time, the second spatial imaginary of white capital culture arm-wrestles with the first space, the reservation. The white hand pushes to wipe out the Indian, to blot out the stereotypical image of his long braids framing his dark, stoic face. The Indian reservation feels the force of white capital culture pressing upon his culture, with its TV imagery and junk food infiltrating the reservation both physically and mentally. "I am in the 7-11 of my dreams, surrounded by five hundred years of convenient lies,"<sup>13</sup> utters the nameless narrator in the "Imagining the Reservation" chapter, voicing an awareness of the commercial takeover of Indian consciousness, the continuance of a tradition of erasure that extends back five centuries.

The domestic despair embedded in everyday reservation life coupled with the tyrannical pressure of white capital culture attempts to strangle the cultural memory of the Native American peoples. It is in the third space of dreams, drugs, and dance that the Indian identity finds agency and defies notions of cultural erasure. The third space, a

hallucinated dance of communal memory, continues independent but yet aware of the other two spaces, like a warrior bearing the heavy costume of tradition, magic, and survival, dancing to an incessant drum beat.

Early on in the novel, the character Junior, tripping on green mushrooms, imagines a dance that will summon back his lost tribe members. He begins, “*they’re all gone, my tribe is gone.*” He suggests, “I’ll dance the Ghost Dance. I’ll bring them back. Can you hear the drums?” The vision of dance rises up before him, overtaking him. “We dance in circles growing larger and larger,” he says, “until we are standing on the shore, watching all the ships returning to Europe. All the white hands are waving good-bye and we continue to dance, dance until the ships fall off the horizon, dance until we are so tall and strong that the sun is nearly jealous. *We dance that way.*”<sup>14</sup>

This passage is emblematic of the third space, a literary and imagined place that defies Western configurations of logic and temporal linearity, a space in which a new language is born from ancient legend and defiant claiming, resisting the past of European domination. A new language is created that is neither spoken nor written but rather danced and dreamed in a phantasmagorical ecstasy across the page.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Priscilla Wald, “Terms of Assimilation: Legislating Subjectivity in the Emerging Nation,” *Boundary 2* 19 (1992): 77-104.

<sup>2</sup> Peter d’Errico, “Native Americans in America,” in Frederick E. Hoxie, Peter C. Mancall, and James H. Merrell, eds., *American Nations: Encounters in Indian Country* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 481-99 and Maureen Konkle, “Indian Literacy, U.S., Colonialism, and Literary Criticism,” in Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, eds., *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race,*

*Ethnicity, and Literature* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2000), 151–75.

<sup>3</sup> Wald, 77.

<sup>4</sup> *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 5 Pet. 1 (1831).

<sup>5</sup> d’Errico, 481.

<sup>6</sup> *Johnson v. McIntosh*, 8 Wheat. 590 (1823).

<sup>7</sup> Konkle, 154.

<sup>8</sup> Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993), 152.

<sup>9</sup> Alexie, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Alexie, 216.

<sup>11</sup> Alexie, 49.

<sup>12</sup> Alexie, 176.

<sup>13</sup> Alexie, 150.

<sup>14</sup> Alexie, 17.