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# Sound And Storytelling—an Auditory Angle on Internalized Racism In Invisible Man And the Lone Ranger And Tonto Fistfight In Heaven

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Sound and Storytelling—An Auditory Angle on Internalized Racism in *Invisible  
Man* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

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Bachelor of Arts in English

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May 1995

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

Cleveland State University

August 2020

We hereby approve this thesis

For

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For the department of

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Sound and Storytelling—An Auditory Angle on Internalized Racism in *Invisible Man* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

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**ABSTRACT**

Studies of American literature and, more specifically, literature by authors of color quite often focus on aspects of “othering”, that is, the practice of separating minority culture and literature from the larger or more dominant culture. Even before the onset of the Civil Rights Era, issues of racism have informed much of the literature of the United States, and just as long as racism has played a role in American literature, scholars, critics, and readers have discussed it. The bulk of criticism discussing African American and Native American literature examines the issues of racism as perpetrated by white society. What is not as commonly examined is the role that internalized racism plays. Ralph Ellison and Sherman Alexie are two of the most extensively studied authors of African American and Native American descent respectively, but analysis of their work tends to overlook the racism that a person can experience against his own race, choosing instead to focus on the hegemonic master narrative. Both authors used a blend of narratological self-deprecation to illustrate a desire both from and for their respective races within a larger, “American” identity; however, whereas Ellison’s novel is a *bildungsroman* that uses a single narrator’s self-hatred, Alexie employs multiple narrators and points of view to stitch bricolage that ultimately serves as a cohesive narrative. Eschewing the typical line of argument about visual imagery, this paper intends to explore how each author uses elements of sound, auditory metaphors, and, especially storytelling and folklore to depict internalized racism, how it works its way under the skin, and how it can be used to expose the effects of overt racism.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The question of identity in literature is certainly well-traveled ground, even more so within the context of racial identity. Issues of race provide a wide variety of thematic considerations in literature written by people of color, and in most of these cases, authors focus on an imbalance of power based on racial differences that are both concrete and perceived. Writing at the pivotal moment in which the Civil Rights Era was gaining momentum, Ralph Ellison examined racial critique from a perspective that did was not always in concert with his contemporaries. Published in 1952, his seminal work, *Invisible Man*, immediately garnered both acclaim and skepticism from audiences and critics alike. To this day, controversy eddies around the work, with literary scholars consistently ranking it among the most influential works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and racial crusaders denouncing it for not advocating strongly enough against racial injustice. No stranger to controversy himself, Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, has faced backlash for what has been perceived as, at best, exposing the weaknesses of



reservation life and, at worst exploiting the miseries of his people for profit. In both cases, there is plenty written about the discrepancy between white perception of minority characters, authorial representation of minority characters, and characters' perception of themselves. Characters of color face marginalization by many other characters, most of them white, but in some cases, those responsible for the "othering" actually find themselves in the same race as the "others." Such is the case for both Ellison's unnamed narrator and the various protagonists within Alexie's collection of short stories. Both authors depict their characters struggling to fit into their respective societies (both within and outside of their races), and in each case, the resulting societal parameters create an internal discord within the protagonists. Ellison's narrator journeys from an all-black section of his neighborhood to an all-black university from which he is expelled, only to land in New York City amid conflicting factions of people of color, each fighting to achieve equality through very different means. Alexie's work centers on multiple narrators of different age and gender demographics, and like Ellison, he installs each as a part of microcosmic acts of hegemony. Despite the fact that several of Alexie's stories begin elsewhere, all literary roads lead back to the reservation that provides the central setting of each.

The criticism that addresses *Invisible Man* is both more plentiful and more widely arrayed due to the relative newness of Alexie's work, but what is surprising is how little is written asserting Ellison's likely influence on Alexie seeing as both directly address racial and identity concerns. Many of the critics who address racial questions raise the same points. Josep Armengol, for example, offers the opinion that "white dominance has been legitimized by making it ostensibly normal and neutral," revealing that "whites are

taught not to recognize white privilege, as it is simply taken for granted,” and further clarifying that, “white privilege, unless threatened, remains invisible to its holders” as he examines racism in *Invisible Man* (34). For Armegnol, the bulk of racism in the novel understandably comes in the form of white racism perpetrated against black characters, though he does briefly acknowledge the internalized racism of Dr. Bledsoe, the Dean of Students at the all-black university. Other critics such as Stephanie Wildman, Adrienne Davis, and Hsuan Hu call upon the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Lacan to solidify their arguments about race, racial identity, and representation both in vision and linguistics, and in doing so each presents a compelling claim about the nature of minority invisibility when held in the larger context of white perception and privilege. To this end, much of the criticism of *Invisible Man* emphasizes eyesight and blindness as metaphors for racial “othering”. Critics of Alexie are similarly interested in issue of race and racial othering, but the bulk of criticism is directed more towards his novel *Indian Killer*, overlooking *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and I shall deal more specifically with criticism surrounding Alexie’s work shortly. Because so many layers to racism refer specifically to *visual* differences, it stands to reason that scholars would align their analysis with the exploration of visual imagery; however, in limiting themselves thusly, critics are missing an opportunity. In addition to this wealth of analysis, I would add that despite the richness of visual imagery, both Ellison and Alexie additionally rely heavily on *auditory* and *verbal* elements, particularly speeches, speech acts, musical metaphors, different narrative voices, and oral storytelling to create protagonists who challenge issues of race in a new way. Both Ralph Ellison and Sherman Alexie use these auditory and verbal elements to depict their characters’ hatred for themselves to illustrate

the way that external racism can work its way under the skin until it becomes internalized. Specifically, Ellison uses his characters' experience with sound to delineate how his narrator moves from ignorance of his self-perception of race when he is a student, to the initial acknowledgement of that self-perception and a beginning understanding of its problematic nature, to his eventual confession of his own internalized racism as he begins to combat it. As a counterpart to this type of self-actualization, Alexie uses similar elements of sound and music, but he more strongly calls upon multiple narrators of varying ages, narratological voice, and point of view, connecting them solely through race to address his personal experiences with internalized racism through satire.

## CHAPTER II

### ELLISON IN HIS OWN WORDS

To better understand Ralph Ellison's argument, it is helpful first to become familiar with his personal experiences with the aforementioned internalized racism and how he uses it to inform his works. Of particular interest to me are Ellison's experiences as a student and as a soldier. As previously introduced, the trajectory of criticism surrounding this book deals with quite variegated aspects of Ellison's work, but there are several threads of continuity, most of them dealing specifically with issues of vision, blindness, invisibility, and perception with regards to identity and race. Ellison himself acknowledges his novel's focus as such, but all too frequently, common modes of inquiry bifurcate questions of identity into merely black and white—more specifically chasing down a line of argument that *Invisible Man* is about only how a black identity fits into the white hegemonic culture. While the argument carries a good deal of weight, exploring it in such a way can be quite limiting. Norman Podhoretz offers an alternative, yet compatible argument that, despite Ellison's efforts "to show that Negroes were very far

from being an undifferentiated mass of suffering victims with no autonomous existence...they were not...a people wholly created and determined by forces controlled by the white world,” unfortunately, and all too often, this reductive patina “was how they had been, and still were (and to this day still are) most often portrayed by their own spokesmen, literary as well as political, black as well as white” (28). In short, Podhoretz is broaching the problem that even in contemporary study, literary critics are still prone to encapsulating the novel and its discussion of race in an “us versus them” framework that is conveniently divided down the middle by race. It is far more difficult to find critics discussing “us versus ourselves”. Decades after Ellison’s novel was published, scholars are still contemplating the role of black authors within literary canons. In his 1982 essay “Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times”, Henry Louis Gates offers a particular concern about the prospect of white critics attempting to analyze the works of African American authors. In fact, he presents the following caveat to any critic undertaking such an endeavor:

For the critic of Afro-American literature, this process is even more perilous because most of the contemporary literary theory derives from critics of Western European languages and literatures. Is the use of theory to write about Afro-American literature merely another form of intellectual indenture, a mental servitude as pernicious in its intellectual implications as any other kind of enslavement? (Gates 77)

For Gates, the issue revolves around the existence of an African American literary canon independent of Western literature, and to delineate the canon with attributes of the Western canon is a betrayal, one he describes as “Learning the old master’s tongue...[as

an] act of empowerment” (74). For Ellison, on the other hand, at the very center of the African American experience was the *American* experience, not separate from white America, but integrated as a part of a whole America. Ellison’s influences included many white authors--European novelists such as Emily Brontë and Fyodor Dostoevsky as well as many American authors such as Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, but the most surprising impact was that of William Faulkner who, “in Ellison’s judgement produced more truthful portraits of Negroes than any black or white liberal Northern novelist had ever succeeded in doing” (Podhoretz 34). As a student at Tuskegee University, Ellison found himself exposed to a wide variety of novelists and authors, and it fostered in him both a love of literature (he had previously intended to study music) and an overwhelming sense of cultural pride that manifested as more than just racial pride, cultural pride, or national pride. His sense of identity was shaped by an amalgamation of all three, and from it, he developed a yearning to become what he felt was the quintessential “American writer” because he believed in “a common culture, one which the various ethnic and racial groups making up a heterogeneous society like ours steadily enriched by their indigenous contributions,” and, in essence, the culture resulting from this amalgamation, according to Podhoretz, Ellison believed, “could be claimed by any American of whatever group or color, and to it...also owed a debt and an allegiance” (30). Quite the contradiction to Gates’ perception of the role of black literary work in the United States, Ellison offers that while maintaining African American culture was a priority, it was imperative to do so within the context of its role as an integral part of a national culture, going so far as to claim that understanding white culture in context would be beneficial for black children. “[N]arrowing the psychological distance between

them and ourselves,” Ellison suggests, would give African Americans “freedom to broaden [their] personal culture by absorbing the culture of others [even] within [their] state of social and political unfreedom” (qtd. in Dickstein 37). It is no secret that Ralph Ellison tacitly disagreed with much of the sentiment behind Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*, and when criticized for not being militant enough with regards to the fight for racial equality, Ellison calmly replied, “Wright was no spiritual father of mine...I rejected Bigger Thomas as any *final* image of Negro personality” (qtd. in Dickstein 31). As a result, he faced no shortage of that type of disparagement from not only literary critics, but from African American authors, and even everyday citizens as well. In constructing “Flying Home”, a short story dealing with his experiences during his tenure as a merchant marine, Ellison struggled to illustrate the frustration soldiers faced when fighting overseas for a country that would deny them equality once they returned home. As he began to realize that “democratic ideals and military valor alike were rendered absurd by the prevailing mystique of race and color,” Ellison further developed the basis for his exploration of the internalized racism that serves as an undercurrent in *Invisible Man*. He had, “discovered that [the implicit drama of the military experiences] was for more complex than [he] has assumed. For while [he] had conceived of it in terms of a black-white, majority-minority conflict...[he] came to realize that [his character] was also experiencing difficulty in seeing *himself*. And this had to do with his ambivalence before his own group’s division of class and diversities of culture” Ellison xiii). A fitting example of the stratification of class within race is the narrator’s episode with Jim Trueblood, which I shall address later. The internal racial schisms developed within his characters act as a catalyst that drives forward his narrator’s awakening within the

bildungsroman, and once Ellison returned from his service, he experienced more moments that informed this awakening even as he worked his way through *Invisible Man*. It may seem unorthodox to cross the genres of short story and novel in comparing Alexie's collection of short stories and Ellison's novel; however, it is important to note that Ellison frequently cited "Flying Home" as inspirational source material for *Invisible Man*. Similarly, Alexie's work, though a seemingly disparate pastiche of stories, is actually a consistent assemblage of characters and episodes. In fact, despite the variegated narrators and viewpoints, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* actually forms a cohesive, nearly linear portrait of life on the reservation.

In the introduction to the novel, Ellison describes the circumstances surrounding the process of writing it. He recounts the differences between his reception in the white, upscale neighborhoods in which he found himself and the neighborhoods of color, remarking the ironic acceptance in the former and the skepticism and distrust in the latter. He distinctly recalls not being

unappreciative of the hilarious inversion of the social mobility that took [him] on daily journeys from a Negro neighborhood, wherein strangers questioned [his] moral character on nothing more substantial than [their] common color and [his] vague deviation from accepted norms, to find sanctuary in a predominantly white environment wherein that same color and vagueness of role rendered [him] anonymous, and hence beyond public concern (Ellison xi).

For Ellison, it seems somewhat strange that he is greeted with more suspicion by his African American contemporaries in what are undoubtedly less privileged neighborhoods. Ironically, rather than being targeted by his white neighbors, Ellison finds



it is his black neighbors who seek to fit him into stereotypes usually attributed to African American men. They “considered [him] of questionable character,” because he “fitted none of the roles...with which [his] neighbors were familiar...a thug, numbers-runner...pusher, postal worker, doctor, dentist, lawyer, tailor...preacher” (Ellison ix). It is interesting to note Ellison’s word choice here. Despite the fact that he is recounting others’ prejudice, when presenting the various stereotypes into which African Americans can find themselves pigeonholed, Ellison chooses first to present the more questionable roles that societal stereotypes foist upon his race--each of them, linked to criminal activity as a means of self-advancement--even as he remarks on the discriminatory behavior, and it is not until the end of the list that Ellison offers up, almost as an afterthought, more “respectable” options . It is as if he himself is subconsciously complicit in branding his people this way; his first inclination is to identify black people with the worst stereotypes, but this is not the only way in which Ellison paints a negative portrait. Even as the analogy moves rapidly from the criminal to the blue collar to the white collar, what is most telling about this line of reasoning is the sentiment Ellison expresses ultimately about the various identities--that he fits in with none of them. He is, essentially, a man without a people or a place. Ellison, in fact, expanded this idea from his short story “Flying Home” in which his protagonist, an African American pilot, confronts racism both from his superior officers and from his own “ambivalence before his own group’s division of class and diversities of culture” (Ellison xiii). Ellison’s uses this ambivalence to illustrate a tension that is, no doubt, caused by a hierarchy of power imposed by an outside force. From this, it is not difficult to imagine the protagonist of *Invisible Man* experiencing the same internal conflict that Ellison used in his pilot to

illustrate the effects of trying to assimilate into a society that by its very design is bound and determined to oppress. The bildungsroman is almost allegorical in this way, and as we follow his narrator's path to understanding, we get also a direct and immediate sense of how Ellison is using the aforementioned sound and linguistic elements to create it. To better illustrate how Ellison utilizes auditory elements to express social commentary, I turn more specifically now to how he uses the tradition of oral storytelling through which the protagonist begins to both to absorb and question his culture.

**CHAPTER III**  
**A GRANDFATHER’S WORDS AND A YOUNG MANS CONFUSION—ORAL**  
**STORYTELLING AS A MODEL FOR CRITICISM**

Beginning *in media res* and progressing into a flashback, only to resume and end back in the literary present is a skillful way not just to engage the reader, but also to establish a tone hearkening back to traditional folktales. Sarah Gilbreath Ford argues that “the form is oral; in the prologue and the epilogue, Ellison tries to replicate the dynamics of oral storytelling by making the narrator the storyteller and the readers the audience. The ‘lively’ action of the storytelling helps the reader feel as if he or she is participating” (100). Not only does the use of first-person narration accomplish the feeling of gathering in a group and sitting down to listen to a tale, Ford points out that “in oral cultures, tellers and listeners search for a verbal space for interaction. Instead of victory, the value is on connection” (97). In this capacity, Ellison is seeking to continue this oral tradition, making the readers into *listeners*. Additionally, Ford explains that

in the very beginning lines, when the narrator says, “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms,” he speaks as if the reader/listener is interrupting. He also uses second person repeatedly to involve this narratee in the action as when, for example, he assures his audience, “I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I’m invisible and live in a hole, I am dead” (6) (100).

It is clear that Ellison is indicating the presence of an audience, and his narrator uses this opportunity to create his own sort of oral tradition. He proceeds immediately to take the reader into a flashback. We should consider the heuristic nature of most oral storytelling, fables being a prime example of this. In establishing this kind of framework, not only is Ellison preparing the reader to learn something from the tale, he is also explaining that he will learn as well, an idea that the narrator himself confirms for us with his poignantly telling final words. Indeed, it is by design that Ellison so deftly uses the folktale as a template to draw the reader in. Given that the nature of African American storytelling emerged in the folktale form, it would stand to reason that Ellison is utilizing its construction in celebration of African American culture, and, though he has vocally celebrated the African American roots of storytelling on several occasions, in response to the claim that his use of folklore was solely racially-based, Ellison said the following:

I use folklore in my work not because I am a Negro, but because writers like [T.S.] Eliot and [James] Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance...the Negro American writer is also an heir of the human experience which is literature, and this might well be more important to him than his living

folk tradition (qtd. in Podhoretz 32).

Echoing his previous sentiments, Ellison is clearly delineating both American culture and African American culture as the latter fits within the former. In this capacity, he provides a perfect example of how a culture, within the framework of another culture, even one that is hegemonic, can grow and expand itself. Traditional African folklore, as filtered through the voices of Eliot and Joyce is actually fortified and intensified for Ellison and, subsequently, for his narrator.

That Ellison begins the tale as a prologue is equally telling. In the literary world, a prologue is most often presented as simply an introductory piece—a device to set a tone, establish a scene, or create a context for a work; however, the etymology of the word reveals that it originates from Latin roots which mean “before speaking” (“prologue”). Indeed, the Ellison’s prologue serves to prepare his audience for the true storytelling that is about to begin. As he ends the prologue by recounting a dream, the narrator prepares a fantastical tone that aligns nicely with the folktales he references throughout. Even the first page of the novel proper alludes to the folktale-esque nature of the novel. Beginning with, “It goes a long way back, some twenty years. All my life I had been looking for something” (Ellison 15), the narrator establishes that the story will be a kind of quest; he might just as well have begun with the lines “once upon a time”. It is here that Ellison begins to outline the dissociation the narrator is feeling as he divulges the first clue about his relationship to his cultural identity. He confesses, “I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed for having at one time been ashamed” (*ibid*). The narrator then recounts a memory in which his grandfather, on his deathbed, offers the following advice:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open... Learn it to the young'uns (Ellison 16).

Here, Ellison uses the familial connection between grandfather and son to frame what he himself will be accomplishing through his narrator, namely that the grandfather is indirectly charging the narrator with the task of keeping up the tradition of teaching the young ones the past, which is the job of the storyteller. Additionally, however, Ellison is presenting his readers with the lesson his narrator will have to learn over the course of the novel—that the storyteller, when aware of his audience's desires, can ultimately use them for his own gain, specifically, in this case, the habit of telling the dominant culture what they want to hear, acquiescing to them to facilitate his own success.

Ellison cleverly utilizes two strategies here to illustrate the disconnection that separates the narrator from his culture. First, Ellison uses both a naïve syntactical structure and a phonetic type of dialect within the grandfather's speech. By arming the grandfather with phrases like “undermine 'em with grins” and “agree 'em to death and destruction”, Ellison establishes his narrator's perception of the grandfather character as simpleminded, nearly addled. Additionally, the malapropic use of “learn” at the end of the advice is more than simply a grammatical mistake; rather, it serves to underscore the grandfather's lack of education. Both of these issues further accentuate just how far removed the narrator, as an educated and eloquent man, is from his family tradition. Even the narrator's own parents hasten to warn him to forget the words immediately, which presents no significant problem at all; he cannot follow his grandfather's syntax, and,

therefore, the wisdom is lost. As a matter of fact, Ellison's narrator is so confused by the words that he actually considers them antithetical to good advice, and in presenting the information thusly, Ellison also succeeds in couching the words of wisdom in a veil of ambiguity for the audience and extends his narrator's befuddlement even further.

When he considers his grandfather's words, the narrator is tripped up by the idea that fitting societal expectation is a form of treachery. That, in and of itself, should not be surprising to the narrator, for an oppressive culture such as that in which Ellison sets the story should naturally foster a feeling of resentment, and trying to conform oneself to the oppressor *is* an act of treachery against one's own culture. That is not exactly what is happening here, however. The narrator confused by his grandfather's advice because he "was considered an example of desirable conduct—*just as [his] grandfather had been* (emphasis mine)" (Ellison 17). What is more troubling to him, on the other hand, is that "when [he] was praised for [his] conduct [he] felt guilt in some way that [he] was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired [him] to...have been sulky and mean" (*ibid*). Put another way, though Ellison's white characters may *appear* to want the meek, mild, and subservient idea of a black man, he implies that instead, it is the stereotype of the angry person of color that they *truly* want—one who confirms their preconceived and racist ideas of what it means to be black in America. The narrator's confusion is also ours, and thus Ellison begins tracing elements of internalized the internalized racism that will eventually provide both characters and readers with his main argument—that a person cannot establish his or her identity solely by societal expectation. Within an orally traditional family structure, it is usually the eldest who sagaciously bestow their wisdom

upon the eager and receptive youth in the family. In this case, however, it is the narrator's status as a formally educated young man that seemingly places him in a reversal of roles, i.e. he feels himself to be the wiser man while his grandfather is addled and simple.

Similarly, Ellison's use of phonetics within the both word "swoller" and the clipping of the initial consonant of "them" into "em" steepens the grandfather's advice in ambiguity. Whereas most readers will appreciate the down-home, "folksy" nature of this type of speech, Ellison's narrator reacts only with confusion and frustration. The grandfather is charging the narrator with the task of keeping up the tradition—teaching the young ones the past, which is the job of the storyteller. Because he does not yet fully understand the cultural significance of the oral tradition, the narrator finds himself befuddled, and "could never be fully sure of what he meant...it became a constant puzzle which lay unanswered in [his] mind" (*ibid*). This confusion should be expected, however, for Ellison has not yet provided his narrator with understanding of his own prejudice. In fact, he even fails to recognize the same sort of internalized racism when he is confronted with it later, during his time at university. Instead, Ellison has established a tone of disconnection between narrator and heritage, and it is this disconnect which will blossom into unexplainable discomfort, disillusionment with his own people, and eventually acknowledgment and reversal of his narrator's self-hatred. At this point, the narrator is at the beginning of his journey of self-discovery, and it is this journey that will eventually lead to understanding of himself, and his acceptance will eventually lead to enlightenment about his grandfather's words. Ellison, himself believed in the power of this type of storytelling, arguing thusly: "Perhaps if we learn more of what has happened and *why* it happened, we'll learn more of who we really are. And perhaps if we learn



more about our unwritten history, we won't be so vulnerable to the capriciousness of events as we are today" (qtd. in O'Meally 244). That the narrator is so confused by his grandfather's words only indicates just how far removed he is from his culture- an idea we clearly see, but that the narrator is too close to realize. Fortifying the storytelling elements in his wealth of literary techniques, Ellison uses auditory symbols and linguistic trickery to move his narrator from the unlearned wisdom of his grandfather to a similarly unrecognized alienation from his peers in a boxing match.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BATTLE ROYAL—SOUND AND FURY

The “Battle Royal” scene offers an additional clear illustration of the narrator’s disconnection from his culture, and while the elements of blindness or obscured vision Ellison uses do make compelling evidence to suggest a racial metaphor (indeed, much analysis of this scene deals with the visual elements alone), focusing attention solely on vision ignores the *auditory* elements of the scene. I contend that Ellison reveals more criticism of his protagonist’s as-of-yet unacknowledged internalized racism by what he hears rather than sees. Ellison also structures this scene in a style reminiscent of a traditional folktale, and that structure in conjunction with the depiction of compromised vision actually serves to accentuate these auditory elements. In “Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison,” Susan L. Blake suggests that by aligning, “elements of black-American folk experience...with similar elements of American or Western mythology, [Ellison] is ritualizing them” (122). She argues that the fight is actually a kind of initiation that alludes to a folktale in which, “Old Marster and

his neighbor pit their two strongest slaves against each other and stake their plantations on the outcome” (*ibid*). This analogy is bitterly fitting as the boys, all young and African America, have been coaxed there under one guise or another (the narrator being promised a forum to deliver his speech) and ultimately promised prize money for the one left standing—and the white men are taking bets on them. The dramatic irony here is that, despite the fact that the boys cannot see their “sponsors,” we are tacitly aware who they are via the narrator’s *de facto* memory. There are many parallels between the two stories, not the least of which are the spectators who remain either partially obscured or completely unseen, pulling the strings and calling out as the young men fight. Just as the plantation owners place bets on the slave fight, the narrator hears a disembodied voice yell, “I got my money on the big boy” (Ellison 25). Ellison’s narrator is in the dark, literally and figuratively, and even after the blindfold is removed, the room is so full of smoke and so dimly lit that the narrator is metaphorically “in the dark” about his situation; he is not able to attach a face to the disembodied voice betting over his fight, and Ellison depicts the culture to which the protagonist so badly wants to belong as a voice that looms ever out of his reach. It is no more substantial than if it were in his head alone.

In separating voice from vision, Ellison is repeating an image from earlier in the novel in which the narrator, under the influence of marijuana, learns “a new analytical way of listening to music,” (9) and as he does so, he becomes increasingly aware of the impact music has on him. As the narrator winds his way into the song to which he listens, Ellison frames his thoughts as a series of disjointed snippets of dialogue in which faceless people interrupt each other and never finish their own sentences. The narrator hears what

sounds like the beginning of a sermon, and as a voice exclaims, “In the beginning,” as a sort of call, voices interject, “At the very start” in response. The first voice continues, “...there was blackness,” to which the crowd bellows back, “Preach it” (Ellison 10). Each prompting from the first voice incites a terse reply in a rapid-fire back and forth, and despite the fact that the voices are affirming what is said to them, the telegraphic nature of the speech belies the anxious nature of the sentiments expressed within. Ellison punctuates this repartee as the first voice warns that “Black will make you...or black will unmake you” (*ibid*). Here, Ellison lays bare the consequences of internalized racism for both his narrator and his readers. The narrator is acknowledging that his people, though they struggle against prejudice from outside sources, struggling more significantly as a result of self-hatred. Oppression from outside oneself is detrimental; oppression from within a culture is devastating. People of color have the opportunity to raise themselves, but they also have the power to destroy themselves more efficiently than anyone else does. It is this point that Ellison, via his narrator’s auditory experiences, intends to underscore more fully, and he will take his readers along for the journey.

Returning to the Battle Royal, what makes the fight all the more sinister is that before the it even began, “[the] boys had arranged it among themselves” (*ibid*). The narrator is not fully a part of the ritual, however. He does not understand, as the other fighters seemingly do, that the outcome of the fight has been prearranged. He is the only fighter unaware that the other men are to leave one-by-one until the final two must fight for the prize. Ellison excludes his narrator from the plans, but it is not merely symbolic that his culture has excluded him. As he faces the final opponent, the narrator is unable to distinguish him as a person. Here, the narrator is unable to fully see Tatlock, and it is not

accidental that Ellison chooses to have “two men in tuxedos [leap] into the ring and [remove] the blindfold” (Ellison 24). Separating Tatlock from his name, the narrator explains, “[he] kept coming, bringing the rank, sharp violence of stale sweat. His face was a black blank of a face, only his eyes alive —with hate” (Ellison 24). Not only has the narrator been discounted from the plans of the fight, he, too, isolates himself, refusing to acknowledge his opponent as a man and verbally reduces him to an anonymous face, describing him only by his skin color. That Ellison has the narrator verbally reduce his opponent to a “black blank” further distances the narrator from his people, more closely aligning him with the very men for whom his suffering is sport. Again, Ellison is using his character’s internalized racism, at this point not merely unintentional, but also unconscious, as a means of further exemplifying the notion that people of color who do not see their oppressors become similarly complicit in that oppression. Most compelling here is Ellison’s word choice. By coupling the noun “blank” with the adjective “black,” Ellison accomplishes two things: he demonstrates that his narrator feels no connection to his race because he is unable to find the words to describe his opponent and must reduce him to color alone, and Ellison implicates his narrator in the very same demoralizing racism that has been foisted upon Ellison himself; a “blank” has neither identity nor agency.

This battle represents the narrator’s struggles with his own identity, and here Ellison deftly employs several clever tools at his disposal, the first of which is a shift in focus to the protagonist’s speech acts-- his only thought is of delivering his speech, and the second is the nature of the speech itself. As he jukes and dodges the blows that rain over his head, the narrator wonders only “about [his] speech. How would it go? Would

they recognize [his] ability? What would they give to [him]?" (Ellison 24). If readers, so appalled by the violence of the scene, have forgotten its catalyst, Ellison quickly and repeatedly uses the narrator's internal monologue to remind us of his very reason for being there. He has so dazzled the trustees of the school with his oratory that they have offered him the opportunity to deliver his speech—one in which he references a speech by Booker T. Washington, himself a figure of controversy, by urging people to "cast down [their] buckets where they are" (Ellison 30)—advocating that they assimilate themselves into white culture and yield to its expectations. This advice seems contrary to Ellison's ideal of embracing African folklore, and, indeed, the narrator is not yet ready to do so as he is motivated simply by the prospect of becoming what he imagines the white trustees envision him to be. To help further illustrate this gap, Ellison offers a quick exchange between the narrator and Tatlock employing an easy-to-miss African-American tradition—the dozen, which is "an individual, extended...display of verbal skills in the fine art of savage insults" (Hughes 133). The narrator, desperate to end the fight but not knowing how to avoid being beaten, offers Tatlock all the prize money if only he will take a dive. Nonplussed, Tatlock responds, "Give it to your ma" (Ellison 25).

Traditionally a game of one-ups-manship, the dozen is a battle of insults, usually centered on taboo topics, in this case, one's mother, and Ellison's narrator is not familiar enough to return the verbal joust. In fact, he is not even cognizant of the verbal barb, and rather than being appropriately outraged by the insult, the narrator continues to think only of his speech. Ellison has separated his characters, not by race, but by class distinctions—the narrator is a young man of words, seemingly praised for his articulateness (he is not aware that the speech he has been promised the opportunity to deliver is, in fact, to

provide a different sort of entertainment as they intend to mock him); whereas Tatlock is a big brute of a man, and the only verbiage he is able to offer is a juvenile type of lowbrow insult. The narrator is not interested in the cultural significance, still alienated from Tatlock and, by proxy, his people. What is more telling here is not just that he is unaffected, but, rather, that he feels “hopeless desperation,” and “wanted to deliver [his] speech more than anything else in the world, because [he] felt that only [the white men] could truly judge [his] ability, and now this stupid clown was ruining [his] chances” (*ibid*). Because it is the strength of the speech that initially “earns” the narrator a place in the ring, thus putting the whole Battle Royal in motion, Ellison returns to the speech to culminate the scene. Consequently, he leaves readers with little choice but to conclude that the narrator has learned nothing throughout the ordeal. If anything, his animosity towards people of his color is strengthened, a point which Ellison further underscores in the scene that follows the fight—one in which the narrator has a one-on-one conversation with one of the white trustees of the school to which he receives a scholarship. The narrator’s speech, in which he urges people of color to follow Washington’s lead and optimize the situations in which they land in order to ingratiate themselves into a society that reviles them is just the pretext the white trustees use to lure the narrator to the fight in the first place. What is perhaps the most galling irony here is that having his own principles eviscerated right before him does nothing to change his ideology, even though it has left him bruised and grasping for fool’s gold on an electrified carpet. Instead, he delivers his speech proudly, undeterred even by the mouthful of blood that impedes his words.

**CHAPTER V**  
**STRATIFICATION BY CLASS AND BY CLASS—THE STUDENT’S**  
**AMBIVALENCE**

Ellison continues to echo this disconnection as he imbues his hapless narrator with the sense of pride in his education that alienates him from other members of his own race, particularly the ultimate symbol of shame-- Jim Trueblood. The episode with Trueblood underscores both Ellison’s use of folklore and the oral tradition and his narrator’s contempt for both. Tasked with chauffeuring a school trustee around the grounds of his university, the narrator is tasked with providing an “authentic” experience, one which Ellison renders his narrator unable to provide. The narrator happens upon the collection of local sharecropper cabins, and is immediately conflicted. He explains to his audience that Trueblood, “had brought disgrace upon the black community...and now his name was never mentioned above a whisper,” but even as he does so, he confesses that Trueblood had previously, “been well-liked as a hard worker who took good care of his family’s needs, and as one who told the old stories with a sense of humor and a magic



that made them come alive,” (Ellison 46) but in both circumstances, Trueblood’s mystique sets a tone ripe for good storytelling. Here, Ellison is especially tricky. By using the passive construction, he is deftly able to insert a blink-and-you-miss-it partition between the narrator and his culture, and it further divides the narrator from the folklore so important within his community. Of course, moments later, Ellison is considerably less understated in transitioning his character from disconnect to more manifest contempt, as his narrator acknowledges that the spirituals Trueblood sang in evening church were embarrassing to him, but, “since the visitors were so awed [he] dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet” (47). Drawing a distinction between the narrator and university populace and Trueblood and the other sharecroppers in the adjacent settlement, Ellison is stratifying members of a communal race into divisions of class and education, which forms the basis of his narrator’s self-prejudice. The narrator is not, himself, yet aware that the discomfort he is feeling is racial, but the inciting moment has definitely been put into play as he declares, “How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people, the ‘peasants,’ *during those days* (emphasis mine)! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down” (*ibid*). The very language Ellison uses here echoes the “us versus them” dichotomy he had previously investigated in his short story “Flying Home”, and it bears mentioning that the narrator is, at this point, feels neither connection to the sharecroppers (despite previously divulging that his own grandfather had been one), nor the ability to appreciate the storytelling about to commence when Trueblood begins to speak, and it is not until much later, as he is recalling the tale, that the narrator is able to acknowledge either. Though the subject of the tale is taboo (Trueblood’s

incestuous relations with his own daughter), Ford offers up a convincing argument about the nature of storytelling itself as she adroitly urges readers to “see Trueblood’s story as not a sociological picture of the South but as a performance in the African tradition of ‘lying’ and in the analogous white tall tale tradition of telling a story to fool an audience,” providing the example that Trueblood begins his story by “taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many times before” (Ellison qtd in Ford 91).

Because the narrator is still unaware of his unconscious bias for African American culture, he initially feels shame and disgust at the tale. He rightfully assumes that Trueblood’s value to the white community is, at best, a lurid curiosity of a cautionary tale and, at worst, an illustration of all of the prurient stereotypes that they hold about black people. Interestingly though, readers first see a glimmer of, if not connection, at least recognition from the narrator, who, while listening to the tale, finds himself “so torn between humiliation and fascination that to lessen [his] sense of shame [he] had kept [his] attention riveted upon [Trueblood’s] face. That was so [he] did not have to look at Mr. Norton” (Ellison 68). The narrator is captivated by the mystique of the storytelling (and the storyteller), but it is still something foreign to him, and he is still too ashamed to acknowledge it. Ellison uses his narrator’s ambivalence to Trueblood as metonymic for the internalized racism that has yet to manifest itself overtly. At this moment, I would argue, Ellison is using his narrator to establish an inciting moment, to set a baseline from which to grow, but in order to do so, Ellison will need to provide him with an epiphany of sorts, and it is long in the making, for he has only begun using the elements of folklore to bring understanding.

I am not alone in my attempt to delineate the narrator's evolution by focusing attention on his relationship to African cultural elements—specifically its folklore. Other critics have examined how the narrator alternately fears, misunderstands, shuns, fathoms, accepts, appreciates, and eventually embraces them in Ellison's development. To this, I intend to add several nuances. In his essay, "Invisible Man: Black and Blue", Robert G. O'Meally provides an intriguing insight into the correlation between the narrator's identity and music. Said correlation is not entirely unlike that between that selfsame identity and African folklore. He posits that close-up details of the American setting and drama are often too troubling and challenging for Americans to face directly:

So while we read and write 'official' American histories, unrecorded or invisible histories also unfold...and the vernacular is a process on which the...styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-ear improvisations which we invent...and this not only in language and literature but in architecture and cuisine, in music, costume, and dance, and in tools and technology. In it the styles and techniques of the past are adjusted to the needs of the present (O'Meally 248).

O'Meally additionally argues that the narrator's "gradual awakening from innocence to experience and from repression to expression are spurred by folk forms. His recollection and acceptance of Black folklore keeps him from losing touch with his identity in the fast and maddening world of the North" (O'Meally 21). It is with this claim that I take partial exception. The structure of the novel is noteworthy, and it is by no means accidental that the story begins and ends where it does—in the middle of the story with the narrator having fully reconciled with his identity as well as having established himself as

invisible. It is my contention that the narrator's identity begins in a place of misunderstanding, a place of ambiguity and that it is only through a process of understanding and acceptance that he finds himself.

Ever-so-slightly exposing his literary maneuvering but not tipping his hand, Ellison besets his narrator with the consequences of both his choice to expose the embarrassing truth about Trueblood and his growing consciousness about his own racial misapprehensions with a confrontation with his dean, the cantankerous Dr. Bledsoe. In describing the idyllic setting of his university, the narrator speaks primarily in auditory metaphors rather than concrete visuals because even as he attempts to recall that, "the buildings were old and covered with vines and the road gracefully winding, lined with hedges and wild roses," his visual memory betrays him, and "over all is a quietness and an ache as though all the world were loneliness. And [he listens] beneath the high-hung moon" (Ellison 35). He tries to contemplate the place of privilege afforded him as a student and can think only of the veteran's asylum, the nearby brothel, and the adjacent tavern, despite the melodic ringing of the chapel bells. He strains "to hear if the music reaches that far, but recall only the drunken laughter of the sad, sad whores" (*ibid*). The prostitutes' paradoxical laughter underscores the divide between students and the residents of the town, and it carries with it the weight of the narrator's judgement, creeping in around the edges and coloring even his memory of the school. The musical elements that introduce and pervade the scene further depict just how entrenched Ellison's beleaguered character truly is in his racial disenchantment. Unlike the shame and embarrassment that the narrator feels when presented with the townspeople's church services, Ellison describes his narrator's walk to his campus chapel service with a starkly

different tone. Contrasting with the “earthly harmonies,” of “their primitive spirituals”, (Ellison 47) the narrator hears his fellow students’ “sudden arpeggios of laughter lilting...far-floating, fluent, spontaneous,” as he heads across campus. The feeling is one of lightness and beauty and joy, and even it is quickly “suppressed; as though snuffed swiftly and irrevocably beneath the quiet solemnity of the vespered air, now vibrant with somber chapel bells” (Ellison 109). Whereas Ellison presents the “native” church of the narrator’s heritage is uncultured, barbarous, and cacophonous to the ear, the collegiate sounds are described in terms that are lovely, majestic, and dignified. It is only fitting, then, that the descriptions established by such vivid contradictions act as a conduit for the scenes that follow—chiefly the juxtaposition of Reverend Barbee’s sermon with Dr. Bledsoe’s gut-wrenching appraisal of the narrator’s actions, the state of African American people within the university and the nation, and his own place in a hierarchy of culture and race. Examination of the two correlated, yet very distinct speech-acts reveals deeper understanding of how Ellison exposes the same self-hatred that his narrator has been unwittingly experiencing as well as hearkening back to the narrator’s interaction with his grandfather.

Reverend Homer Barbee is brought to the university to deliver a rousing and inspirational speech recalling its history, specifically chronicling the history of “the Founder” --the legendary figurehead of the university loosely based on Booker T. Washington—and his triumph over many trials and tribulations. That Barbee is blind only accentuates the stirring nature of his speech, and the both the students listening and the narrator are emotionally moved by its musical nature. The narrator is captivated as Barbee’s “voice [fell] to a whisper; his hands were outspread as though he were leading

an orchestra into profound and final diminuendo,” and the theatrics come to a crescendo, leaving the narrator with the feeling that, “the silence was so complete that [he] could hear the power engines far across the campus throbbing the night like an excited pulse. Somewhere in the audience an old woman’s voice began a plaintive wail; the birth of a sad, unformulated song that died stillborn in a sob” (Ellison). The institution being an emblem of all the narrator believes—that education provided by white trustees is the ultimate act of “casting down your buckets where you are,” he is overcome with guilt and shame over the incident with Mr. Norton and Jim Trueblood not only because he fears that it confirmed the worst typecasting of Southern black men, but, more importantly, because “though [he] had not intended it, any act that endangered the continuity of the dream was an act of treason” (Ellison 134). Instead of being concerned that the image of the incestuous Trueblood might be detrimental to all African Americans, Ellison’s narrator is instead solely anxious that it will sully the contrast that the university and its students have fought to draw from the less civilized townspeople. The consequences of the incident come down almost immediately, and Ellison utilizes the scene to reiterate the lesson his narrator has yet to learn, and he parallels Bledsoe’s speech with Reverend Barbee’s sermon, from the rise and fall of his volume and pitch down to the demonstrative way he “touched his fingertips together,” (Ellison 148). It would *appear* that Ellison is juxtaposing the two orators because they share a similar sounding message—that the black spirit cannot be crushed by oppressive forces, yet there is one discrepancy that distinguishes them. Whereas Reverend Barbee’s triumphant “Founder” transcends the white forces by striving to better himself, Dr. Bledsoe’s success is at a higher cost, a price much dearer than the narrator could have imagined.

Not only does Dr. Bledsoe use his own racism as a reason for catapulting the narrator from the university, both the narrator and readers quickly learn that he uses it to buoy his own political success. After learning of Mr. Norton's visit to the sharecropper cabins, Dr. Bledsoe asks the narrator, "You're black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?" and continues by scolding, "Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please is to tell him a lie!" (Ellison 142) thus echoing the cryptic, grandfatherly advice for the narrator to "overcome 'em with yes's". Bledsoe, suggest that in a hegemonic culture, the subjugated can ameliorate their situation, advance their positions if they are willing to prostrate themselves before the oppressors, to "act," as he had to do, "the nigger" (Ellison 143). The narrator, still believing in a kind of kinship with the white trustees of the school, threatens to report to Mr. Norton. "Tell anyone you like," Dr. Bledsoe responds in a speech antithetical to Reverend Barbee's:

"I don't care. I wouldn't raise my little finger to stop you. Because I don't owe anyone a thing, son. Who, Negroes? Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else...No, sir, they don't control this school, nor white folk either...I's big and black and I say 'Yes, suh' as loudly as any burr-head when it's convenient, but I'm still the king down here...Power doesn't have to show off...Let the Negroes snicker and the crackers laugh! ...The only ones I even pretend to please are big white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. This is a power set-up, son, and I'm at the controls...When you buck against me, you're bucking against power, rich white folk's power, the nation's power -- which means government power!" (Ellison 144).

Ellison shrewdly situates Reverend Barbee, a man passionately speaking about one man prevailing over institutionalized racism in order to raise up an entire race, against Dr. Bledsoe, a man cruelly willing to tyrannize and subjugate his own people in order to demonstrate two extreme sides of the same issue, and at the heart of it is a lesson about the narrator's unconscious bias. Unfortunately, the narrator has yet to understand his grandfather's charge, Dr. Bledsoe's caveat, or the internalized racism that either would quickly expose, and he leaves the university the next day, fully prepared to accept responsibility for his "transgressions", if only to avoid having to "admit that [his]

grandfather had made sense. Which was impossible, for though I still believed myself innocent, I saw that the only alternative to permanently facing the world of Trueblood and the Golden Day was to accept the responsibility for what had happened" (Ellison 147).

Clearly, Ellison is not finished with his unwitting student, and the narrator packs his bags and catches the first bus out of town.



**CHAPTER VI**  
**“THE GREAT WHITE NORTH”—SOUNDS AND FOLKLORE USED AS  
EXPLOITIVE SYMBOLS**

At this point in the novel, it is tempting to argue that the narrator's removal from the all-black college in the South and his transplantation into cosmopolitan North signifies his awakening. It is, after all, reasonable to equate this novel with a type of hero's journey, and what signals a transition better than a change of physical location? Here, O'Meally argues that “throughout his work Ellison plays with ironies concerning the who and the where of it all. To know who I am, Invisible Man discovers, I must know where I am. But if where is no easy question, it also cannot, as we have warned, be the only significant question” (247). It is interesting to note that despite O'Meally's contention that the physical journey is most emblematic of the narrator's change, even he must admit that it is not the sole factor in understanding it. Ellison, himself, when describing his own transition from South to North, remarked how “writing about invisibility had rendered [him] either transparent or opaque and sent [him] bouncing back

and forth between the benighted provincialism of a small village and the benign disinterestedness of a great metropolis” (Ellison xi). However, there is plenty of culture rooted in African tradition in the North. As he found himself writing the novel, Ellison admitted that the novel “drew much of its substance from the voices, idioms, folklore, traditions, and political concerns,” from Harlem itself. After having been expelled from his safe haven of comfortable disdain, the narrator makes his way to New York, whereupon he finds himself repeatedly rejected when applying for jobs. He encounters a man singing a song that “went far back to things [he] had long ago shut out of [his] mind. There was no escaping such reminders” (Ellison 173). The song itself, is a force that helps to trigger his connection, not only to his childhood, but his Southern cultural past, and it is ironically in the North where he cannot escape it. Though it does stir something within him, it is not enough of a catalyst, and when he speaks with the singer himself, the narrator is confounded by the conversation that ensues:

“Looka-year buddy...”

“Yes,” I said pausing to look into his reddish eyes.

“Tell me just one thing this very fine morning—Hey! Wait a minute, daddy-o, I’m going your way!”

“What is it?” I said

“What I want to know is, he said, “is you got the *dog*?”

“Dog? What dog?”

“who got the damn dog? Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before! Hell, ain’t nobody out here this morning but us colored—Why you trying to deny me?”

The conversation is not only confusing to the narrator, he finds himself “angry and embarrassed” (Ellington 174). He does not know what the man expects to hear, and even though the man should be a familiar line of conversation, the language itself seems foreign, and the narrator is unable to respond. In fact, when the man offers up a thought or two about Harlem being a “bear’s den”, he attempts to rack his brain for an appropriate reply. What he comes up with are “Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear... who were both long forgotten and now brought a wave of homesickness,” but the narrator’s reaction is one of ambivalence. He notes, “I wanted to leave him, and yet, I found a certain comfort in walking along beside him as though we walked this way before through other mornings, in other places” (Ellison 175). Here, readers see the stirrings of the narrator’s awakening to his own cultural past, and it is noteworthy that he is stirred by in the comfort of a Southern voice and the folktales of his past; however, the animal stories have not yet risen back to the surface of his memory. As the man recedes into the distance, the narrator finds himself once again confounded. He asks himself about the meaning of the man’s song, wonders about its lyrics, and ultimately gives up, thinking about his removal from college. As the tune fades into the distance, he thinks to himself, “God damn... *they’re* a hell of a people,” (emphasis mine) and “didn’t know whether it was pride or disgust that suddenly flashed over [him]” (Ellison 177). The location of this epiphany in New York is at best, ironic. Once again, it is clear that the narrator is unsure about how to feel about his people, unsure about how he fits into their culture, and similarly unsure about whether or not he even wishes to. Ellison adroitly drives this point home almost immediately by having the narrator refuse a typical Southern breakfast, despite its temptation, and replacing it with an acidic orange juice and bitter coffee. He smugly

congratulates himself, all the while worrying how to speak in the perfect accent to obscure both his Southern black accent and his “Northern Negro” pretensions in order to hide his identity auditorily.

This episode immediately precedes the narrator’s introduction to Mr. Emerson, his own name a cultural allusion to Ralph Waldo Emerson, and it is here that he is exposed to the ugly truth of Dr. Bledsoe’s letters. Emerson, in a misguided attempt to show a kind of empathy to the narrator, repeatedly references *Huckleberry Finn*. He gets frustrated by the fact that Emerson “[kept] talking about that kid’s story,” (Ellison 188) and leaves the meeting broken and dejected when he discovers that Dr. Bledsoe has no intentions of allowing him to return to school. In his hopelessness, he unwittingly recalls another element of his cultural past as he watches a child dancing for pennies. The man on the bus in front of him is whistling a familiar tune about how they “picked poor Robin clean” (Ellison 193). A perfect metaphor for the narrator’s situation and his resulting self-perception, he is still unwilling to face the elements of his past. He flees the bus, haunted by “the thin, tissue paper-against-the-teeth-of-a-comb whistle following [him] outside at the next stop” (*ibid*). He cannot escape the feeling of terror at by confronted by his own culture, and he waits for the next bus, “trembling at the curb, half-expecting to see the man leap from the door to follow [him]” (*ibid*). It is apparent that even physical movement from one locale to another does not remove its cultural heritage, regardless of how much he rebuffs it.

The inciting moment for the narrator’s acknowledgment, understanding, and eventual embracing of his roots comes for him after a nearly fatal accident at the paint factory. Slung between two opposing forces, he finds that he fits in neither with his boss,

Lucius Brockway, nor his co-workers. Stumbling upon a union meeting, he is violently expelled under the assumption that he is a fink. Returning to Lucius, he is, again, violently assaulted under the assumption that he is a “two-bit, trouble-making union louse!” (Ellison 225). Though the moment is a small one, it is no less significant in its subtext. The narrator is not accepted by his contemporaries in this new place in the form of the union members; yet, his interaction with them, albeit involuntary and incidental, precludes him from a successful partnership with Lucius, who represents the “old school” traditional as well. Ellison is subtly reminding his readers of the narrator’s position of liminality, and it is here that he finally brings the narrator’s internalized racism roiling to the surface. “Why, you old-fashioned, slavery-time, mammy-made, handkerchief-headed bastard,” is the series of invectives that the narrator hurls at Brockway, designed not just to disparage his age, but also cut a clear dissention between his hard-working, youthful, educated philosophies and Brockway’s negro indolence. The resulting fight with Brockway allows for one of the machines to overheat and erupt, a fitting symbol for the narrator himself—he has persisted for so long with the internal conflict over his identity, that he metaphorically erupts, and the hospital is where he begins his journey to acceptance. He wakes in the factory infirmary, surrounded by unfamiliar faces, voices, and sounds. His mind, in agony from the experiments the doctors are performing on him, seeks to comfort him with memories from his past, as he recalls the memory of watching “the hounds chasing black men in stripes and chains [as his] grandmother . . . sang with twinkling eyes:

‘Godamighty made a monkey

Godamighty made a whale

And Godamighty made a ‘gator

With hickies all over his tale...” (Ellison 234).

In this memory, tinged with unpleasantness, readers see that for the narrator, the sadness is tinged with a kind of sweetness, and it is this sweetness that makes the pain bearable for him, both in the memory and in his current state of agony. It is his cultural heritage that saves him from the ugly reality of the circumstances in his memory, just as it is his memory of the cultural heritage that saves him now.

Similarly, while still emerging from the depths of unconsciousness, the narrator glimpses a nurse, and this prompts him to ask, “did you know that when you strolled in pink organdy and picture hat between the rows of cape jasmine...we little boys hidden snug in the bushes called out so loud that you daren’t hear,” a filthy nursery rhyme about a woman urinating into a stream. He feels no shame, and his gleeful mock confession indicates that he is losing his fear of the past, freeing himself from the shame of it, and even beginning to delight in it. In essence, Ellison is sending his narrator through a type of rebirth, accompanied by several musical images that will culminate in revelation. The narrator cannot communicate with the doctors because “the Fifth Symphony rhythm racked [him],” (Ellison 233) which suggests a kind of disengagement from the racially fueled self-hatred that had plagued him until that moment. The inaccessibility of the music’s rhythm discombobulates the narrator, and he is left with no voice—an obstacle that remains unsurmountable until the narrator remembers the aforementioned nursery rhyme—and as he emerges once more from pain-filled stupor, the tune is augmented by and then becomes, “a distinct wail of female pain” (Ellison 235). With his narrator confused and shaking, Ellison’s childbirth metaphor is complete, explicit, and

emotionally telling. Subsequently, he finds himself confronted with a simple, yet troublingly significant question. The doctors hold up a card asking him what his name is, and his response becomes emblematic of this central problem, both of the narrative and for the narrator. He reads the card and feels “a tremor me it was as though he had suddenly given a name to, had organized the vagueness that drifted through my head, and I was overcome with swift shame...that I no longer knew my own name” (Ellison 239). The very first representation that one gains for identity is gone, eradicated by the experiments performed upon him. He is no one. The second mark of identity a person usually grasps, too, is gone. When asked what his mother’s name is, the narrator feels he is “just this blackness as bewilderment and pain...somehow...submerged and lost” (Ellison 240-241).

Recalling Ford’s discussion of the taboo insulting of mothers, the narrator does reconnect with that aspect of his childhood. He does not remember his mother’s name, but he *does* remember enough of his childhood to know how to feel about discussing her. He quips, “I looked at him, feeling a quick dislike and thinking, half in amusement, I don’t play the dozens. And how’s *your* old lady today?” (Ellison 241). Interestingly, it is this cultural element, albeit in anger, rather than affectionate memories of her, that connects the narrator to his mother. Clearly, his familial connections are becoming more significant to narrator’s identity—roots he had previously struggled to bury or avoid. At this moment, Ellison is nearly finished transforming his narrator. He has presented the metamorphosis; all that remains is for the narrator to internalize the lessons he is learning—to replace the internalized racism that has plagued him for so long.

## CHAPTER VII

### “I YAM WHAT I YAM”—ACCEPTANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

Ellison's narrator, tortured by a fierce internal conflict, leaves his job at the factory but does not know what to do next. As he thinks of Dr. Bledsoe's betrayal, "Somewhere beneath the load of the emotion-freezing ice which my [his] had conditioned [his] brain to produce, a spot of black anger glowed and threw off a hot red light" (Ellison 258). He is no longer content to "cast down his bucket", per se, but he has yet to find an outlet for his anger, and "the more resentful [he] became, the more [his] old urge to make speeches returned... All things were indeed awash in [his] mind. [He] longed for home" (*ibid*). This vacillation is the catalyst for a greater embracing of his race, his culture, and as he rushes down the street past all manner of signs that remind him of his internalized racism (wiry, black wigs, African statues in caricature, and adverts for skin lightening cream that promise, "You too can be truly beautiful... Win greater happiness with whiter complexion. Be outstanding in your social set" (Ellison 258) a new kind of rage gurgles and seethes inside him. The moment is perfect; Ellison does not miss



the opportunity to insert an icon of the cultural temptation the narrator had previously rejected and generate an almost epiphanic scene of self-acceptance, and it revolves around a yam. Ellison has previously used food as a symbol of cultural rejection, and as a delicacy of the South, he describes the syrupy, sugary yam bubbling with melted butter antithetically. The narrator is so tempted by the sights and smells that he cannot even wait to take the yam home to eat it in private, as his embarrassment would normally dictate that he does. His decision is equally bolstered by the salesman's promise that it will be the best yam he has ever tasted, or he will get his money back, and with such an easy guarantee of cultural happiness, the narrator truly cannot lose. "I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control," the narrator explains, and he was, "as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom -- simply because I was eating while walking along the street...I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper...If only someone who had known me at school or at home would come along and see me now. How shocked they'd be!" At long last, Ellison provides the rub. "Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked," realizes the narrator (Ellison 265). This revelation is the beginning of the healing process for the narrator, but Ellison is not satisfied with his mere self-acceptance. The lesson Ellison has created for both his character and his audience is, as of yet, half-learned. Enter, the Brotherhood, widely accepted as a thinly-veiled metaphor for the Communist Party of America. They, too, are interested in exploiting the narrator, which he allows to happen for a time.

Once again, Ellison utilizes his narrator's connection to traditional African

folklore to designate a passage from ignorance to awareness and acknowledgement of self-hatred, and he does so in a scathing reclaiming of the very folklore elements coopted by Joel Chandler Harris in the Uncle Remus tales. Of the many questions over his identity the doctors ask him, the only one that triggers recognition is that of Buckeye the Rabbit, often referred to as Brer Rabbit. Here, again, the narrator roguishly participates in a game of the dozens. When asked, “Boy, who was Brer Rabbit?”, the narrator wittily retorts in his mind, “He was your mother’s back-door man” (Ellison 242). Embracing the trickster within, the narrator is ready to acknowledge his own mythos. In his article entitled “Negro Tales”, Richard M. Dorson gathers many of the traditional folktales from African culture, and using the same sort of primary sources as Joel Chandler Harris, Dorson delivers many of the tales directly. Within many of them, a similar narrative element repeats itself—that of Brer Rabbit (Dorson 77). In each of the tales, the rabbit acts as a trickster. In the tale “The Rabbit, The Fox, and the Bear: Raiding the Icebox” the rabbit uses his wits to trick his boss, the bear, into letting him leave work, using the excuse that his wife is having a baby. Each time, the excuse does not change, and each time, the bear is none the wiser. The rabbit is able to sneak into the fox’s house and steal his food (Dorson 77-80). This story perfectly parallels the narrator’s own use of trickery to navigate his way around the Brotherhood, and he finds himself finally understanding his grandfather’s advice. He recounts how he “started yessing them the next day, and it began beautifully” (Ellison 517). Having been removed from his position and accused of treachery, the narrator fully embraces his new persona as Buckeye the Rabbit. In the very simple act, Ellison is able to voice some authority over these folktales, and in doing so, he is able to reclaim at least some of their appropriated power back from Chandler Harris.

It is not a coincidence that Brother Jack is often referred to as “Jack the Bear”. In most of the Brer Rabbit stories, it is the rabbit, put upon and bullied by the bear, who uses his cunning and wits to turn the tables on his oppressor. Similarly, in the story of “The Rabbit, The Fox, and the Bear: Raiding the Vegetable Garden”, upon hearing that the overseer bear has been impugning the rabbit’s name with falsehoods and rumors, the rabbit frames the bear for stealing from the fox’s vegetable garden (Dorson 82-84). This particular tale aligns well with incidents in the book in which an anonymous letter (later revealed to be sent by Brother Jack) accuses the narrator of putting his own goals and ambitions before those of the Brotherhood. As a result, the narrator seeks to leave the Brotherhood.

This image is mirrored in a later episode in which the narrator, burdened with the request to fulfill a sort of Mandingo rape fantasy for Sybil, uses his cunning to play a joke upon her. Taking advantage of her drunkenness, the narrator cheekily scrawls across her stomach in lipstick, “Sybil, you were raped by Santa Claus. Surprise” (Ellison 522). Once again, it is his connection to the folklore figures of his past that allows the narrator the freedom to behave in such a brazen way. At this point, the narrator not only understands his grandfather’s advice, he fully exemplifies these cultural elements.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **THE FINAL LESSON**

As I have previously stated, it is not enough for Ellison to expose his narrator's internalized racism and self-hatred; the narrator also must dismantle both within himself, and he must "learn the young'ns". Ellison avails himself of yet another dichotomy in the form of antipodes Ras the Exhorter and Brother Tod Clifton. The two allude to the antithetical forces fighting for civil rights in Ellison's world, with Ras emblematic of Ellison's fear of militant racial separatists and Tod representing his worry over being too easily swayed by suggestion. Rent by the antagonism between with the two the narrator is thrown into confusion until he is confronted by a final image of internalized racism, this time coming from Brother Tod, himself in turmoil over the Brotherhood's manipulation of their racial concerns. In an act of quintessential desperation and having left the Brotherhood, Tod is spotted by the narrator on the street, in a most compromising position. "Look at that rumba, that suzy-q, he's Sambo-Boogie, Sambo-Woogie," Brother Tod trills for the enchanted audience as he puppeteers a grotesque paper doll. He further

cajoles, “you don't have to feed him, he sleeps collapsed, he'll kill your depression/ And your dispossession, he lives upon the sunshine of your lordly smile,” while the puppet gyrates at his fingertips in a gross pantomime of dance. (Ellison 432) The Sambo figure is problematic in several ways, not the least of which is its connection to the more recent African American folklore that emerged in the days of slavery. Appropriated as a character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Sambo acts as a symbol of internalized racism at its most nefarious. Even as she transformed the figure from a traditional West African character (Zambo) to suit her own needs, Stowe presented Sambo as an overseer of other slaves, essentially a figure who betrays his own race as a means of earning favorable treatment, eventually beating the titular character to death. Ellison is similarly using the puppets allegorically as Dr. Bledsoe, Brother Tod, Lucius Brockway, and even the narrator himself have all participated in acts of internalized racism; each character is positioned pedagogically and at different cautionary levels, with Brother Tod's story being the most allegorically tragic—it is his shenanigans with the illicit puppets that eventually get him murdered by the police—and he serves as the most extreme example of what self-hatred and community sabotage with do, to say nothing of the horrifically antipathetic connotation of the name itself.

Having witnessed this last act of treachery, Ellison's narrator is nearly finished with his transformation. Perhaps the most overt representation of both the narrator's internalized racism and his harried and jumbled search for identity is result of the fallout from Brother Tod's murder. Rioting erupts in the streets, and in the ensuing chaos, several people confuse the narrator for Rinehart, a character whose lack of appearance in the novel facilitates the ease with which the narrator slips into his role. Ellison positions

Rinehart as an enigmatic figure who is at once a pimp, a bookie, a preacher, a hero, and a man with no concrete identity, a utilitarian symbol to propagate not only all the stereotypes of African American men, both positive and negative, but also for the narrator, and indirectly for Ellison himself. The narrator, ironically having to flee from Ras's men rather than the police drops down an open manhole cover still in his Rinehart disguise, and thus, Ellison's final lesson is revealed. Our narrator has undergone much transformation, has witnessed many different types of racism, and ultimately learns about his own prejudice; however, all of the revelations he experiences are not enough for him to embrace an identity for himself, and with that, Ellison ends the story where he began. Just as the storyteller around campfires, at childhood bedsides, and in all manner of didactic speeches is wont to do, the narrator directly addresses the audience thusly:

“Ah”, I can hear you say, “so it was all a buildup to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!” But only partially true: being invisible and without substance, a *disembodied voice* (emphasis mine), as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me:

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (Ellison 581).

It is this last interrogative breaking of the fourth wall that interests me the most with regards to Ellison's point. The narrator, having finally acknowledged his own internalized racism, expresses the only fear that can follow it—that his audience shares the same unconscious bias, and that his words, on the “lower frequencies” will be ineffectual in exposing it. Returning to a format in which he not only addresses the

reader, but also poses questions as though expecting a response, Ellison once again reminds us of the feeling of storytelling. The story has come full circle, and fully realizing his role as storyteller, the narrator completes his tale. The ceremonious nature of the storytelling is quite similar to that in many of the short stories in Sherman Alexie's collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

**CHAPTER IX**  
**THE SAME DEMONS BUT DIFFERENT WEAPONS—EXAMINING NATIVE**  
**AMERICAN STEREOTYPES**

Both Ralph Ellison and Sherman Alexie used their literary efforts to tackle issues of race. Despite that obvious commonality, it is quite reductive to compare Ellison's work to that of Sherman Alexie based solely on racial concerns, particularly on the conflict between the characters of each and white people. Doing so is a disservice to both; more exhaustive investigation finds more in common than the simple "white versus other" considerations, despite what the surfeit of scholarly criticism would suggest. A thorough search of critical analyses of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* provides no shortage of argument about Alexie's narrative voice; however, much of the contemporary argument tends to hone specifically in on interracial romantic relationships, which is simply a new sheen on an oft-painted idea. Interestingly enough, this mode of inquiry does create a connection for Jodie Sheffer, for she not only begins her article about interracial sexuality and Alexie's short story collection by referencing a



scene from *Invisible Man* that firmly entrenches Ellison's narrator in the issue of "the interracial gaze" as she calls it, demonstrating a different, yet equally compelling connection between Ellison's work and Alexie's. In it, Sheffer explores how Alexie's work explores "the racial and sexual politics undergirding interracial relationships—epitomized by the desiring gaze— between men of color and white women [as well as] the progressive potential of the interracial gaze through [and its] power to shape (and frequently deform) [a] characters' sense of self" (120). She offers compelling evidence about the nature of interracial desire, specifically how it functions as a reflection of minority position and subsequent identity in a larger, hegemonic culture. Like much of the criticism surrounding *Invisible Man* Sheffer argues that for Alexie's characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, just as Ellison's, the issues of gender stereotypes, coupled with racial stereotypes are predominantly depicted using visual metaphor and means. "[I]nterracial sex," Sheffer claims, "is shaped by similar desires for acceptance by dominant white culture and fears of racial disloyalty, as well as by distinct patterns of inequality" (121). While this focus is well-argued and thoroughly supported, Sheffer acknowledges neither the auditory elements nor the elements of storytelling so important to Alexie's Native American culture, though her connection between interracial sexuality and its effects on internalized racism is cogent.

Alternatively, in an article entitled, "A Rez Kid Gone Urban", Richard Sax argues about identity and gender in a slightly different way. Examining what Alexie has referred to as a "John Wayne mythology" of male identity and masculine swagger, Sax also discusses what it means to be Indian, what it means to be male, and what it means to face to potential of failing as both. Indeed, Alexie does spend much of his time within the

collection discussing the role of fathers as hero-figures, but while Sax does acknowledge Alexie's characters' various relationships with their fathers, he chooses to spend more time discussing the author's use of "Crazy Horse as icon and role model for the contemporary Indian male...and the theme of Indian spirituality and identity in contemporary popular culture" (144). In a compelling line of reasoning, Sax recalls a short story in which a Native American student is called upon to take a standardized test. The student, Gabriel, aces the exam, and when called upon to explain his impressive score, he glibly references elements of Native American culture sarcastically, and, claiming that bringing a traditional drum circle might distract the other test takers, he alludes to Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Geronimo. "Gabriel has successfully waged intellectual war on the culturally biased, 'colonial' test," Sax argues, "invoking the three greatest Indian leaders of the nineteenth century, with Crazy Horse foremost, as his inspiring muses for a twenty-first-century standardized examination" (147). Again, this is both well-reasoned and well-argued, but by presenting the line of reasoning that focuses on the figures as allusive motifs, Sax does not fully engage with the narrative aspect of the story; there is a ceremonial dimension to the figures, and analyses of storytelling gives us insight into Alexie's perception of identity and self-identity among Native American people.

## CHAPTER X

### OLD STORIES/NEW SIGNIFICANCE

A member of the Native American Spokane tribe, Sherman Alexie is no stranger to feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and anonymity deeply rooted in a push-pull conflict of life on a reservation, and it is this liminality—the existence between two worlds that emerges repeatedly in his collection of short stories entitled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. In her article entitled “‘The Same Damn Stories’: Exploring a Variation on Tradition in Sherman Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*,” Jacqueline McGrath presents evidence that Alexie has faced much criticism about his writing, particularly that his abandonment of Native oral tradition is at best, a non-committal attempt to usurp a cultural identity to which he feels no connection, and, at worst, a disloyalty to his heritage that threatens to dissolve an already fading custom. McGrath argues that, despite much criticism to the contrary, Alexie’s style of writing is, in fact, an homage to the oral tradition of his people. It is my hope to add to her argument the contention that Alexie, though stalwart in his expression of nativity also presents

glimpses of his own internalized racism as a reaction to the racism is experienced growing up on the reservation and after he left it. As Alexie juxtaposes moments of sardonic, self-effacing humor against scenes of sadness and bitterness created by the harshness and disappointment of life on the reservation, what he is adroitly doing is setting up tension between European perception of Native American identity and its resulting stereotypes, but, more than that, Alexie is cleverly exposing any kernels of truth that may exist within them.

The title of Alexie's collection of short stories is, in and of itself, thought-provoking, and it provides the first hint at his position. The Lone Ranger is a quintessential American archetype: a heroic figure of mysterious origins who repeatedly appears by sheer *deus ex machina* in the name of lawfulness and righteousness. His mask obscuring his face, he is an everyman's hero whose true identity is secondary to the nobility of his actions. Tonto presents a different archetype: the loyal sidekick willing to sacrifice himself for his friend. The Lone Ranger's character arc begins after he survives a bandit attack—an attack he survives solely because of Tonto's rescue and subsequent patient ministrations; however, it is always the Lone Ranger in a leadership role the two travel together, maintaining justice throughout the very wild West. The stories paint a portrait of a collaborative and genial relationship which provides Alexie the opportunity to manipulate an iconic symbol using his signature, snarky sense of humor.

The character of the Lone Ranger and that of Tonto in all of their incarnations--created by white executives for radio, television, and comic book consumption by white, suburban audiences, are problematic in their relationship. Audiences frequently read, listened to, or watched the image of the Lone Ranger and Tonto locked in fisticuffs as a

symbol of the discord between white people and Native people, and with the subtle subjugation of Tonto in the classic tales, it would stand to reason that they would brawl. The image presents another, more personal interpretation for Alexie. Tonto has come to represent, rather than an archetype, a stereotype of white, European conception of what an “Indian” is. Tonto, who could easily be developed as a brave warrior, is reduced to a fatuous, unidimensional figure comprised of easy jokes and insulting pidgin. Alexie is, in his way, doing his best to resolve his own identity as it relates to a European abstraction of what he is supposed to be, and in his way, he is working within the same ideological framework as Ellison, (i.e. the dilemma over whether as a minority to rebel against, work within, or completely assimilate into the larger, hegemonic culture). For Ellison, the answer was apparent—working within a cultural framework would serve to benefit both; whereas for Alexie, it is not that simple. As Kathleen Carroll points out, for Alexie, in the black and white television show, the “stoic, reserved, mute figure of Tonto embodies the Indian contained in the white man's narrative, a Euro-American stereotype that was adopted by early Native American writers and threatens to erase ethnic identity even today,” which is exactly the criticism lobbied at Ellison for his philosophy of “Americanism” (76). Not being content to allow his people to be absorbed and erased, Sherman Alexie turns the narrative on its head. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist-fight in Heaven*,” Carroll posits, “Alexie combats this incorporation [by bringing] the stories of the heroic Indians of the past and the culturally alienated Indians of the present into...using tribal members as...storytellers, united by the experience of negotiating cultural boundaries to create an identity within a world that refuses to situate Indians (*ibid*). With this point, I agree. To this day, Native American characters serve as

sidekicks and stereotypes, and one of the most famous, the most recent incarnation of Tonto was played to a racist caricature by a white actor. Considering that this is not the first time a white person has filled the role (John Todd played the role when the college educated Native American who was chosen refused to perform the broken English pidgin required for it) it is not surprising that Alexie would want to react against the character. For all the years that Tonto toiled in the shadow of the Lone Ranger, from radio program to television show, it would stand to reason that Alexie would provide him with the means and the motive to seek revenge. Because of its significance within American pop culture, Alexie cannot eliminate the character completely, however, and even as he fights to reclaim Tonto, Alexie is aware of how he struggles with conceptions of what it means to be Native American.

**CHAPTER XI**  
**THE STORYTELLER VERSUS ORAL TRADITION—UPDATING CULTURE**  
**THROUGH VICTOR**

To generalize the more than 500 tribes in the United States with the sobriquet of “Native American” is a slippery slope; to metonymize them all by the trait of “oral tradition” is similarly reductive. It bears noting, however, that Alexie does not disregard this particular aspect of his ancestral roots in his writing, and he utilizes the ceremonial nature of storytelling to communicate more of his internalized racism. John Newton, referencing a paper written about postcolonial and Native American literature, offers that Arnold Krupat claimed one would be hard-pressed to find a Native American writer whose work did not call upon the oral tradition of storytelling for influence. Immediately after presenting the argument, however, Newton presents Alexie as refutation. Quoting Alexie’s glib joke that “my writing has nothing to do with oral tradition because I typed it,” Newton claims, is actually proof that Alexie’s “refusal of this ‘oral tradition’ is indicative of the way he distances himself from the writers of the Native American

Renaissance...and stresses instead his own affiliation with urban mass culture and the contemporary reservation” (415). Much like Ellison, Alexie found himself every bit as influenced by the elements of culture *outside* his own as he was influenced by his own. Whereas Ellison refers to Eliot and Joyce, Alexie acknowledges Stephen King, John Steinbeck, and *The Brady Bunch*, as some of the names having a cultural impact on him. What this creates, Newton finds, is a “‘postcolonialism’ that makes no claim to disentangle itself either from the colonial past or from the postmodern present”(ibid). I contend that Newton is a bit too hasty in claiming that Alexie is refusing his cultural traditions. Thomas Builds-the-Fire is the most directly connected to the art of storytelling, but he is not the sole character involved in the oral tradition.

The majority of the stories in the book revolve around Victor, Junior, and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, though there are many other characters who populate the reservation. The narrative form shifts between first person and third person, with the lion’s share of first-person stories told by Victor, but even in the stories told in the third person, Alexie gives a definite presence of a *narrator*. The very first story, for example, has all the feel of a timeless tale told over a fire. That it starts hearkening back to years past (1976, the American Bicentennial, to be exact) is immediately compounded by the likening of a familial fistfight to “a hurricane [that] dropped from the sky and fell so hard on the Spokane Indian Reservation that it knocked Victor from the bed and his latest nightmare” (Alexie 31). This story resides somewhere between an anecdote a tall tale as it sets the tone of the whole book, and its impact is immediate. The collection can be taken as a compendium of contiguous stories—a snapshot of life on the reservation—or because it focuses mostly on Victor, it can read as one continuous intertwining of Victor’s life with



those of his friends and family members, and after establishing the folklore feel, Alexie then speaks about crazy people in other hurricanes who tied themselves to trees in order to feel experience the hurricane firsthand. This moment carries with it an allusion to *The Odyssey*, itself a story that would have been recited completely orally to a rapt audience; however, instead of spinning yarns of glory about an epic hero courageously withstanding the temptation of sirens, Alexie uses this approach to cast aspersions upon life on the reservation. The hurricane is metaphorical, the two men fighting are stereotypically drunk, and the protagonist of the story, a seven-year-old boy who eventually crawls under a table and sleeps between his unconscious parents. It is with a sardonic sneer that the third person narrator declares

They were all witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale. Victor's uncles were in the midst of a misdemeanor that would remain one even if somebody was to die. One Indian killing another did not create a special kind of storm. This little kind of hurricane was generic. It didn't even deserve a name (Alexie 33).

Either the narrator is unimpressed by the scene, or else this type of event, even on this scale, was so commonplace as to be expected. Regardless, the only thing remarkable in this anti-folktale is just how unremarkable it is; however, interestingly enough, it is still being talked about. By presenting the story so dispassionately, Alexie is comparing the story to the epic tales of yore, and finding the cultural elements lacking. And yet, Alexie tinges the story with a poignancy by including Victor's sweet memories of his parents' love and his bittersweet dreams of delicious food in a warm diner as music played in the

background. It is here that we see Alexie's understanding of his own prejudice against his people as he tempers Victor's disappointment *ex post facto*.

As he grows up, Alexie uses Victor's relationship with music, particularly with regards to his father, to help express his own conflicted sentiments about Native American culture, and this is especially prevalent in the story "Because My Father Said He Was The Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' At Woodstock", narrated in the first person by Victor himself. In it Victor engages with his audience straightaway by asking a rhetorical question as he recalls his father being arrested for assaulting a National Guardsman. After he explaining that his father was featured in a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, Victor is quick to downplay the glamour of it by pointing out how his father had first been exploited for his Native American identity, then made an example of because of it. Similarly, Alexie is quick to dispel the thrill of the arrest by using the word "Anyway" to being Victor's confession that the charges had been reduced from attempted murder to assault. The revelation of the crime is handled with all the excitement of a story told in passing. What is perhaps the most revealing thing about the narration is just how little time and effort Alexie puts into giving Victor's descriptions of Woodstock itself, which is surprising considering that the music festival featured prominently in the title.

It is a calculating technique on Alexie's part that calls into question just how effective a storyteller can be passing along a tradition is he has not been a firsthand witness. In fact, Victor spends more time describing the cassette tape of the performance that his father played for years later than he does discussing his father's memories of the

actual event. Working contrarily to the typical father/son passing down of stories, Victor recalls:

as much as I dream about it, I don't have any clue about what it meant for my father to be the only Indian who saw Jimi Hendrix play at Woodstock. And maybe he wasn't the only Indian there. Most likely there were hundreds but my father thought he was the only one. He told me that a million times when he was drunk and a couple hundred times when he was sober (Alexie 67).

Here is where I veer slightly from Newton's claim that Alexie is refusing the oral tradition of his tribe in that I would argue that Victor's interaction with his father, including the ritualization of the musical experience has become a new form of storytelling that actually includes Victor. In fact, Alexie breaks from the typical prose for a brief moment to create a list in which Victor can clearly but succinctly outline the steps Victor takes while waiting for, preparing for, experiencing, and recovering from his father's interaction with the cassette, and it is a deliberate strategy for Alexie to punctuate Victor's list with the matter of fact observation that "days after, [Victor's] father would feel so guilty that he would tell [him] stories as a means of apology" (60). This anti-ritual serves not to refute the oral tradition of Alexie's heritage, but rather to accentuate the principal, the virtues of which Alexie himself has extolled, that:

Overlaying stories about heroic Native Americans of the past (diachronic moments) onto stories where Native Americans are trapped within modern stereotypes (the synchronic moment). By drawing the past into the present, Alexie brings the subordinate and the dominant cultures into conversation with each other and subliminally critiques the ways that being inscribed within the

Eurocentric stereotype of 'the white man's Indian' have usurped Native Americans' efforts to re-imagine and recreate a modern identity that insures communal survival (Carroll 75).

Victor's father takes him into his world for the brief moments they are sharing the song, and it is the only time Victor is able to feel close. In fact, Victor laments that they cannot even share a war experience because his generation had not real war to fight, and this, too serves as a kind of lampoon of the warrior legacy so many people imagine of Native Americans. Victor is left relying on music as a means of connecting with his father, and he imagines that the understanding the music and, subsequently, Jimi Hendrix is the only way he can know his own flesh and blood. Here, Alexie slips in another self-effacing jibe as Victor considers that it is only about dead musicians that he and his father can talk. He quips, "I guess every song has a special meaning for someone somewhere. Elvis Presley is still showing up in 7-11 stores across the country, even though he's been dead for years, so I figure music just might be the most important thing there is. Music turned my father into a reservation philosopher," before adding, "Music had powerful medicine" (Alexie 65). This could easily be construed as a thinly veiled poke at the traditional medicine man, himself a figure of Native American tradition, and, appropriately enough, when Victor's father suffers a nearly-fatal motorcycle, it is his mother's singing of "Indian tunes under her breath, in time with the hum of machines," that brings his father back from the edge of death" (Alexie 69). Eventually, the pull of the road and the siren's song of music are too much for Victor's father, and he gets on his motorcycle and leaves Victor and his mother.

Victor is left to grow up without guidance from his father, and it is not until he is older that he actually understands that for his father, the pull of music could be racial. “The first time I heard Robert Johnson sing,” Victor remembers, “I knew he understood what it meant to be Indian on the edge of the twenty-first century, even if he was black at the beginning of the twentieth. That must have been how my father felt when he heard Jimi Hendrix” (Alexie 72). Victor is more connected to an African American musician than he is to his father or his tribe. A similar disconnection plagued his father, and, ironically, it is not until he experiences his own alienation from his tribe that he understands his father at all. In short, it is his father’s leaving that causes him to understand his father. It is certainly not the last time that Alexie will use Victor to explore self-hatred or prejudice against his own people.

Capitalizing on the alcoholic stereotype some have of Native American people, Alexie brings creates vivid examples of internalized racism in both thought and deed through Victor. From his sexual encounter with a Lakota woman at a powwow in which he leaves while hissing at her that she is “ nothing” because he is bitterly convinced he will not live up to *her* stereotypical image of him, he waits outside her mobile home for hours lamenting his insecurity, and even his vitriolic declaration that she is, “just another goddamned Indian like me,” cannot free himself from the wish that he was Crazy Horse. He is simultaneously confined by, yet unable to be the image of the Indian others would ascribe to him (Alexie 78). Conflicted by this turmoil, Victor then turns his shame and embarrassment fueled by internalized racism into an act fueled by cruelty. As a young man, Victor pays a carnival worker twenty dollars to let a passed out Indian man ride a

roller coaster all night because as he sits next to the man on the grass, he fears being associated with the ultimate stereotype of the drunken Indian, and as “all the white tourists watch, laugh, point a finger, their faces twisted with hate and disgust, [he] was afraid of all of them, wanted to hide behind [his] Indian teeth, the quick joke” (Alexie 95). Rather than attempt to protect one of his own, Victor chooses to exploit the man’s unconsciousness, and he does so out of a combination of fear of the white people watching and his need to dissociate himself from his race out of a sense of shame. Alexie does not let Victor or the reader off so easily, and Victor and his friend Sadie firmly drop themselves right back into the pigeonhole as they ruminate about how much drinking money they could amass if they charged the white people fees to watch it all. Humiliated by Dirty Joe living up to what Victor imagines the white perception of the drunken Indian, Alexie uses a razor-sharp sense of irony as Victor is completely unaware of the hypocrisy of his internalized racism. As Victor flees the scene to a funhouse full of distorting mirrors, Alexie gives Victor a moment of spiteful self-actualization as he lists the different effects the mirrors have on his perception of his identity, and Victor begrudgingly acknowledges that the selfsame mirrors that make a white man remember he is the master of ceremonies, barking about the Fat Lady, the Dog-Faced Boy, the Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty,” also disillusion the Native American who has to accept that the mirrors “can never change the dark of your eyes and the folding shut of the good part of your past” (98). In one verbal maneuver, Alexie is able to liken his character with the sideshow freaks exploited for their oddity while simultaneously lamenting loss of the ability even to remember what about them is redeemable. Again, Victor’s self-hatred as filtered through the metaphor, is

communicated with shame. That this moment is described in the first person is especially poignant because it reflects Alexie's own issues of internalized racism, a subject which he has had to address with his critics. Alexie nimbly sidesteps the issue thusly:

When the book was first published, I was (and continue to be) vilified in certain circles for my alcohol-soaked stories. Rereading them, I suppose my critics have a point. Everybody in this book is drunk or in love with a drunk. And in writing about drunk Indians, I am dealing with stereotypical material. But I can only respond with the truth. In my family, counting parents, siblings, and dozens of aunts, uncles, and cousins, there are less than a dozen who are currently sober, and only a few who have never drank. When I write about the destructive effects of alcohol on Indians, I am not writing out of a literary stance or a colonized mind's need to reinforce stereotypes. I am writing autobiography (26).

As reasonable as his response is, it is equally slippery. Hiding behind equal parts faux innocence of "truth" and insincere *mea culpa* of "they have a point", Alexie might as well be Victor, looking in the funhouse mirror, acutely aware that the illusion of redemption is not redemption itself.

**CHAPTER XII**  
**THE STORYTELLER VERSUS MODERNITY—THOMAS BUILDS-THE-FIRE**  
**AS A FULCRUM OF INTERNALIZED RACISM**

Alexie's depiction of internalized racism is best exemplified not just through Victor's self-hatred, but also through his reaction to Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and the former's disdain for the latter represents a pushback against the cultural aspect of storytelling. I contend that through his portrayal of Victor's interactions with Thomas Alexie offers insight into his own complicated relationship with oral tradition. In the short story "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona", Alexie chronicles the bond the two shares from amicability to cool distance to eventual dissonance, with Victor as the sole waverer. Initially, Victor's relationship with Thomas is one of camaraderie and friendship. As children, they played together, celebrating their "Indian-ness", telling jokes, and wishing they could be warriors. Walking together to a Fourth of July celebration, the paltry fireworks display is enough to satisfy them both, but whereas Victor is excited to get to the celebration, it is Thomas who pragmatically contemplates,



“It’s strange how us Indians celebrate the Fourth of July. It ain’t like it was our independence everybody was fighting for” (Alexie 103). Victor responds by telling him that he thinks too much, and it is this first, microscopic division that positions them antagonistically, with Victor seeming to land on the side that is pushing back on his Native American culture. The rift is almost imperceptible as Victor soon thereafter reembraces his culture by asking Thomas to tell him a story. He happily obliges and in what will become Alexie’s signifier for Thomas’s *modus operandi*, “closes his eyes and tells this story” about two young warriors stealing a car”. For now, the rift is mended, and the two boys continue with a sense of fellowship. In fact, Thomas even saves Victor when he gets his foot stuck in a wasp’s nest, but, unfortunately, Victor’s indebtedness to Thomas will quickly dissipate as they grow up and go their separate ways.

Until this point, Victor has appreciated and actively sought out the very thing that will become the root of their separation. Alexie is using Thomas Builds-the-Fire synecdochally—for Alexie and for Victor, Thomas is the quintessential storyteller, the tribal voice that retains and passes along the traditions, but in the thick of puberty, a time when a young man’s search for identity and all the confusion and chaos that entails is at its peak, Victor’s disdain from Thomas evolves into direct hostility. With Victor and his friends daring Thomas to jump off the roof of their school building, it is with a mixture of hatred and glee that react to his fall and subsequent injury. They chant about his broken arm while “flapping their wings, wishing they could fly, too”. Alexie observes that the boys “hated Thomas for his courage, his brief moment as a bird. Everybody has dreams about flying. Thomas flew” (113). The boys are suspicious and jealous of Thomas, but they are also aware of what he represents—a connection to the tribal culture that buoys

him aloft but also makes him incorruptible, and even when they physically assault him he is impervious to their hurts. The other boys avoid Thomas Builds-the-Fire because of his storytelling, and he continues to tell the stories to himself when nobody else will listen to them. He tells himself, "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...I have no brothers or sisters. I have only my stories which came to me before I even had the words to speak. They are all I have. It's all I can do" (Alexie 115). For Victor, Thomas as the storyteller has shifted from compatriot and spiritual guide to embarrassment to target of aggression, and through it all, Thomas remains unwavering.

By creating a character of consistency even in the face of adversity, Alexie is able simultaneously to celebrate and criticize the oral tradition of his tribe. Additionally, Alexie imbues Thomas with a sense of righteousness and virtue when, even years after Victor and his friends beat Thomas up for no reason, Thomas agrees to help Victor collect his absent father's remains. Though he agrees to give Victor the money he needs to travel, Thomas's kindness extends to more than simply a monetary one. Thomas provides for Victor the support he will need to navigate the experiences of loss and sadness, and, as it turns out, he will also ultimately be the link Victor does not have to his father. By fully utilizing Thomas as storyteller, Alexie connects Victor to his father and, consequently, his heritage. Thomas recalls much about Victor's father that Victor either did not experience or could not remember, including Victor's father picking him up from a dangerous part of town as he was waiting for a vision, and further connecting the two boys as well as more clearly delineating his role as tribal storyteller, Thomas tells Victor, "Your dad was my vision. Take care of each other is what my dreams were saying. Take

care of each other” (Alexie 119). This is the reason that Thomas agrees to help Victor, and though Alexie has overtly depicted Victor’s internalized racism through his derision of Thomas’s stories, the interconnectedness between the two of them is momentarily restored. Alexie punctuates the moment by having Victor agree, “Just one time when [Victor is] telling a story somewhere, [to] stop and listen” (*ibid*). Interestingly, Thomas’s storytelling, though a bone of contention among his former friends (and emblematic of their alienation from their culture), seems to be his cultural birthright as his own grandfather possessed the same resilience and unwavering resolution in his storytelling as Thomas does.

Samuel Builds-the-Fire’s tale is a tragic one, filled with loneliness as he waits for his family to send him even the simplest of birthday wishes. “Got their own fry bread cooking in the oven. Got a whole lot of feathers in their warbonnets,” is the story he tells himself to mask his disappointment, but it becomes part of the catalyst (the other being his dismissal from the job in which he took great pride) for Samuel to decide to get drunk for the first time in his life. “I understand everything,” he thinks to himself as the alcohol begins to take effect, and he surmises that “He knew all about how it begins; he knew he wanted to live this way now” (Alexie 188). In a mockery of coming-of-age type of vision quest, Alexie gradually instills a slow, sad understanding within Samuel, and “with each glass of beer, Samuel gained a few ounces of wisdom, courage," but the revelations Samuel experiences are condemning; instead of growing in wisdom and the confidence of tradition, Samuel embraces the internalized racism that plagues many of Alexie’s characters, for replacing the wisdom of elders, “he began to understand too much about fear and failure, too. At the halfway point of any drunken night, there is a moment when

an Indian realizes he cannot turn back toward tradition and that he has no map to guide him toward the future” (*ibid*). His tale becomes a cautionary one when he passes out drunk on a train track as the train approaches. Alexie directly challenges the notion that Native American culture hands down wisdom from generation to generation, and that reverence and respect for the traditional will insulate them from external racism. In fact, Alexie is suggesting, the biggest inheritance a Native American accept is the hopelessness of his situation and a legacy of substance abuse. It seems inescapable.

Perhaps the most cogent example of Alexie’s internalized racism is in the form of an episode populated by Victor, Junior, and Thomas Builds-the-Fire and embellished with a setting of drugs, hallucinations, and a rapid-fire shifting of narrators and perspectives. Jerome DeNuccio presents a thorough analysis of Alexie’s work, particularly with regards to the problem I have been discussing. Alexie’s characters, “wage daily battle against small humiliations and perennial hurts,” DeNuccio claims, “[and] the dilemma of how to be ‘real Indians,’ of how to find ‘their true names, their adult names’, of how to find a warrior dignity and courage when it is too late to be warriors in the old way” (86). Alexie has struggled with the very same internal conflicts, and though he has endeavored to resolve his artistic identity by positing, “I wasn’t saved by the separation of cultures; I was reborn inside the collision of cultures,” it would appear that he, too, is still grappling with what it means to be a “real Indian”, and whether in becoming one, he is either conforming to European stereotypes or creating an image that will serve to inspire generations of young Native Americans to embrace their culture (qtd. in Wilson 53). Alexie’s characters, just as Alexie does, “struggle to cope with passivity, cynicism, and despair to find healing for the pain that turns into self-pity and

the anger that turns into self-loathing” (DeNuccio 86). Nobody encapsulates this desperation better than Victor, and nobody provides a more soothing salve for it than Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and in the short story “A Drug Called Tradition”, Alexie addresses multiple perspectives on the presence of internalized racism.

The story begins in the first-person with Victor narrating as he ambles around a party Thomas is throwing to celebrate a settlement from the power company that needs to lease part of his land. He invites Junior to sneak away from the party to try the new magic mushrooms he has secreted with him, and they decide to invite some Indian princesses, “only if they were full-blood,” a requirement that they quickly amend to, “at least half-Spokane” (Alexie 45). Like the need for the princesses to be of pure ancestry, Junior’s “new car” (quotes mine) is merely a front—it looks flashy and sharp on the outside when he displays it prominently in front of the Trading Post, but, “driving it was a whole other matter... It belched and farted its way down the road like an old man. That definitely wasn’t cool” (*ibid*). Like the contrast between inside and outside, Alexie contrasts the two boys’ insincere swagger cocky braggadocio with Thomas’s calm spirituality when they pick him up on the way. They audaciously anticipate wild ancestral revelations which may or may not arrive. DeNuccio contends that for Native American culture, “the self is positioned in a social space replete with memories, dreams, and voices... that must be accommodated and negotiated if the self as an individual and a tribal subject is to emerge,” because within a culture that emphasizes an ancestral framework, he continues, all of those elements, “bear traces, are mediated by social relations and cultural dynamics, are inflected

by family, friends, lovers, traditions, mass media, history” (87). While Victor and Junior have been actively pushing against the forces of heritage, family, and community, considering them to be hokey and embarrassing, Thomas has always been in connection with them. It is these forces that fuel Thomas’s stories, but it is also these forces that drive a wedge between him and his peers. His position as the storyteller is a constant source of irritation for the other young men who consider him addled or maybe even maladjusted, but in a peripatetic transposition of roles, when the boys take their hallucinogen, it is Thomas who serves as the guide to help them navigate its effects.

At this moment, Alexie begins clever manipulation of perspective as Thomas takes the first dose. He begins explaining his vision to Victor, and it has the effect of not only drawing in Victor, but drawing us in as well, and Victor switches from narrating the story to narrating Thomas’s vision. We are privy to the scene in Thomas’s mind, and it is the first time Alexie gives us a first-person perspective of one of his visions. In it, Victor triumphantly liberates a horse from its oppressive captors, and the two gallops to freedom that eventually becomes flight, which fittingly is the horse’s name. It is a moment of harmony and joy, but the moment is short-lived within the context of Alexie’s story, and Junior ingests the drug next.

Junior’s vision, like Thomas’s, begins with him claiming to see Thomas dancing. Similar to Thomas’s vision, the narrative perspective becomes first-person again, with the subject of the vision assuming the role of narrator. It is one of the few times Thomas is given first-person perspective, and in it, he dances and dances first to honor his dead tribe, then to revive them, and eventually the newly risen dancers” knock all the white people from their beds...until [the dancers] are standing on the shore, watching all the

ships returning to Europe...until the ships fall off the horizon...until [the dancers] are so tall and strong that the sun is nearly jealous” (Alexie 50). It is another triumphant moment for the boys, but it is one that Alexie uses cleverly, for while it may feel as though it succeeds in negating the suffering of generations of Native Americans, we must remember that it is a hallucination. What Alexie does next is of particular interest to my inquiry.

When Junior takes the mushrooms the narration changes yet does not as the overarching structure of the frame narrative has consistently been Victor all along. There is no jarring shift for the reader to try and navigate, but the *nature* of the hallucination raises questions. In it, Victor takes the position of “best guitarist in the who ever lived”, and he celebrates that fact with sold out shows and worldwide laurels. It is here that Alexie tips his hand with the phrase, “Indians make the best cowboys,” perhaps a reference to the Lone Ranger/Tonto dynamic of the title. In their roles in their respective visions, both Junior and Thomas take on the personas of positive stereotypical Native American icons. Junior is the stealthy Indian brave with the ability to commune with nature, a blur of speed and nobility as he rescues a horse. Thomas is the paragon of Indian virtue who suffers through his dance in order to resurrect his long past community, and as he does so, he is able to liberate his people and send the white imperialists back to Europe without violence or aggression. He is peaceful diplomacy personified. On the other hand, Victor becomes an entertainer, assuming the identity of the very culture that is responsible for his subjugation. The satisfying facet of his “triumph” (quotes mine) is that, “All the white folks come to hear [his] songs, [his] *little pieces of Indian wisdom* (emphasis mine),” and he appears to claim racial advantage because, “although they have

to sit in the back of the theater because all the Indians get the best. It's not racism. The Indians just camp out all night to buy tickets" (Alexie 51). What interests me about this is that even as Alexie reduces the typical image of Native wisdom that Thomas usually provides into "little pieces", his narrator is still providing entertainment for his white audience, and this appears to be Victor's ultimate ambition. Rather than making his audience suffer the same racism he suffered had at their hands, Victor becomes a caricature and mirrors the same internalized racism that allowed Brother Tod Clifton to betray his own people with his Stepin Fetchit while selling his Sambo puppets. Junior and Thomas become heroes, and Victor becomes a jester.

The last vision of the night is Thomas's, and it comes as they usually do for him—unaided by chemicals, fueled only by his connection with his heritage and his ancestors. Once again, Junior and Victor have returned to a position of cynicism, but they begrudgingly agree to listen as "Thomas closed his eyes and told his story," (Alexie 53). He attempts to use his vision pedagogically, and he sees the three of them as they are at that moment, searching for visions and "for their adult names" (Alexie 55). Alexie again uses a frame narrative because as Victor describes it, the boys listen to Thomas's story, the boys in his vision wait for their own visions, and within those visions, they are transported to a time before they had experienced alcohol. The story-within-a-story serves to distance Victor from the message because, at the helm of the outermost tale, he is the furthest from the experience; however, it is he who most needs the message provided by Thomas as he explains the problem of "keeping up with your skeletons". As DeNuccio observes,



The term *Indian* names a subject position traversed by competing claims, saturated by multiple insinuations, the confusion or mastering force of which can induce a capitulation that Thomas identifies as failing to keep “in step with your skeletons.” Such capitulation forecloses choice, and the result is often self-sabotage (87).

His suggestion bears a great deal of weight, especially in the context of Victor, who never misses an opportunity impugn Thomas Builds-the-Fire and his position as storyteller. Thomas suggests that all Indians live in a perpetual state of the “now”, but even as they do, the skeletons of their pasts hurry to overtake them even as the skeletons of their futures step quickly beyond their reach. Thomas warns the boys that they must constantly be in step, to walk the tightrope between the two and not be tempted to give in to either. He tells them that even as they walk, “your skeletons will talk to you, tell you to sit down and take a rest, [. . .] make you promises, tell you all the things you want to hear,” all in an attempt to stop them (Alexie 56). The message is simple and well-reasoned, but Victor and Junior do not understand it. As is their way, they dismiss Thomas out of hand, and eventually find themselves back in front of the Trading Post, having learned nothing and, in essence, having not moved an inch.

### **CHAPTER XIII**

#### **THE STEREOTYPE AS ARCHETYPE—WHAT COMES NEXT?**

Following both Victor and Junior's development, Alexie addresses the darkest part of internalized racism—the kind that results not from outside forces, but instead from Native American perception of itself. Returning back to the reservation after a failed interracial relationship, Junior falls into the stereotypical pitfall of life on the reservation. He recalls an Indian poet who said that "Indians can reside in the city, but they can never live there," and sadly figures that "That's as close to truth as any of us can get" (Alexie 247). This sad realization immediately precedes a period of listlessness, inactivity, and avoidance. He travels through a cycle of trash television, recriminating questions about his future from his mother, and strict avoidance of the want ads, potential jobs circled in accusatory red pen. Alexie's narrator is distinctly aware of the burden put upon him by the people on the reservation. He thinks to himself somewhat bitterly, "I was one of those Indians who was supposed to make it, to rise

above the rest of the reservation like a fucking eagle or something. I was the new kind of warrior” (Alexie 248). Not only is he acutely aware that he is being bulldozed into the hope of all of his people, he is also acknowledging that it is a responsibility that he does not want—at least not yet. Again, Alexie shows us a man who is pulled in different directions, and each of them is the result of an outside preconception of his identity. This begs the question: in Alexie’s estimation, what is the solution?

Junior addresses the issue by a different means, on his own terms, and this, too helps Alexie express what he feels is a responsibility of a Native American storyteller. He finds his way out of the listlessness gradually, and by way of basketball. This, too is symbolic, as the Junior begins the endeavor alone. He recalls:

At first I just shot baskets by myself. It was selfish, and I also wanted to learn the game again before I played against anybody else. Since I had been good before and embarrassed fellow tribal members, I knew they would want to take revenge on me. Forget about the cowboys versus Indians business. The most intense competition on any reservation is Indians versus Indians (Alexie 248).

He is aware of his responsibility to his tribe, but he is also aware of the dangers of jumping into that role. Alexie wants his readers to know witness the double-edged sword of internalized racism here—in bettering oneself within the eyes of a hegemonic culture, one also faces scrutiny from one’s people. Once he has accepted this role, Junior finds himself in a position to represent his tribe, and the competition *with* them becomes a competition *for* them. Standing in the gym as one of the tribe’s forgotten heroes and

facing a white opponent, he has a unique opportunity to represent his people, and he takes it, offering up that even though he had “played most of [his] ball at the white high school [he] went to, [he] was still all Indian...when it counted, and this BIA kid needed to be beaten by an Indian, any Indian” (*ibid*). Alexie uses this moment to offer an interesting truth. Sometimes, the hero is not successful, but it is not the victory that matters here. Junior does not ruminate over the loss, nor is he consumed by it. Instead, he understands that the white boy was just better that day, and this somehow frees Junior to resume his life. He realizes that he is hungry, and the only solution is to work. From this point on, he is able to get up every day, find a job, and support himself, relieved of the burden of expectations foisted upon him by both European bigotry and the expectations of his tribe. Though he still experiences both daily, he is no longer bound by either. This is Alexie’s solution to the limits of internalized racism—witness it, acknowledge it, but, ultimately, find your own path.

McGrath takes exception to what she calls the “incorrect and casual identification of folklore in literature, as well as any preemptive dismissal of its presence,” as well as the “popular but simplistic notion that Native American writing is somehow more ‘oral’ than other texts” (2). She contends that oral storytelling and written storytelling need not be mutually exclusive, offering that when utilizing more performative aspects of writing, it replicates oral tradition to the point that distinctions between the two disappear. More specifically, McGrath references Leslie Marmon Silko, also a Native American author, who comes to Alexie’s defense by explaining “a legacy of ‘lengthy fictions of interlinked characters and events’ as commonplace,” (Silko qtd in McGrath) and by doing so, “indicates the importance of tradition to the writing of Alexie’s

work...[and]...contextualizes his authored literature in relationship to oral tradition and composition,” (McGrath 5). Regardless of whether or not Silko’s attesting on his behalf garners Alexie the credibility McGrath suggests, his book offers a great deal of the “interlinked characters and events”, and shows a sort of melding of Native and non-Native storytelling techniques.

Alexie’s ability, not so much to straddle two worlds, but to transcend them, carries with it the risk of marginalizing the very subject the writer wishes help raise up. McGrath observes that he has been accused by “people on the reservation...that he’s making fun of them. It’s supposed to be fiction, but [they] all know whom he’s writing about. He has wounded a lot of people” (3). To this, Alexie responds, “I write what I know, and I don’t try to mythologize myself, which is what some seem to want, and which some Indian women and men writers are doing, this Earth Mother and Shaman Man thing, trying to create these ‘authentic, traditional’ Indians. We don’t live our lives that way” (qtd in McGrath 3). McGrath culminates her argument with the concern that “The question for Alexie often seems to be whether the risk and the imperative of innovation on tradition, and the radical and revolutionary disruption his work can wreak on readers who belong to the dominant culture as well as on American Indians is worth the seeming loss or decay of oral tradition and traditional meaning” (12). After examining *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, we realize that Alexie has, as McGrath explains, “crafted stories which illustrate the tensions within living traditions (both the oral tradition in which he participates, as well as the literary tradition of authored text)” (11). Alexie’s use of humor and pathos afford him a unique ability to address the issue of internalized racism. He feels the pain of life on the reservation, all the while admitting to

experiencing life outside of it. Often criticized by his own people for what they perceive as a betrayal of sort, Alexie has done an impressive job at maintaining sensitivity. Alexie acknowledges, “I’m incredibly privileged when I’m sitting at a typewriter, but once I get up and out of that role, I’m an Indian (Newton Alexie qtd. in Fraser 70). That being said, Alexie is uncomfortable with the idea that he is a spokesperson for his culture, and this tends to clash with the negative aspects of Native American life that he has written about. In fact, members of his own ethnic group have criticized him for what they see as exploitation of the unflattering elements of life on the reservation. Alexie acknowledges that his writing does explore self-criticism and internalized racism, but he emphasizes the importance of a writer not to shy away from the truth, even if and especially if it encourages self-exploration. To the critics who accuse him of capitalizing on the misery of his own people, Alexie responds:

You know, because as Indians we’ve been so stereotyped and maligned and oppressed and abused, in acts and deed, in action and word, we seek literature that cheers us in some way, that acts as some sort of antidote, rather than an examination of us, and an interrogation of us...I think a lot of Indians want Indian artists to be cultural cheerleaders rather than cultural investigators (qtd. in Peterson 122)

In his typical sardonic style, Alexie has both provided an explanation for his characters’ internalized racism and justified his encouragement of others, authors and “civilians” alike, to explore the darker sides of their own cultures—to examine, unafraid, the things about their identities that others might see as unpleasant.

## CHAPTER XIV

### CONCLUSION—INTERNALIZED RACISM EXPLORED IN A CURRENT CLIMATE

Like Ralph Ellison, Sherman Alexie seeks to tell his stories with an air of honesty. Both authors have dealt with accusations of betrayal, that their works have besmirched their own races, and that they have contributed to the racism their people suffer by cashing in on their own internalized racism. Both authors have used explored the controversial topic for pedagogical reasons, and though both *Invisible Man* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* have been widely discussed (albeit Ellison more widely than Alexie), not as much has been written about the specific way each author achieves his aims. through slightly different means. For Ellison, the presence of internalized racism within *Invisible Man* serves as a lesson about recognizing one's own prejudices and reacting to them as a point of departure from a greater oppressive force. In other words, we must be aware of the way our own philosophies may actually serve to work against us, and we must then seek to counteract those harmful ideas and grow from

them. Ellison's narrator is unable to form his own identity until he is able to see how someone like him might appear to himself. Once he is able to observe the internalized racism both around him and within him, it becomes easier for him to forge ahead and fully realize the man he is becoming. As a cautionary tale, however, Ellison makes a point of concluding his novel with his still-unnamed narrator underground, unaware of his identity, and seemingly invisible to the outside world. Clearly, he is not yet finished wrestling with the demons of internalized racism that he resulted from years of *externalized* racism. He has witnessed it, he acknowledges it, but only when he is able to eliminate it from his own mind will he be able to experience full agency. He makes thorough use of different sound techniques to express his characters' internalized racism, specifically auditory elements, acts, and the oral tradition of African folklore.

Similarly, Sherman Alexie's use of internalized racism within *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is for edification, but unlike Ellison, Sherman's characters experience self-hatred in order to show the audience that it is not always pleasant or comfortable to examine all aspects of one's identity. Alexie does not shy away from the more negative aspects of life on the reservation, nor does he try to mask the foibles that result from some parts of Native American culture. Instead, Alexie would argue, one must accept his or her heritage as it is without attempting to brush aside or completely obfuscate even the embarrassing or detrimental scars that bear witness to the external oppression one might have suffered. From Victor's treatment of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire and his role as storyteller to his use of narrative techniques and frame story, Alexie also manipulates his characters and their philosophies to expose how years of prejudice, persecution, and cultural appropriation can impact a person's self-perception.



But what does this mean for the innumerable modern cultures in the United States? It would be naïve to pretend that prejudice no longer exists. Despite the fact that most (but by no means all) systemic racism has been eliminated in practice, covert racism is far more sinister because it is often difficult to spot and, because psychological biases are internal, impossible to prove. Extinguishing cultural biases, however, is of the utmost importance, especially in the world of academia because, as Psychiatrist Franz Fanon observed, “the sustained denigration and injustice that the oppressed are subjected to often lead to self-doubt, identity confusion, and feelings of inferiority...and the oppressed may eventually believe the inferiorizing messages about one’s racial group” (qtd. in David et al 1060). As the world becomes more culturally aware and technologically savvy, it becomes easier to propagate ignorance, hatred, and cruelty, especially since the technological access gives people greater anonymity, and this in turn, stokes the fires of antipathy among people of differing races, genders, identities, social classes, and especially cultures, and academia has the distinct power to combat each with the power of literature. In this capacity, both Ellison and Alexie’s works are topical and relevant despite being somewhat anachronistic. A thorough understanding of *Invisible Man* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* can most definitely serve to provide young readers of all colors and identities with the tools to navigate today’s social morass.

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