

Dealing with the
present via the past
in the lone ranger and
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In Sherman Alexie's "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven", the past is never really past. The aftershocks of 500 years of Native American persecution, oppression, and neglect continue to haunt the world of the reservation, in the form of alcoholism, poverty, and familial dysfunction. In spite of all this-or perhaps because of it-ancient tribal tradition/ritual lives on, if in a modified, more contemporary version. Throughout the story, the old ways-whether they be storytelling or vision seeking-serve to renew hope, and strengthen the bonds of the community. Thus, the past is both a destructive and a redemptive force within the novel. It is at once a source of continuing suffering and an antidote to that suffering. These two opposing forces are best represented by two of the novel's principal characters: Victor and Thomas-Builds-the-Fire. Victor, raised in poverty by an alcoholic, "failure" of a father, can only see the past through dark colored glasses. For him, the past is a force that, more often than not, leaves disaster in its wake; the tragedy of the past begets the tragedy of the present, pain begets pain. It is an endless and indefatigable cycle. Thomas-Builds-the-Fire on the other hand, is a man who sees value in the past and in tradition-hence his role as a storyteller. When Thomas speaks of the past in his stories, he speaks of past Indian glory, of acts of bravery and sacrifice, and in such a past he sees hope for the future. For each man, the past holds a different meaning, and a different potential; where one sees only decay, the other sees the possibility for rebirth. In the first few pages of the novel Victor lays out his belief in the power of the past to wreak havoc on the present," Their...anger had not died. Instead, it moved from Indian to Indian...giving each a specific, painful memory. Victor's father remembered the time his own father was spit on as they waited for a bus in Spokane. Victor's mother remembered how the

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Indian Health Service doctor sterilized her moments after Victor was born...

Indians continued to drink harder and harder, as if anticipating" (8). Here we see a generation of Indians, consumed by their past, by memories of past injustices against them, fallen into a drunken despair. As Victor sees it, such a situation is, for the Indians, veritably unavoidable; despair breeds alcoholism, which breeds poverty, which breeds despair and so on and so forth. In the same chapter Victor exclaims, " There was enough geography and history [in both his parents] to destroy the reservation and leave only random debris and furniture" (11). Thus, the tragedy of the present, or " the now" as Victor calls it, is inevitably bound up in the tragedy of the past. More precisely, the inability to let go of past hurt leads to the inability to move forward, to progress, i. e. self-betterment. The contemporary *rez* (Indian slang for reservation), like Victor, is a victim of such a cycle. At the other end of the spectrum, we have Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, who, via the ancient Indian art of oral storytelling, uses the past to try and heal the present. Thomas mixes elements of the traditional with elements of the modern in order to make his stories all that much more relevant, and all the more urgent. His goal is to motivate young reservation Indians like himself to put down the bottle, turn away from the squalor of " the now", see the glory of the past, and understand the promise of the future. One very poignant example of such a story can be found in the aptly titled chapter " A Drug Called Tradition". In this story, " three Indian boys are drinking diet Pepsi and talking about Benjamin Lake" when suddenly they decide"...to be real Indians...and have their vision, to receive their true names, their adult names...their visions arrive. They are all carried away to the past, to the moment before any of them took their first drink of alcohol. The boy Thomas

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throws his whiskey through a window. The boy Victor spills his vodka down the drain. Then the boys sing. They sing and dance and drum. They steal horses. I can see them. They steal horses. (21) The story expresses a longing to return to a type of glorified, pre-reservation-blues past, in which Indians were still “real Indians” and they did not carry the historical/emotional baggage associated with contemporary reservation life. Thomas’s storytelling invokes a past that does not dishearten but inspires. Hence, “A Drug Called Tradition” is about seeing the positive in Indian history instead of only the negative. It presents an alternative to Victor’s highly negative and highly counterproductive attitude, which is mirrored in the history of Native American tragedy, as opposed to Native American triumph. “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven” presents us with two ways of perceiving and dealing with the past in contemporary Indian life. In the end, Alexie leaves us with these words as a means of choosing between the two, “Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you... Now, these skeletons are made of memories, dreams, and voices. And they can trap you in the in-between, between touching and becoming. But they are not necessarily evil, unless you let them be... But no matter what... keep walking.” (8) Alexie warns the Victors of the world to keep walking to avoid getting trapped and entangled in the skeletons of the past. The past, as he says, is not necessarily evil; you can look upon it, in all its ugliness and in all its beauty, but do not get stuck in it. Move on. And this is the essence, paradoxically, of Thomas’s call to return to tradition. This is the idea behind the diet Pepsi

vision quest; let us take the good and leave the bad (but do not forget); let us empty the liquor bottle, and once more, learn to steal horses.