

Dreams Like Baseball Cards:  
Baseball, Bricoleur, and the Gap in  
Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger*  
and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

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Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America  
had better learn baseball.

JACQUES BARZUN,  
*God's Country and Mine*, 1954

I like your interest in sports—ball, chiefest of all—base-ball  
particularly: base-ball is our game: the American game: I  
connect it with our national character.

WALT WHITMAN,  
*Baseball is our game*, 1888

**I** • The Euramerican Game

Jacques Barzun, the continental thinker who adopted America as his home, and Walt Whitman, the self-proclaimed poet of America, the literary figure foretold by Emerson, may be separated by over one-half a century and radically different origins, but they express remarkably similar sentiments about baseball. In this deceptively simple sport that has been played in the United

States since the years leading up to the Civil War, Barzun and Whitman locate the source of a fundamentally "American" character. This American character, however, is one that may more accurately be referred to as *Euramerican* character, for both Barzun and Whitman's cultural touchstone is the dominant American culture that grew along with the society constructed by European settlers who extended the borders of the United States further and further westward throughout the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, eventually fulfilling what was popularly referred to as the nation's Manifest Destiny.

Manifest Destiny—and American Character—fail to account, however, for the original Americans. From the perspective of Manifest Destiny, American Indians were little more than an obstacle to be overcome as the engine of progress churned toward the inevitable realization of a nation spanning the North American continent. And from the perspective of Whitman and Barzun's "American character," American Indians are typically seen as savages (by turns noble or purely brutal in the dominant narratives constructed to make sense of American history). It is, then, with a full awareness of the irony inherent in the subject of my examination that I seek to bring together literary constructions of American Indian identity and agency with baseball, a sport that would more accurately seem to align with the cultural conventions of Euramerican culture. Through the analysis of American Indian characters brought into contact with "the American game," we may discover that baseball is not so rigidly aligned with the cultural values of the dominant Euramerican culture that it precludes these characters from constructing an identity and exercising a power (or agency) independent of cultural forces that may otherwise constrain them. In fact, baseball, because it is a game that exists in the kind of gap explored later in this essay, allows them to successfully perform these very tasks. Specifically, the American Indian characters in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* illustrate the possibilities inherent in a conception of "the American game" that extends beyond its apparent Euramerican limits.

## II. The Gap: It's Not About Khaki

To address the issue of American Indian identity and agency means opening the proverbial can of worms (or Pandora's Box—you may select the metaphor of your choice), requiring the consideration of a host of questions: what is an American Indian? Is such an identity, to borrow the terminology set forth by Jana Sequoya Magdaleno, more accurately characterized as "tribal" or "ethnic" (280)? When we speak of identity, are we speaking of identity as constructed by the dominant culture (i.e., the romanticized noble savage vanishing from the American landscape or the brutal marauder terrorizing innocent settlers carving out an existence on the American frontier), or identity as constructed and asserted by a member of the colonized culture (in whatever version that may be)? And perhaps most importantly, once we have agreed to the parameters established by answering these questions, where can we look for

examples of successful identity construction, of meaningful agency, and what are the conditions that enable such constructions and operations?

For the purpose of this essay, "American Indian" will be defined as anyone possessing American Indian blood (Magdaleno's ethnic designation) and attempting to live within the dominant Euramerican culture on his or her own terms—not those set forth by the ideology of the dominant culture (though this individual may appropriate the language and norms of the dominant culture in the service of his or her goals). In answering the final question articulated in the preceding paragraph, I will look to the "gap" that factors prominently in both the theory and practice of literature, a gap made manifest in multiple narratives by and about American Indians and in the very structure of the sport of baseball.

In the often contentious fields of literary theory and cultural study, the gap of which I speak takes on any of a number of permutations. Linguistically, the gap may be referred to as an *aporia*—an "impasse" of an undecidable oscillation, as when the chicken depends upon the egg but the egg depends upon the chicken [and] the only way to claim that language functions performatively to shape the world is through a constative utterance" (Culler 101). Language, then, may be said to function within this linguistic gap; it can never definitively position itself at either pole, and in its oscillation, it situates itself within a gap, a position from which it effectively bridges the constative (read: utterances either true or false) and performative (read: utterances actually performing actions to which they refer) functions.

Similarly, we can discover a gap within the field of myth theory, a gap with significant implications for the construction of American Indian identity within the American game. In her impressive study of mythic conventions within the sport of baseball and the literature that has grown up around it, Deeanne Westbrook draws upon the linguistic roots of myth to situate the gap in which baseball functions. As she points out:

The words *language* and *myth* have traveled together from a common origin. Both ... go back to a single Indo-European root, \**ma-*, realized in Greek as *mythos*, "word," "speech," and related to "mother" ... So myth is language ... [but] complicating the picture is the word *mythology*, which sometimes means simply 'myths' but has traditionally been used ambiguously to mean both "a body of myths" and "the study of myths." The word (which combines *mythos*, "word," and *logos*, "word") is a reiterative term ... In Plato both *mythos* and *logos* could mean "account" or "story," but the two terms were already taking on connotations, at times, of the "false" and the "true," or the narrative and discursive. (5)

Such an understanding of myth situates a definite gap between narrative and discourse—between story and theory, between the presumed construction of something false and the apparent pursuit of truth—helping us understand the function myth serves in the modern world. It is within this gap that Claude Levi-Strauss identifies the role of “mythic enterprise” (which Westbrook identifies as both the act of storytelling to make meaning in the world and the act of interpreting myth to consider its implications for the world) as “the work of the *bricoleur*, the artificer who ‘make[s] do with whatever is available’ to construct a new thing, building, as Boas said, ‘new mythological worlds’ from the shattered remains of the old” (Westbrook 5). In this sense, the *bricoleur*, be he storyteller or critic, carries out his work in the gap between narrative and discourse; this work, whether it generates or interprets myth/narrative, effectively bridges the gap between the two—an act of bridging carried out by Sherman Alexie as he allows his American Indian characters to situate themselves in relation to the American game.

Before examining Alexie’s characters as *bricoleurs*, however, two tasks must be performed: first, the mythic character of baseball must be established, and second, examples of American Indian characters effectively constructing identity and exercising agency within “gaps” must be briefly examined. In recent years, several critics and commentators have examined the mythic character of baseball (and indeed, fiction writers like W.P. Kinsella and filmmakers like Phil Alden Robinson have firmly entrenched the mythic within their baseball narratives, encouraging such examinations), but perhaps the best exploration of the link between baseball and the mythic is presented by Roberta Newman in her essay “The American Church of Baseball and the National Baseball Hall of Fame.” In this work, she makes a compelling argument in support of her assertion that “in this country, where the secular is frequently imbued with religious significance, baseball, the national pastime, may be said to serve as the American religion” (46). In this statement alone, we see evidence of the manner in which the American game functions in the gap—in this case, in the space between the religious (read: myth/narrative, the performative) and the secular (read: discourse/theory, the constative); baseball, by being imbued with the characteristics of both myth and religion, becomes the *bricoleur* Westbrook identifies in the theory of Levi-Strauss. As Frank Hall notes, baseball fluctuates between the secular and religious poles, never resting wholly with the former because “with all its rituals and ceremonies, [baseball] certainly mirrors religion” or the latter as “it lacks a metaphysics. It may have saints and heroes, but baseball has no real sense of the divine” (qtd. in Newman 47). Though baseball may be imbued with elements of both the religious and the secular, it effectively exists in the gap between the two, allowing those who “worship” at its altar to find a kind of salvation not typically present in the secular world.

Interestingly—and appropriately, given the objective of this essay—Newman’s analysis of baseball’s religious/mythic character goes on to include

a notable discussion of American Indians, citing their importance in Mormon cosmology. In *Mormonism*, Newman locates a figurative link that helps her to articulate the religious nature of baseball. She writes that "like America's game, Mormonism is an adaptation of an older, European religion, or, more appropriately, a group of religions, all labeled as Christianity . . . . However, their doctrine departs considerably from mainstream Christianity, just as rules of baseball diverge from the rules of rounders" (48-49). She points out that in both the circumstances of its origin and the tenets of its beliefs, Mormonism is an American religion. Significant among these beliefs are the assertion that "Native Americans are the descendants of the lost tribe of Israel" and that with Christ's second coming "Zion would be built on the American continent" (49). In this sense, American Indians hold a privileged position, having already situated themselves in the only "home" that ultimately matters (the type of mythic movement homeward that could be said to resonate in the movement of the successful batter in baseball returning to home plate). As such, they could be said to be gap dwellers; within the fabric of the dominant American secular narratives of progress, American Indians occupy a cultural and historical aporia—a gap in which positive identity is constructed and genuine agency functions when the American Indian becomes Levi-Strauss's *bricoleur*, able to link the sacred and the secular, able to bridge the gap between presumed and actual identity, at times ironically seizing upon the symbols and cultural currency of the dominant culture in the process.

Numerous American Indian texts within this developing body of literature utilize the figure of the gap in performing their thematic work. In Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Tayo exists in the gap between his Pueblo community and the Euramerican culture that sent him to fight a war that would send him home as a damaged individual—and it is his ability to bridge the gap between the two (using elements of both his native and non-native cultures) that allows him to construct an identity we may assume will function successfully. N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* begins and ends at dawn, the narrow gap between day and night, between the symbolic good and evil of the world, and by running within this gap, we see Abel symbolically attempting to strike a balance between the two. In Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*, Proude Cedarfair is ultimately situated in the gap between the natural and supernatural worlds, his laughter roaring "from the rim of the mesa in the west ha ha ha haaaa . . . . from the mesa in the east ha ha haaaa . . . . [moving] to the south and north in timeless flight . . . . over time in the four directions" (244). From this position, Proude Cedarfair may function as Vizenor's compassionate trickster. And in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, American Indian storytellers exercise a unique agency from the space they occupy in the gap between narrative and discourse—they alter Judeo-Christian stories and figures within Biblical narratives and alter the ending of a stereotypical Western film by having the Indians defeat John Wayne.

Additionally, two figures that are characteristic of American Indian literature, the trickster and the mixedblood, could be said to exist within the gap. Louis Owens argues that while the position of the mixedblood "has almost universally been treated as the 'tragic' fact" (167), it need not be tragic. Such a position in the gap between cultures instead offers the mixedblood a privileged position of power, and if he is able to bridge the gap between the two with the tools at his disposal (i.e., Silko's Tayo), the mixedblood can act with a type of agency uniquely available to him only. Similarly, the trickster is positioned in a gap, fluctuating between creator and destroyer, between promoter of the sacred and bringer of the profane. To paraphrase Kimberly Blaeser's examination of the trickster figure in the work of Gerald Vizenor, the trickster, when understood to possess transformative properties inherent in the figure, stimulates reader participation (137). In this sense, the trickster displays a truly remarkable type of agency; not only does he function from within the gap in his narrative world, but he also actively works from a gap between the "real" and narrative worlds.

Jerome DeNuccio identifies the gap existence in which the characters in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* function. DeNuccio points to the storyteller Thomas Builds-the-Fire as the originator of the figure that enables a conception of Alexie's characters as existing within a gap. Thomas tells Junior and Victor that "your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you .... [but] what you have to do is keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons .... That's what Indian time is. The past, the future, all of it is wrapped up in the now. That's how it is. *We are trapped in the now*" (Alexie 21-22). On the basis of being situated between the past and the future, DeNuccio argues that Alexie's characters are positioned "in a social space replete with memories, dreams, and voices that invite attention and response, that must be accommodated and negotiated if the self as an individual and a tribal subject is to emerge. Such negotiation, although paramount, is never easy" (87). Though the negotiation to which DeNuccio alludes may seem unsuccessful given the proclivity for tragedy that seems inherent in many of Alexie's characters, we can find, within their gap existence, a tool which enables them a greater degree of success than would otherwise be available in the construction of identity and the exercise of agency.

That tool is baseball.

### III. But Can Tonto Hit the Curveball?

That sport may play a significant role in the construction of identity and exercise of power for American Indians—or for any member of any group—is clearly an assertion possessing merit. Jacques Derrida, in his landmark essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" establishes the theoretical framework by which, according to Timothy Morris, sport (and

specifically in this instance, baseball) may be regarded as a *centered* structure (17). "Centering" would imply its existence between two structures—hence, an existence in a gap. Derrida writes that on this foundation, "anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game ... of being as it were at stake in the game" (qtd. in Morris 18). By enabling participants to master anxiety, play/sport, then, may be said to function as *bricoleur* for those participants, bridging the gap between whatever poles create the anxiety brought to bear upon them. Similarly, *Tewaarathon*, a project of the North American Traveling College of the Akwesasne Mohawk Indian Reservation, examines the traditional American Indian sport of lacrosse (interestingly, it is, like baseball, a game involving ball and stick) and its role in the lives of the Akwesasne. A portion of the report states that lacrosse

came from the creator himself, [and] was also played to bestow honour and respect to these members living on Mother Earth who had done great things for the Nation. Related to this, Tewaarathon also constituted a means of offering thanksgiving to the Creator for having allowed an elder or medicine person to remain with the Nation so that the person could continue to share the richness of his full life with the younger members. (par. 2)

In this conception of *tewaarathon*, the sport enables its participants to forge an identity within the gaps between the mortal and the immortal, between the past and the future—sport again effectively functions as Levi-Strauss's *bricoleur*, as Derrida's centered structure.

That Alexie intends to link sport, identity, and agency in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* is undeniable. Basketball is the sport most frequently mentioned in the text, but for all its popularity on the Spokane reservation where most of the collection's stories take place, it fails to function as a productive venue for the construction of identity or the exercise of meaningful agency. As Alexie's narrator points out, "There's a definite history of reservation heroes who never finish high school, who never finish basketball seasons. Hell, there's been one or two guys who played just a few minutes of one game, just enough to show what they *could have been*" (italics mine) (47). In basketball, potential remains unfulfilled, identity merely a partial, potential construction, and agency a fleeting display of prowess. Significantly, several characters throughout the text claim basketball wasn't created by James Naismith, but by Indians; this claim enables Alexie to present a symbolic example of Euramerican seizure of Indian land and culture with its attendant prevention of constructing identity and demonstrating agency. In the collection's title story, we see Junior returning to the basketball court after several year's absence. After training himself for his return, "on the night I was ready to play for real, there was this white guy at the gym, playing with all the Indians. ... the new BIA chief's kid ... [who] played

Indian ball, fast and loose, better than all the Indians there." Eventually, despite the fact that Junior "played well for a little while," the "white kid took over the game .... We just knew he was better that day and every other day" (188-189). The success of the "white kid" at what the text claims to be an indigenous game symbolically reconstructs the spread of Euramerican dominance in North America.

It is in baseball, however, that the tables are turned; it is the site where we see Indians seize upon the "American" game in a manner showing that it is a truly American—not Euramerican—game. Baseball appears three times in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*. Its first appearance is in "A Good Story," when Junior's mother, tired of stories that are "too sad," urges him to tell a story in which "good things happen." Junior agrees, but tells her that if she "wants to hear a good story, [she has] to listen" (140). The story he tells is easily the most benign, least tragic narrative in the collection. It focuses on Uncle Moses who sits "in his chair eating a sandwich ... [humming] an it-is-a-good-day song" (141). Moses waits for children to visit him, and when he sees them, they carry "dreams in the back pockets of their blue jeans, pulled them out easily, traded back and forth." Upon seeing this, Moses comments that "dreams [are] like baseball cards" (142). In this tableau, Indian children are clearly in control of their dreams, the implication being that they need not have their identity or fate determined by a dominant culture eager to tell them what is and is not good for them, how they should or should not structure their lives. And in the transformation of dreams to baseball cards, we see a reversal in the roles of colonist/colonizer present on the North American continent, a reversal symbolically embodied by an *American* game.

Baseball's second appearance in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* occurs in "The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor," when the story's narrator, Jimmy discovers he has cancer. His tool for coping with the news of the cancer is the tool he utilizes when confronted with anything potentially destructive in his life—humor. Jimmy tells the story of how he broke the news to Norma, his wife:

I told her the doctor showed me my X-rays and my favorite tumor was just about the size of a baseball, shaped like one, too. Even had stitch marks .... I told her to call me Babe Ruth. Or Roger Maris. Maybe even Hank Aaron 'cause there must have been about 755 damn tumors inside me. Then, I told her I was going to Cooperstown and sit right down in the lobby of the Hall of Fame. Make myself a new exhibit, you know? Pin my X-rays to my chest and point out the tumors. What a dedicated baseball fan! What a sacrifice for the national pastime! (157)

Baseball gives Jimmy the metaphors he requires to secure a degree of power in a situation that could likely render him powerless—he constructs a functional



identity and exercises whatever agency he can in the face of a disease that will ultimately kill him. Jimmy's utilization of baseball as metaphor for identity and agency again reveals the productive nature of baseball in this regard.

Also worth noting are the names Jimmy uses in his gallows humor. Each of the three players he identifies—Ruth, Maris, and Aaron—is known for his prowess in home run hitting, but each of the three players, like Jimmy, is also a gap figure. Babe Ruth, revered in his lifetime for his single-season and career home run records, has become the subject of revisionist history—the one-time hero who was once featured in newspapers a syndicated box entitled “What Babe Ruth Did Today” (Ward & Burns 164) is now as likely to have tales of alcoholism, overeating, and womanizing attached to his name; Babe Ruth the man is no longer a “god,” yet his achievements elevate him well above the status of celebrity boor. In essence, his legacy is one that rests firmly in the gap between two extremes.

Roger Maris, too, may be read as a gap figure. Most noted for breaking Ruth's single-season home run record by hitting 61 home runs in 1961, Maris did not receive the acclaim one might expect to accompany such an achievement. Instead, baseball commissioner Ford Frick suggested that “some distinctive mark’ appear next to Maris’s achievement in the record books” (Ward & Burns 373) because he set the record over the course of a 162-game season as opposed to Ruth’s 154-game season. Further driving Maris from the spotlight was the fact that he—a soft-spoken man who eschewed the limelight—and not his more flamboyant, photogenic teammate, Mickey Mantle, broke the record (Mantle hit 54 during Maris’s record-setting season). For as great as Maris’s accomplishment was, it was not fully accepted or celebrated by either the public or the institution of baseball, effectively allowing him to dangle in a gap not of his own making.

And Henry Aaron, American baseball’s all-time home run champion, also occupied a gap as he approached Ruth’s record of 714 home runs. Like Maris, he was not a media darling—he did not possess the flair that could be found in several of his more celebrated contemporaries. Also situating Aaron in the gap was his ethnicity. In the months leading up to his record-breaking home runs, Aaron received a great deal of hate mail, much of expressing sentiments like those presented in the crude poem “Hank Aaron”: “With all that fortune,/and all that fame,/You’re a stinkin’ nigger, just the same” (Ward & Burns 429). He even received death threats. In a time that clearly should have been celebratory for Aaron (and he did receive such accolades), he also was forced to deal with threats and hate generated as a result of his ethnicity, mirroring circumstances often faced by American Indians and effectively placing him in a gap between being despised and being revered.

But in each of these instances, the player in question, like Jimmy, endured. Aaron and Maris kept playing in the face of criticism and under the lens of scrutiny, setting records that, over time, have come to take on genuine rever-

ence; Ruth, for all the revisions now attached to him, cannot be separated from the immensity of his legend, and he retains a unique position within American culture. Like these three players, Alexie's Jimmy endures. Though Norma leaves him, ostensibly because she cannot bear his incessant joking, she returns to Jimmy from an affair with another man who "was so fucking serious about everything" because "someone needs to help you die the right way ... and we both know dying ain't something you ever done before" (170). In Norma's reply to Jimmy, we see evidence of his work of the *bricoleur*—as a member of the Spokane tribe, as an American Indian living literally and figuratively in the gaps within history, narrative, and myth, Jimmy has seized upon the metaphors of the dominant culture—and most significantly, upon the metaphorical power of the *American game*—and used them to successfully construct an identity, one he will presumably manage. To paraphrase the terminology of DeNuccio, baseball has offered him what he needs to negotiate his identity.

In Alexie's final use of baseball in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, naming also plays a prominent role in the negotiation of identity. Norma, who is perceived by Junior as a "cultural lifeguard," (199) assigns him a new name: Pete Rose. The new name comes about as a result of Junior sharing the story of how he, along with several white college classmates, harass an African American basketball player who had been released from prison but had "made it to college and was playing and studying hard." Junior, upon reflection, states that "if you think about it, he and I had a whole lot in common. Much more in common than I had with those white boys I was drunk with" (208). In this instance, we can again see the dominance of Euramerican culture figured in the symbolism of basketball, a process in which even Junior participates. But we again see the appropriation of baseball as a tool in constructing genuine identity. After hearing Junior's story, Norma treats him differently for a year: "She wasn't mean or distant. Just different. But I understood" (209). That different treatment ends when she walks up to Junior at the Trading Post:

"Pete Rose," she said.

"What?" I asked completely confused.

"Pete Rose," she repeated.

"What?" I asked again, even more confused.

"That's your new Indian name," she said. "Pete Rose .... Because you two got a whole lot in common .... Pete Rose played major league baseball in four different decades, has more hits than anybody in history. Hell, think about it. Going back to Little League and high school and all that, he's probably been smacking the ball around forever. Noah probably pitched him a few on the Ark. But after all that, all that greatness, he's only remembered for the bad stuff." (209-210)

In this exchange, in the assignation of a "new Indian name," we see Norma function as *bricoleur*; by giving Junior the name of a baseball player, she has effectively appropriated Euramerican cultural currency. She enables Junior to identify with a representative of the dominant culture, acknowledging what DeNuccio calls "a commonality of experience that frankly concedes not just [Junior's] error, but also its ineradicability, its permanence," a condition whose acceptance DeNuccio correctly identifies as "requir[ing] courage and break[ing] the cycle by which past failures are repeated in the present" (93-94). But that error becomes acceptable in the guise of Junior's new identity—an identity that can only succeed on the fertile ground within the gap occupied by a truly American game, one that functions as *bricoleur* between myth and discourse, between the sacred and the secular, between colonizer and colonized, and between the competing narratives of history. In this sense, both Barzun and Whitman's remarks take on an unintended, but nonetheless significant, resonance, especially for American Indian characters situated in relation to a game that is, truly and wholly, American—situated in the gap that is baseball.

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