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### The Universal Theme of Exploitation within Indigenous Literature

In studying works written by authors of several indigenous cultures, there are certain themes that emerge, not only among different stories, but between different peoples of which have had no geographical overlap or close contact. One prevalent theme is that of exploitation. In works such as Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Patricia Grace's *Potiki*, and Thomas King's *Borders*, the theme of exploitation is distinctly present. Naturally, each author depicts the issue in different ways, however each work -whether focused on the issue directly or not- mentions the exploitation of indigenous peoples in some small way.

One of the most obvious depiction of exploitation is present in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which covers the life of a teenage Native American boy living on a reservation. Reservations are famously poor communities, on which Native American's were forced to live during North American colonization. The main conflict of the story is that of protagonist Arnold Spirit, who has to find a balance between staying loyal to his Indian heritage and leaving the reservation behind in order to improve his life. It's in that very struggle that the reader sees the exploitation of the Indian people in full. The reservations are depicted as places of soul-sucking poverty. One of the few white residences Mr. P puts it as such "The only thing you kids are being taught is how to give up.... all your friends. All the bullies...And their grandparents gave up and their grandparents before them. And me and every other teacher here. We're all defeated" (Alexie 42). The reservations are a place of punishment and pain, specifically designed to break the spirit of those living there, regardless of race. Even if they were originally only meant to house Native Americans, the reservations kill the hopes of anyone living there. The natives are exploited as cheap labor, kept so deep into poverty that they will take whatever jobs are available at whatever price. They are held in this perpetual cycle of base-level work and low income meaning not only can they never rise out of poverty, but they also can't quit and start a different life for fear of falling deeper into poverty. It is a system that has been put in place by colonizers whose main philosophy on the matter is "kill the Indian to save the child" (Alexie 35). The idea, that an entire culture is somehow evil or lesser than another and it is the job of the 'better' culture to fix it, is what inevitably led to the exploitation of Native Americans within both this story, and real life.

However, this is not the only way to depict the exploitation of indigenous peoples. In Patricia Grace's *Potiki*, the ingoing conflict of the story is that of rebuilding a culture after it is ravaged by outsiders. Within the story the indigenous lands were first taken away by the

government, only to later be partially reclaimed by the natives. The reader sees the land be exploited for profit as the characters struggle to survive on the land that remains. It is here that the damage done to nature is set as a metaphor for how damaging tampering with native cultures can be to both the environment and the cultures themselves. "All of this happened because of the stripping of the hills" (Grace 115). It's by disregarding the past that the future is degraded. The native people's are put at a disadvantage simply by being near a site that has no regard for consequences or morals, since the flood that destroyed the land (originally thought to be a result of shredding the hills) was a purposeful move by the outsiders in order to buy the native's remaining land. It doesn't matter what the peoples have left, the outsiders want it. The outsiders (in this story represented by business men) are like hungry parasites, taking everything, they see and leaving nothing of material value behind. Similarly to *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the outsiders have no real respect for the indigenous cultures. "What he saw was brokenness, a broken race. He saw in my Granny, my Mary, and me, a whole people, decrepit, deranged, deformed" (Grace 102). It may be that the reason outsiders find it acceptable to exploit others is because they see them as lesser, unintelligent people who won't tell the difference. Yet ironically, it is the outsiders that tried to break the native in the first place. Therefore, the theme of exploitation as depicted in *Potiki* is not only one of simple theft, but also of oppression and forced stereotypes.

Alternatively, the exploitations of indigenous people are -while still present- not always as blatantly depicted in stories such as *Borders*, by Thomas King. Within the story a woman is trying to cross the Canadian-American border to visit her daughter in America, however, she refuses to identify as a Canadian just because her half of the Blackfoot reservation is on that side of the border. "Now, I know that we got Blackfeet on the American side and the Canadians got Blackfeet on their side. Just so we can keep our records straight, what side do you come from?" (King 4). Here there is a situation in which neither side is truly in the wrong. The border guards have to follow the law, yet on a moral standpoint forcing indigenous people to adopt a second identity that they don't possess is wrong. It's a way of forcing native peoples to become more 'civilized' as it was in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and harkens to a period in which, at one point or another, the Blackfoot community was one identity, rather than being split between Canadian-Blackfoot and American-Blackfoot. The border guards show a distinct misunderstanding of the principle the woman is trying to set when they say this "I'd be proud of being Blackfoot if I were Blackfoot. But you have to be American or Canadian" (King 7). Her point isn't that she's proud of her heritage (regardless of whether that's true or not), but instead that she shouldn't have to be anything else. Blackfoot is a complete identity, yet the others within this story see fit to push other labels on people in an attempt to change them. They exploit the power imbalance that exists between one small community and a global superpower in order to get their way. Now, it doesn't work, as by the end of the story news stations and reporters spread the story to the point that, through public support, the woman gets to cross the border without changing her identification. However, this too is an exploitation on the woman's part, she took advantage of the news people in order to get her own way, purposefully being stubborn until the situation drew public interest. Either way, both sides had a valid reason for their actions.

Regardless of which story one looks at, the theme of exploitation is present. In every story there is this underlying truth, that the native peoples which populate the tale are being or have been exploited in some way. Again, the theme itself is depicted a little differently depending on the what the story's main focus is, yet the theme is there one way or another. Sometimes it's just an understated part of the background, and others have it as a vocal point. Some stories take a more nuanced perspective, in which the indigenous cultures take just as much advantage as the outsiders, just in different ways. It's just one last reminder, that even in fiction, everyone is human.

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