Turtles All the Way Down:

Counterstorytelling in Thomas King’s *The Truth About Stories*

“There is a story I know,” begins every chapter of Thomas King’s novel *The Truth About Stories.* “It’s about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes.” King uses this structure to show the importance of stories, including the value of oral storytelling; he repeats it to show how this story has stuck with him, how it helps him see the world. And he ends every recounting with a different person asking what lies beneath the turtle, to which the answer is always another turtle, and another and another. How many turtles are there? “No one knows for sure… but it’s turtles all the way down” (King 2). Underneath every story is another story. Following a line break, King also repeats the phrase “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.”

There is a story I know. It’s about how we structure how the world and how we tell stories. I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it never changes. It’s based on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and it is how we teach people to structure their plots. The idea is that a story begins with exposition, has a rising action culminating in a climax, which is then followed by a falling action and a denouement or resolution. This is all facilitated by a series of reversals that move the plot along.

One time, it was in a class with Mark Lord I think, another student asked about this structure. Is this the only option we have, she asked?

No, he replied.

It is stories all the way down. But they are not all Aristotle’s.

King’s construction resists typical Western storytelling. He doesn’t have a plot to follow, but a series of anecdotes, which seem random or unrelated at first. He weaves these stories in between recounting Native history, theorizing about stories, and examining the role of stories in his own history. King quotes a Nigerian storyteller, Ben Okri, who writes: “…we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way…If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (153). The stories we are told and the stories we tell ourselves are the ways in which we understand the world – in the most basic of terms: narratives of failure lead to failure. However, if we reframe these stories in a new light, we can potentially change how we see ourselves and how we move about in the world.

Storytellers are not the only ones concerned with how stories impact our lives. Critical Race Theorists study storytelling as well, for whom it “is not valued so much for its *truth content* as its *truth effects,* its ability to affect our actions and orientation to the Other” (Leonardo 20). It does not matter if stories are true, or even if we believe them to be true. What matters is the impact they have on our psyche, the build-up over time of highly raced statements of value that we may not fully realize the impact of.

The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.

When I was seventeen I wrote a play called *Generations.* It was a family drama set in a grandmother’s old money Manhattan apartment, where siblings struggle with breakups, book deals, and marriages and pregnancies. I wrote the play having never dealt with a breakup, never published a book, never been married or pregnant. I had never so much as been inside an old money Manhattan apartment and both of my grandmothers were long dead. None of the themes in the play really made all that much sense to me, but they were the themes that Serious Contemporary Drama dealt with, so they were the themes I wrote about.

The show had two acts, although it should only have had one, because I thought plays should have two acts. The story followed an Aristotelian structure, even though the neat falling action and denouement never really made sense.

It was not the story I wanted to write. At the time I was grappling with depression and anxiety, something that consumed every aspect of my life. But that wasn’t a story anyone wanted to hear. Or so I thought.

Critical Race Theorists do not only look at the impact of storytelling, they offer a way to turn this impact on its head. They use “counterstorytelling to reframe the tale, to flip the script. Questioning that race is a fact and favoring a social-constructivist perspective, counterstorytelling becomes an antidote to the majority’s line of thinking… Offering a counterstory does not make pretenses about truth value but begins the discussion from the lived experiences of the people most affected by race” (Leonardo 20). Recognizing the dominant narrative, which serves to disenfranchise people of color, counterstorytelling offers an alternative narrative that places people of color at the center, offering perhaps the same or similar truth content but a vastly different truth effect.

King’s novel, which is part history, part memoir, and part storytelling theory, offers a compelling counterstory to what we are accustomed to hearing about Native peoples. This is especially valuable considering that Native history has been violently silenced to pretend that the Indian is, as King says, “extinct.” He describes the travels of Edward Sheriff Curtis, who spent about thirty years in the early 1900s traversing the American continent and taking over forty thousand photographs of Native Americans. “Curtis was looking for the literary Indian, the dying Indian, the imaginative construct. And to make sure that he would find what he wanted to find, he took along boxes of ‘Indian’ paraphernalia – wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing – in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look” (King 34). Curtis was looking to photograph the Indian of his imagination, the one created for him by the popular narrative of the time: a noble savage. By creating images of what he believed an Indian to be, Curtis gave the world tangible proof that this narrative was true. That the truth content (“Indians” as a monolithic group of people who all looked and acted as Westerners thought) was not in fact truthful at all did not matter – the story had been told and the truth effects were already in motion. Curtis, whose ideas were shaped by the popular narrative, added fuel to the fire that led to genocide and violent forced assimilation.

King offers countless counterstories to the notion of Native American culture as a monolith, one of which is directly inspired by Curtis’s journey; King and his brother also travelled across the country photographing Indians – this time, focusing on Native artists. As they started their journey, however, they realized a potential flaw in their plan: the Indians they photographed may not look like “Indians” at all.

In Spring of 2016, I saw a show that came to Bryn Mawr called *Lovertits*. The show was weird to say the least. In fact, it was practically nonsensical. There was a Benjamin Franklin themed striptease, about twenty minutes of naked women pretending to be goats, a scene from *Little Women* acted out several times, and a monologue about the butchering of a goat. The show was everything Aristotle would have hated – it had no coherent plotline, no rising action or resolution. It was everything I thought no one would show up to see.

And it was sold out every night.

I would like to say that *Lovertits’s* success made me rethink everything I knew about theater – everything I knew about storytelling even. That I decided to reject conventional structure completely, or that I felt free to tell my story honestly, to focus on what mattered to me rather than what I thought people would want to hear. I did not leave the theater with a new sense of artistic freedom. But it did make me think.

King also recounts his own struggles with “looking Indian.” He writes that in college, “being recognized as an Indian was critical. And here tribal affiliation was not a major consideration… We dressed up in a manner to substantiate the cultural lie that had trapped us, and we did so with a passion” (King 45). How King dressed had nothing to with his culture and everything to do with his culture. He may not have been wearing the clothes that his immediate family wore, or even dressing based on Cherokee tradition, but he dressed as an Indian in the broadest sense of the word in order to be recognized as who he was and to fit into a community of other Indians, to whom tribal affiliations did not matter so much as the shared Indian identity. And he dressed as he saw himself, struggling (as all of us do) to understand who that “self” was.

Telling us about how the idea of the literary Indian was constructed and the impact it had on him as he tried to navigate his own cultural identity forces King’s readers to revalue their own notions of what and who an “Indian” is. While this may not actually change the truth effects of the dominant narrative, King does call his reader’s attention to their existence. And, after all, King is not trying to change anything. He even points out that the idea of changing the world through the humanities is a comforting Neoliberal lie we tell ourselves. He just wants to pass on his stories. Stories, King says, that “we make up to try to set the world straight. Take [this] story, for instance. It’s yours. Do with it what you will…But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (60)

In class one day, I said that every time I write a story I am trying to get a little closer to the truth. Now, as I write this, I am so tempted to follow Aristotle. I want my story to have a neat ending, a denouement worthy of Sophocles. But this is not how King writes.

His stories just end. Sometimes they drop off without any clue as to what happens next. Others have a bit more of a resolution. But none of them are neat. And why should they be? His stories are drawn right from his life, and life is by no means neat.

Take my story, for instance. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You’ve heard it now.