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CONTINUING THE CYCLE OF STEREOTYPING NATIVE AMERICANS:  
SHERMAN ALEXIE AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the centuries, Native Americans have been stereotyped as being alcoholics. This stereotype has haunted them in many ways, but there has been little effort by Native Americans to stop this stereotype from continuing. Sherman Alexie, a prominent Native American author, is continuing the stereotype, particularly in his novels for young adults.

In these works, Alexie brutally describes life on the reservation, with particular focus on alcoholism, poverty, suicide, and other tragic events. By writing for a young audience who often does not know any better than to accept his work for the truth, Alexie is continuing the cycle of stereotypes about his population.

Many critics, particularly Louis Owen, Gloria Bird, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, attack Alexie for his choices, yet Alexie's works continue to be written in such a way to continue stereotypes about Native American populations.

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## Introduction

Since the arrival of the Europeans to the American West, stereotypes have encircled Native Americans, insisting that Native peoples are alcoholics and cannot hold their alcohol. This reputation continues today and has impacted Native American life quite drastically, as many non-Native peoples assume that all Native Americans have problems with alcohol. Thomas Watts and Roosevelt Wright, authors of *Alcoholism in Minority Populations*, state “no group in America, or possibly the world, has been stigmatized more by alcohol-related behavior than American Indians. The ‘drunken Indian stereotype’ negatively affects most perceptions which people have of Indians.”<sup>1</sup> This stereotype can cause serious damage to Native Americans, as it can lead to many social problems, particularly in encounters with non-Native peoples.

Because alcoholism is such a central issue of their population, even if it is only perceived to be such, it may seem natural that Native American authors incorporate alcohol into their works. Many of these authors choose to do so in such a way that does not focus on alcohol as the focal points of their works, instead using alcohol more as a side story, away from the central plot. One author, though, does not shy away from using alcohol as a primary focus in his works. Sherman Alexie, easily regarded as one of the best and certainly one of the most popular Native American authors of the time, has multiple works that appear to revolve around alcohol. His characters, which he insists are fictional, though many would argue otherwise, seem to all be alcoholics, and, though they are not portrayed as glamorous in any sense of the word, they certainly are in the majority in many of his works.

Many of Alexie's critics, including authors such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Gloria Bird, insist that his use of alcoholism in his works is furthering the cycle of stereotyping against Native Americans. While there is certainly a strong argument to be made over this point, a less obvious issue seems to be emerging. Alexie also has written works for young adults. Two of these works in particular, *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, have become relatively popular in the last few years. One may think that Alexie, after choosing the audience of young adults, would tame down the references to alcohol, or at least have fewer instances of alcoholic characters, but Alexie does not. Instead, these works are also filled with alcoholic and abusive fathers and teenage characters who drink as frequently as their elders. These characters also are not rewarded for their lifestyle choices, and the young protagonists do seem to live happily ever after once choosing not to drink alcohol anymore, but, despite the eventual feel-good nature of these works, Alexie is ultimately promoting a false reality—that the majority of Native Americans, including Native American youth, are alcoholics.

This is a more problematic message for young adults for a number of reasons, but the primary of is that many young, non-Native American adults have little knowledge of the Native American culture. Because so little Native American culture is taught in schools, other than the often romanticized story of the first Thanksgiving, young adults are only able to form opinions and gather knowledge from outlets like these works. When works like these discuss alcoholism in such a way, it is much more likely that many young adults begin to believe that all Native Americans are alcoholics, which, in turn, continues the cycle of stereotyping Native Americans.

These works also are problematic for young Native American audiences as well. Though one would assume that this audience would have a better understanding of Native cultures, Alexie does not do much to deter the young Native audience from believing that alcoholism in their culture is normal and accepted. This is problematic for two primary reasons. Firstly, for the Native youths also surrounded by alcohol in their families, Alexie's works do nothing but reinforce the normality of the situation. Secondly, even though his young adult works do have "happy" endings, they do not suggest a solution to how to remove alcohol from the lives of those surrounding them. The parents continue to drink, as do the other family members. Instead, the only suggestion is for the youths to move far away from the reservation, a solution that alienates the Native American youths from their families and from their culture.

Alexie's works for young adults are not appropriate for their intended audience, Native American or otherwise, primarily because they continue the cycle of stereotyping Native American populations, especially pertaining to alcoholism.

## **Stereotypes and Statistics**

The vast majority of Native American populations north of present-day Mexico were not introduced to alcohol until the Europeans began to settle the American West. Often, Europeans used alcohol as a trade commodity, trading alcohol for goods that the Native Americans had available. The Europeans often took advantage of the Native Americans' early desire for alcohol. Watts and Wright explain, using stereotypical nicknames for Native Americans, that the Europeans quickly realized that "the Indian was unable to drink in moderations, for the sensation of drunkenness was to him the most attractive feature of the white man's liquor, which was readily able to turn the most peaceful Red Man into a savage of the most ferocious type."<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the stereotypes began rather shortly after many Native Americans were introduced to alcohol.

The stereotype varies in wording and interpretation depending on where it began, but it generally holds the following, according to Watts and Wright:

The existing stereotype regarding Native American drinking generally maintains that 'Indians cannot hold their liquor.' Not only is the 'average Indian' seen as craving the white man's liquor, but when he is drunk he is to be overtaken by 'horrendous changes-for-the-worse.' These 'changes-for-the-worse' tend to take the form of violence, crime, degradations, and other acts of deviance and depravity.<sup>3</sup>

The stereotype holds that Native Americans abuse alcohol and cannot control themselves while drinking. These reputations quickly spread throughout the country, even to areas where Native Americans were not present. It should be clear, then, that these reputations

were very harmful to Native populations, as non-Native peoples, without having met a single Native American, often held these preexisting beliefs.

As a result of these prevalent stereotypes, many studies have been done, especially in the past thirty years, to determine if Native Americans are actually more prone to develop alcoholism than the rest of the United States population. Most of these studies concluded that alcohol use varies greatly among different tribes. One scientist, May, reviewed eight studies of drinking among Native American tribes and found the following, as documented by Everett Rhoades in his work *American Indian Health: Innovations in Health Care, Promotion, and Policy*. As Rhoades has clarified:

(May 1996) noted that the percentage of adult tribal members who were drinkers ranged from 30 percent for Navajos surveyed in 1969 to 84 percent of Ojibwa surveyed in 1978. He concluded that (1) a larger proportion of Indian men than women drink; (2) many reservations are characterized by high abstention rates, particularly among women; (3) many previously heavy-drinking Indian men moderate their alcohol use or quit drinking in midlife; (4) abstinence rates tend to be higher among reservation-based than urban Indians; (5) in some tribes, problem drinking is limited to a small percentage of Indians.<sup>4</sup>

While all of these findings are certainly significant, the fourth part of May's findings is especially of interest. May found that abstinence is more likely on reservations that are not urbanized, and therefore among Native Americans who have not been urbanized.

Further studies, discussed in Watts and Wright's work, identify statistics of alcohol uses in different tribes across the United States. In one study, "statistics for Indians indicate that the following proportion drink: 52 percent of the Navajo of the Southwest, 58 percent of the Standing Rock Sioux (S.D.), 80 percent of the Ute of Igacio

(Col.), and 84 percent of the Ojibwa of the Brokenhead Reserve in Canada.”<sup>5</sup> These numbers are dramatically different, especially when compared with the United States’ statistics. According to the same study, 67 percent of all adults in the United States drink at least once per year.<sup>6</sup> Two of these Native American groups, then, are significantly less than the United States’ average, while the other two are remarkably higher than the United States’ average. All four of these tribes, though, have reputations as “hard drinking” groups, which surprises many, given that two of the groups have a smaller percentage of drinkers than the whole of the United States’ population.<sup>7</sup>

Many studies have found similar results, indicating that, as a whole, Native American populations do not have more people who drink than the whole of the United States population. The stereotype remains, however, in part because of the amount of alcohol that many Native American drinkers consume. Another study, discussed in Watts and Wright’s work, found that “among those who do drink, there are quite a few heavy drinkers as measured by quantity drunk per sitting, experience with blackouts, and by self-definition as an alcoholic,”<sup>8</sup> within many Native American tribes.

Another reason that the stereotypes remain about Native Americans and problems with alcohol is the number of alcohol-related illnesses and deaths among Native Americans. Rhoades discusses another study by scientist May that concluded that

17.3 percent of all Indian deaths in Indian Health Service (IHS) Areas between 1987 and 1989 were alcohol-related. Deaths directly attributable to alcohol, including those caused by alcoholic liver disease, alcoholic cardiomyopathy, alcohol dependence, alcohol overdose, and other conditions, were 3.3 to 13.0 times more common among Indian men and

4.6 to 31.0 times more common among Indian women than among age- and gender-matched members of the general U.S. population.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, according to other studies discussed by Fred Beauvais in his article “American Indians and Alcohol,” “chronic liver disease and cirrhosis are 3.9 times as prevalent in the Indian population as in the general population; alcohol-related fatal automobile accidents are 3 times as prevalent; alcohol-related suicide is 1.4 times as prevalent; and alcohol-related homicide is 2.4 times as prevalent.”<sup>10</sup>

With statistics like those discussed above, it does not seem completely unreasonable that Native Americans would have a reputation as being alcoholics. However, what these statistics have also shown is that only a small percentage of Native Americans drink and an even smaller percentage drink excessively. This proves that the stereotypes encircling Native Americans are incomplete, rather than simply true or untrue. What should be made clearer is that, in Native American populations, just like most other populations, a small portion of the population has problems with alcohol, problems that often lead to disease or death. It should also be noted that the vast majority of the population with problems with alcohol live off-reservation or have been severely urbanized.

## **Criticisms of Sherman Alexie**

Given all of the background and statistics surrounding this topic of alcoholism in Native American populations, alcoholism is a very popular trend in many Native American books, including the works of Sherman Alexie. Many other Native American authors, such as Leslie Marmon Silko and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, also integrate alcohol into their works, but no one does it in the way that Alexie does. Critic Lynne Cline states,

His work carries the weight of five centuries of colonization, retelling the American Indian struggle to survive, painting a clear, compelling and often painful portrait of modern Indian life. Never one to mince words, he has become a controversial figure, criticized by Indians and non-Indians alike. 'I've come to the realization that many people have been reading literary fiction for the same reason they read main-stream fiction,' he says. 'For entertainment and a form of escape. I don't want to write books that provide people with that. I want books that challenge, anger, and possibly offend.'"<sup>11</sup>

In this statement, Alexie is arguing against his critics, claiming that his critics are reading his works for the wrong reasons. He does not want to write books simply for the entertainment of his audience. His works are intended to do just the opposite; they challenge the reader to think beyond their previous conceptions of Native American culture, they anger many other Native American authors, and they offend many Native American populations.

One of the most common critiques that Alexie's works garner is that his characters are too extreme. His works are classified as fictional, but since many members of his reading audiences have little outside knowledge of the Native American world, his

characters are often taken to be literal representations of Native Americans. Alexie defends his use of these characters though, because he says that he created them from what he experienced while living on the reservation. He says in his forward in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* that “[i]n 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.”<sup>12</sup> Alexie is writing from what he knows, then, having grown up in an atmosphere with alcohol being an integral part of his family’s life.

It may be so that Alexie grew up with people surrounding him who were constantly struggling with alcoholism, but for many members of Alexie’s youthful, non-Native audience, this just is not the case. For that reason, it would seem likely that Alexie would tone down his mention of alcohol and alcoholism for his audience. While the comments use a slightly more dull language, the outcomes for his alcoholic characters seem to be the same. Unfortunately, for this audience who has little background with Native American culture, these scenarios are the little information they have about Native Americans. One Native American author, Walter C. Fleming, explains the problems with this:

Because many people have such a limited knowledge of Indians, we are, arguably, among the most misunderstood ethnic group in the United States. Native Americans are also among the most isolated groups. Thus the knowledge that most people have about Indians does not come from direct experience. What people know is limited by their sources of information-- and, unfortunately, much of the information about Indians is derived from pop culture.<sup>13</sup>

Although most people would not describe Alexie's work as pop culture, Fleming's assessment applies. For many young, non-Native audiences, his works are their only interaction with information about Native Americans.

These works also pose a problem for the other potential audience: Native American youths. Because Alexie's works include stories about young Native Americans who are surrounded by alcoholics, the works only serve to further solidify the idea of normalcy to young Native Americans in similar family situations. Rather than convincing the young audience that alcoholism is a bad thing, it serves instead to reinforce that alcoholism is normal and is even accepted in Native American populations.

Additionally, these works are problematic for this young Native audience because Alexie does little to propose solutions for these problems. In his works, Alexie's characters are often seen fleeing the scene, leaving behind their families and friends on the reservation and instead becoming urbanized into a non-Native culture. This solution is promoting leaving the reservations all together, which in turns suggests leaving behind their Native American roots.

### *Flight*

The first of Alexie's two works for young adults is *Flight*. This book chronicles a few months in the life of Zits, a Native American teenager trying to find his way. His father left his mother before he is born and his mother dies when Zits is still a child, leaving him to travel from house to house in search of a new family. He constantly finds himself in juvenile jail and eventually becomes so angry with his situation that he plans to shoot innocent people in a bank. Zits finds himself traveling through time, filling the shoes of Native Americans and whites in different historical moments, like an FBI agent who kills Native Americans in the 1970s and Gus, a war hero who hunts Native Americans. Eventually, Zits finds himself in the body of his estranged father, a man Zits has never met and has learned to hate more than anyone else. He is able to see the circumstances surrounding his father's departure from Zits and is able to begin to understand the decisions his father made. Finally, Zits returns to his own body and finds himself in the bank, about to shoot dozens of innocent bystanders. Instead, Zits leaves the bank and turns himself in to the police.

Certainly a feel-good story intended to inspire youth to pursue through even the most difficult circumstances, *Flight* also contains a strong social commentary about the lives of Indians. Zits father is portrayed as an alcoholic who abandoned Zits moments before he was born. Zits mother is a white woman and is portrayed to be a great mother, but one who develops breast cancer and dies when Zits is still only a child. Zits discusses many of the foster families he stays with and states that the Indian fathers are the most barbaric of any family with whom he has stayed. The Indian fathers are all alcoholics who beat Zits and other children.

In addition, we see Zits travel through time, back to events that created fractures in the relationships between Native Americans and whites. For example, Zits becomes a white Army hero whose goal is to hunt down and kill the Native Americans who killed a group of white men. Zits is responsible for leading a group of white soldiers to the Native Americans and beginning the attack. In the story, this serves as a way for Zits to examine the inhumanity of killing, regardless of race. However, in a social criticism spectrum, these detours that Zits takes gives Alexie a chance to write about some of the big disagreements between Native Americans and whites throughout time.

One of the most interesting passages in the work is when Zits chronicles his life, from age eight to his current age of fifteen:

When I was eight years old, I ran away for the first time.

When I was nine, I poured lighter fluid on my aunt's boyfriend and tried to set him on fire. He woke up and punched me into the hospital. They sent him to jail.

After he got out of jail, he left my aunt. She blamed me.

When I was ten, Auntie Z gave me twenty dollars and sent me to buy some hamburgers and fries. When I got back to the apartment, she was gone. She never came back.

When I was eleven, I ran away from my first foster home and got drunk in the street with three homeless Indians from Alaska.

When I was twelve, I ran away from my seventh foster home.

When I was thirteen, I smoked crack for the first time.

When I was fourteen, I stole a car and wrecked it into a building beneath the Alaska Way Viaduct.

When I was fifteen, I met a kid named Justice who taught me how to shoot guns.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, not only does Alexie detail a character who was drunk at age eleven, but he also details other tragic decisions that are alien to most of the youth reading his works. It is difficult to imagine that many young adults in Alexie's intended audience, Native or not, would be able to relate with this extreme story. Instead, it seems that many of his readers would instead be inclined to think that this is the average life of a teenage Native American.

Alexie is also brutal when discussing interactions between Native Americans and non-Native, primarily white, people. In one dramatic scene, Zits finds himself in the body of a white FBI agent who is having a discussion with another white FBI agent. The other agent says, "I didn't know any Indians until they sent me to work here. And then I met Indians. And trust me, none of them is worth much. Well, maybe some of the kids. Some of the kids are still okay. But they're going to go bad, too. Just you watch. There's something bad inside these Indians. They can't help themselves."<sup>15</sup> This segment suggests to non-Native youthful audiences that all Native American and white interactions are negative. It also promotes the idea that all whites see Native Americans as a "bad" population. Once again, these excerpts appear to be promoting the cycle of stereotyping to continue. For the Native American youth audience, however, this segment is insisting that all whites believe that Native Americans are bad individuals. So, not only is it lowering the self-worth of the young Native American population, it is also implying that all white people believe that Native Americans are an awful population.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

In his second book for young adults, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a poor Indian boy named Junior is followed through his quest of a decent education. He attends a poorly funded reservation school and, when presented with a thirty-year-old geometry book, Junior begs his parents to let him transfer to a white school twenty miles outside of the reservation.

Junior is considered an outsider in his new school and a traitor on his reservation. He feels more alone than ever before but sticks to his commitment of attending the much better school with hopes of one day leaving his reservation. Through a series of events, Junior becomes more accepted at his new school and begins to make friends. Eventually, Junior becomes a sports hero at his new school and reunites with his old reservation best friend, creating the perfect ending to a young adult read. But this work is so much more than that. It provides a great deal of social criticism on many stereotypes surrounding Native American life on the reservation, including alcoholism, poverty, and racism.

Most of the adults on the reservation are presented as alcoholics. Junior describes his father as an alcoholic and his mother as a recovered alcoholic. Junior's best friend Rowdy has a violent alcoholic father who beats Rowdy and Rowdy's mother. Even Junior's grandmother, the only sober Native American adult in the novel, is killed by a drunk Native American driver. At one point, Alexie goes as far to write, "I mean, the thing is, plenty of Indians have died because they were drunk. And plenty of drunken Indians have killed other drunken Indians."<sup>16</sup> Though the work certainly does not center on alcoholism in the same way that many of Alexie's other works do, alcoholism plays an important role in this novel.

Junior's reservation is presented to be in a horrific state of poverty. His reservation school uses textbooks that are thirty years old. His father cannot drive Junior to school most days because he does not have money for gas. Junior's dog, Oscar, is shot when he becomes sick because the family cannot afford to take him to the vet. Junior also feels even more out of place at his new school because he does not want to be the poor Native American stereotype if he can avoid it. Although his family qualifies for free school lunches, Junior refuses to take them because he does not want his peers to know his family is poor. Alexie makes sure to discuss the role that extreme poverty plays on Junior's self-esteem when he writes that "[y]ou start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and *there's nothing you can do about it.*"<sup>17</sup> Though this section is more about poverty and less about alcoholism, at least on the surface, Alexie seems to believe that alcoholism and poverty are closely linked. Junior's parents can never seem to afford things that arguably really matter, like gas for the car or school lunches for Junior, yet Junior's father always seems to have enough money to buy more alcohol. Rather than not having any money for anything, Junior's father just uses the small amount of money that he and his family has for the wrong things. Alexie is making a statement by creating a character like this, claiming that this is a problem for much of the Native American population residing on the reservations. It is not necessarily that they are too poor to buy anything, the problem is that they spend their money on alcohol or other drugs rather than on things that are more important.

The role of racism in this novel is quite astounding. Not only are the whites racist toward the Native Americans, but the Native Americans are also very racist toward the whites. Alexie clearly wants to make a statement about racism going both ways in these two societies, and does so in a very powerful way. One of the white teachers in the Native American reservations school says the following about the reaction to Native cultures:

When I first started teaching here, that's what we did to the rowdy ones, you know? We beat them. That's how we were taught to teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child...I didn't literally kill Indians. We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren't trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture.<sup>18</sup>

Again, it would appear, to a young adult unfamiliar with Native American schooling on reservations or the interactions between whites and Native Americans, that this is a common practice, even today. This is problematic for a number of reasons but primarily because it enforces to a young, non-Native audience that the Native American cultures are not considered important or worthwhile enough to continue in our society. However, this is even more problematic for the Native American youth reading this work, as this section is only reinforcing the idea that the culture is not considered legitimate to the rest of the country. Earlier, it was mentioned that Alexie does not propose real solutions for Native youths to remove themselves from the alcoholism that may be surrounding them on their reservations, other than to leave the reservation, and all of the people and culture that reside there, behind. In this segment, this idea is once again reinforced, as it claims that the outside, non-reservation world has no interest in the culture of Native Americans.

At the end of the work, Alexie tries to leave the young audience with the promise of a better tomorrow:

I wept and wept and wept because I knew that I was never going to drink and because I was never going to kill myself and because I was going to have a better life out in the white world. I realized that I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I way not alone in my loneliness. There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream. I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants.<sup>19</sup>

At first glance, this passage does seem optimistic. However, it also makes some startling statements. First, because it is such a revelation for Junior to realize that he will not be an alcoholic or suicidal, it implies, primarily to the non-Native audience of the book, that the only other people in the novel, and therefore on reservations, are alcoholics and suicidal. The characters in the novel back this statement up. Second, and most shocking, Junior views himself as an immigrant to America after leaving his reservation. This does nothing but ensure that the audience is convinced that the reservation is a completely separate entity from the rest of the United States, which only continues the idea of separation of Native Americans and the rest of America.

Junior is realizing that he has the potential for a full and rewarding life in front of him, but only if he leaves the reservation for good. This is once again implying to the young Native American audience that Alexie is writing to that their only option to escape the alcoholism and other evils on the reservation is to completely disassociate with the reservation, its peoples, and its cultures. Alexie gives no alternatives to this and there is no way of finding a moderate solution, somewhere between conforming to alcoholism

and remaining on the reservation and severing all ties with the reservation and remaining sober for the rest of time.

### The Arguments of Alexie's Critics

Many critics have attacked the information stacked in Alexie's works. Three such critics are Louis Owen, Gloria Bird, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. The first, Louis Owen, is a Cherokee critic who has much to say about Alexie's works. He believes that Alexie's fiction:

too often simply reinforces all the stereotypes desired by white readers: his bleakly absurd and aimless Indians are imploding a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing: there is no family or community center toward which his characters...might turn for coherence; and in the process of self-destruction the Indians provide Euramerican readers with pleasurable moments of dark humor or the titillation of bloodthirsty savagery. Above all, the non-Indian reader of Alexie's work is allowed to come away with a sense...that no one is really to blame but the Indians.<sup>20</sup>

Owen is arguing that, despite Alexie's statement that he intends for his writings to challenge and possibly offend his audiences, Alexie writes to please the white audience. He creates scenes of complete tragedy that a white audience, according to Owen, has come to expect from Native American literature.

Spokane Indian Gloria Bird has much to say about Alexie's works, and though, she focuses her critique primarily on Alexie's work *Reservation Blues*, it also applies to Alexie's works *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. As quoted in Stephen Evans work "*Open Containers*": *Sherman Alexie's Drunken Indians*, she "contends that...much of the structure and ethos of *Reservation Blues* depends on the readers' knowledge of popular culture, including film, to be successful; the reliance, Bird argues, distorts, debases, and falsifies Indian culture and literature at the same time that it reinforces notions of Indian stereotype."<sup>21</sup> Bird, a Spokane Indian herself, has had much

to say about the appropriateness of Alexie's characters in his works, even going as far as to claim that Alexie is so far removed from the reservation that he no longer understands what reservation life is like.

Alexie, upon hearing Bird's argument, defended himself against this claim by stating:

[M]y Mom is the drug and alcohol treatment counselor on the rez, so I'm quite aware of what's going on out there. There are two major cocaine and crack dealers on the rez now....In every government housing village, crack vials are on the lawns. Fewer and fewer kids are going to college. Domestic violence incidents are rising. Property crime, almost unheard of during my years on the rez, has risen dramatically. My fiction doesn't even come close to how bad it can be...on my reservation.<sup>22</sup>

Because Alexie's mother is still on his old reservation and works in a position where she encounters Native Americans with alcohol problems on a daily basis, Alexie argues that his assessments of life on the reservation in his works are accurate. Bird does have a good point, though. Just as Alexie has preached in many of his works, Alexie left the reservation at a young age and never moved back to the reservation. It is difficult to imagine that he does have a full understanding of current reservation life, regardless of his family members who have stayed behind.

Though Bird is harsh with Alexie, she does admit that having to struggle with how to present alcohol in his works must be extremely difficult for him, or any other Native American author, to handle. She "concedes...that 'the portrayal of alcoholism that has been rampant through the generations cannot be denied...a paradox with which native writers must grapple'."<sup>23</sup>

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a Crow Creek Sioux author, has similar troubles with Alexie's works as Bird. She does not believe that Alexie is fairly representing life on the reservation. Evan discusses Cook-Lynn's views by declaring:

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Sioux)...complains against the number of recent works that "catalogue the deficit model of Indian reservation life." These works, some of which Cook-Lynn characterizes as "trash or fraudulent of pop" are troubling to her because they do not "suggest a responsibility of art as an ethical endeavor or the artist as responsible social critic, a marked departure from the early renaissance works of such luminaries as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko"....Cook-Lynn reveals an unwillingness to recognize or accept for modern Indian literature the meliorative cultural and social values of satire, as well as the satirist's essential social conscience and moral values.<sup>24</sup>

Her point in this argument seems to be asking whether every writer has the authority to write about whatever he or she chooses. As already discussed, Alexie's writings have changed the way many individuals view Native Americans. Cook-Lynn seems to be wondering why he has the authority to do this, since he, in her opinion, is incorrectly describing reservation life.

Evans brings together the arguments of both Bird and Cook-Lynn to bring the argument full circle.

Bird and Cook-Lynn share a concern for the pernicious effects of Indian authors' replication of stereotypes for mainstream consumption, while disregarding the fact that much Indian fiction actually has relied upon stereotypes and formulaic constructions for the achievement of meaning. Of course, when literary forms, types, and features become overused and outlive their original vitality, they often become transformed into

stereotypes, inviting a literary mode such as satire or the inflection of irony to reinvigorate them with meaning.<sup>25</sup>

It seems that Evans is just arguing that, because this is such a difficult and overused topic for Alexie, and other Native American authors, it is only natural that he use a satiric approach to keep the material fresh. If this is indeed what Alexie is trying to do, it may seem difficult to fault him. However, as an author, and especially as an author for young adults, Alexie has a social responsibility to attempt to stop the cycle of stereotyping. It may not be fair, but as one of the few individuals able to reach a large population about the issue of alcoholism in Native American population and the issue of continuing stereotypes, Alexie must be held responsible for what he says and how it is construed by others.

## **Conclusion**

Sherman Alexie is continuing the cycle of stereotyping in his works, especially pertaining to alcoholism. By writing for such a young audience in such a brutal way, Alexie is, in many ways, forcing his exaggerated views of reservation life, however untrue, onto his audience. Regardless of whether his audience is non-Native American or Native American, Alexie is harming them and the reputation of Native Americans by writing in his dramatic way.

For the young non-Native American audience, Alexie is furthering the stereotypes that have existed for centuries. Because the youth of today are undereducated in Native American cultures, Alexie's works are one of the few sources from which a non-Native audience can learn about the Native American culture. Alexie's unforgiving stories of alcoholism, poverty, ignorance, and death are all that this generation is learning about Native Americans populations. Therefore, Alexie is continuing the stereotype of Native Americans.

For Native American youths, Alexie is promoting a normalcy of alcoholism within Native American populations. Further, the only solution that Alexie provides is to leave the reservation, and all of its peoples and cultures, behind and to become urbanized within the general American population. This is only reinforcing a negative stigma about the Native American population and promoting a feeling of embarrassment about one's heritage.

It may seem unfair to fault Alexie with the continuation of negative stereotypes about his people. However, as an author, Alexie is in a unique position to reach and influence many more people than the average Native American is. Therefore, if Alexie

chooses to write about his Native American heritage, he must take on the social responsibility of his people to accurately describe the Native American population and must understand that backlash will always be directed at him, as he has made himself a public figure and a representative of the Native American population.

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- <sup>1</sup> Thomas D. Watts and Roosevelt Wright, Jr., *Alcoholism in Minority Populations* (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas Publisher, 1989), 96.
- <sup>2</sup> Watts & Wright, 97-98.
- <sup>3</sup> Watts & Wright, 97.
- <sup>4</sup> Everett R. Rhoades, ed., *American Indian Health: Innovations in Health Care, Promotion, and Policy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 283-284.
- <sup>5</sup> Watts & Wright, 102.
- <sup>6</sup> Watts & Wright, 102.
- <sup>7</sup> Watts & Wright, 104.
- <sup>8</sup> Watts & Wright, 104.
- <sup>9</sup> Rhoades, 281-282.
- <sup>10</sup> Fred Beauvais, "American Indians and Alcohol", *Alcohol Health and Research World* 22 (1998): 255.
- <sup>11</sup> Lynne Cline, "About Sherman Alexie", *Ploughshares* 26, no. 4 (2000/2001): 197-202.
- <sup>12</sup> Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), xix.
- <sup>13</sup> Walter C. Fleming, "Myths and Stereotypes about Native Americans", *The Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 4 (2006): 213.
- <sup>14</sup> Sherman Alexie, *Flight* (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 161.
- <sup>15</sup> Alexie, *Flight*, 44.
- <sup>16</sup> Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (New York: Brown Books for Young Readers, 2009): 158.
- <sup>17</sup> Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 13.
- <sup>18</sup> Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 35.
- <sup>19</sup> Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 217.
- <sup>20</sup> Stephen F. Evans, "'Open Containers': Sherman Alexie's Drunken Indians", *American Indian Quarterly* 25 (2001): 47.
- <sup>21</sup> Evans, 49.
- <sup>22</sup> Evans, 64.
- <sup>23</sup> Evans, 52.
- <sup>24</sup> Evans, 50.
- <sup>25</sup> Evans, 50.

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