

“Open Containers”: Sherman Alexie’s Drunken Indians

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Ironic and satiric impulses consistently suffuse the tone, structure, realization of characters, and vision of contemporary reservation reality in the small press collections of poems and stories of Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene), from *The Business of Fancydancing* (1991) through *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), as well as his mainstream works of fiction, from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) to *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000).¹ Much of the praise bestowed on Alexie’s early efforts and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* has focused on the author’s unflinchingly bold depiction of the dysfunctional nature of contemporary reservation life and the fragmented, often alienated “bicultural” lives of characters who daily confront the white civilization that encaptives their world – physically, historically, spiritually, and psychically.

Clearly, part of the attractiveness of Alexie’s early volumes of verse and works of prose, at least for many mainstream readers, can be attributed to the author’s conscious construction of a hyperrealistic “hip” persona, one that at times might be indistinguishable from his biography. Kenneth Lincoln’s recent assessment of Alexie’s poetry, for example, voices both puzzlement and concern over Alexie’s authorial stance: “With Sherman Alexie, readers can throw formal questions out the smokehole. . . . Parodic antiformalism may account for some of Alexie’s mass appeal. This Indian gadfly jumps through all the hoops, sonnet, to villanelle, to heroic couplet, all tongue-in-cheek.” To Lincoln, Alexie is “A stand-up comedian, the Indian improvisator [who himself] is the performing text” (267). While Lincoln acknowledges that some readers may find meaning in Alexie’s performance-art poetry – “His firecat imagination plays tricks on the reader, for our supposed good, for its own native delight and survival” (268) – he also questions Alexie’s motives: “His is more performance than poem, more attitude than art, more schtick than aesthetic. Definitely talented, deeply impassioned, hyphenated American-Indian, but to what end?” Although Alexie’s poetry shows an obvious delight in surfaces, Lincoln finds little more beyond the façade:

Indi'n vaudeville, then, stand-up comedy on the edge of despair. A late-twentieth-century, quasi-visionary clown tells the truth that hurts and heals in one-liners cheesy as the Marx Brothers, trenchant as Lenny Bruce, tricky as Charlie Hill's BIA Halloween 'Trick or Treaty'. (271)

Following publication of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* and *Reservation Blues* (1995), however, Alexie also came under fire from certain quarters for his purportedly negative use of irony and satire – namely, literary connections to (white) popular culture and representations of Indian stereotypes that some consider “inappropriate” and dangerously misleading for mainstream consumption. Despite his early praise of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, for example, Louis Owens finds that Alexie's fiction

too often simply reinforces all of the stereotypes desired by white readers: his bleakly absurd and aimless Indians are imploding in 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, no matter how loudly the author shouts his anger. (79–80)

In his chapter on “new” American Indian fiction, Owens contends that “the most popularly and commercially successful Native American works thus far are marked by a dominant shared characteristic: They are the direct heirs of the modernist tradition of naturalistic despair, of which the Indian is the quintessential illustration” (81). For Owens, these new American Indian novels

articulate in sometimes extraordinarily well-disguised form the familiar stereotype of the Vanishing American, the crucial difference being that white people no longer have to shoot or hang the Native, who is quite willing to do the job him- or herself. Most crucially, they are human beings incapable of asserting any control over their lives, infantilized and cirrhotic, waiting to exit stage west. What do Euramerican readers want to see in works by American Indian authors? They want what they have always wanted, from Fenimore Cooper to the present: Indians who are romantic, unthreatening, and self-destructive. Indians who are enacting, in one guise or another, the process of vanishing. Borrowing from William Faulkner, that epic poet of inexorable, tragic history, I'll call this the “Chief Doom” school of literature. It seems we cannot escape it, even when it is manifested as a form of inner-colonization. (82)

Point well taken. But criticism along the lines of Lincoln's, Owens's, and oth-

ers' clearly denigrate and misjudge Alexie's purpose in crafting a different and fresh imaginative literary realism by prescribing, at least implicitly, the kind of Indian literature that they would like for him to write. Considered from another critical angle, Alexie's artistry, I believe, may be seen as that of a consciously moral satirist rather than as a "cultural traitor." In fact, a close examination of Alexie's work to date shows that he uses the meliorative social and moral values inherent in irony and satire, as well as certain conventional character types (including the prejudicial stereotype of the "drunken Indian") as materials for constructing a realistic literary document for contemporary Indian survival.

In his foreword to Alexie's *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993), Adrian C. Louis rightly notes that "Many of the poems in this collection turn on an axis of irony, and, as a consequence, the reader may view Alexie himself as a trickster figure telling stories" (ix). Consonant with Barbara Babcock and Jay Cox's view of the trickster-coyote figure in Indian literature(s), Louis observes that Alexie's voice "transgresses both genres and periods of tribal literature." That is, "In mythic time and narrative coyote appears as one of the first beings, responsible for 'the world as it is,' in historic legend. . . . [H]e is the crazy, creative Indian negotiating urban America. Polysemic as well as multifunctional, coyote and his stories just keep 'going along,' somewhere beyond interpretation, epitomizing resistance and survival" (100).² From yet another prismatic angle of vision Louis discerns a positive, salvific quality in Alexie's *Old Shirts*:

Filled with poems that can make you laugh and cry, this book is neither strident nor self-pitying. . . . Choreographed with those objects and events that construct American Indian life today, these poems bind us to the present, yet at the same time connect us to the ancestral voices of our past. In the forlorn saloons, on the gym floors of the Six-foot and under basketball tournaments, among the stacks of commodity foods in HUD houses, lost in cities, or at powwows, we still hear the whispers of Crazy Horse. (ix)

The recurrence of characters, situations, and themes in *Fancydancing through Toughest Indian* suggests that Alexie's work may be estimated most fairly in terms of its accretionary power, a salient feature of oral tradition. In other words, what may be taken as repetitiveness in a casual read-through of Alexie's work actually reveals ongoing development that is entirely consistent with oral tradition techniques. Taken thus, Alexie's literary endeavors collectively form his artistic vision of a survival document – a defiantly realistic coping mechanism for modern reservation "warriors." One of Alexie's speakers concludes the prose poem "Sundays, Too," for example, by remarking with irony that "There is nothing we cannot survive" (*Old Shirts* 47). As Louis puts it, "It is so important for us when a poet like Sherman Alexie emerges to detail our

dreams, our hopes, and our embattled states of being. He fulfills the traditional decrees of poetry: He speaks to people in hopes of bringing about change; he speaks as a functioning ear and eye of the people; he speaks as a seer" (viii). Considered as a whole, the best artistic moments in Alexie's poems, stories, and novels lie in his construction of a satiric mirror that reflects the painful reality of lives that have become distorted, disrupted, destroyed, and doomed by their counter-impulses to embrace or deny traditional Indian culture, to become assimilated to or resist absorption into white civilization – or both.

Inevitably, perhaps, it is precisely the success of *Reservation Blues* among the mainstream literary establishment that has brought Alexie criticism from some Indian writers and scholars. In her review-essay of the novel, Gloria Bird (Spokane), author of the novel *Full Moon on the Reservation* (1993), raises a number of important issues concerning the future direction of new Indian fiction, its subject matter, Alexie's fictional representation of the "reality" of contemporary reservation life (including that of individual members), and what Bird considers the moral responsibility of Indian authors writing for the mainstream to "accurately represent our communities without exploiting them" (51). In effect, *Reservation Blues* provides Bird with a platform from which she argues for a renewed traditionalist approach for writers of Indian fiction. Any critical assessment of whether or not *Reservation Blues* is artistically successful or satisfying, as well as questions of whether the book qualifies as a novel, its relative degree of "Indianness" (Bird 48, 51), or its "accurate" representation of reservation "reality," ultimately are personal in nature. Bird's apprehension regarding *Reservation Blues* clearly is consonant with concerns voiced by one of her colleagues who, Bird writes, "has pointed out that referring to pop culture is not the problem; it becomes problematic, however, when this is the only exposure to native literature to which mainstream readers are exposed" (48). On this level Bird's criticism takes on a political dimension. Her essay, "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*" (1995), considered along with previous critical pronouncements by Bird and other Indian scholars as well as Alexie's own responses to the criticism, together form something of a polarized and politicized debate over the direction of new Indian fiction.

Bird faults the novel, for example, for what she terms its "cinematic" narrative technique, whereby Alexie connects "scenes" via tawdry remnants of (white) popular culture, likening him to an "Indian Spike Lee" (47–48). She contends that, like the portrayals of African American individuals and culture in Lee's films, much of the structure and ethos of *Reservation Blues* depends on readers' knowledge of popular culture, including film, to be successful; this reliance, Bird argues, distorts, debases, and falsifies Indian culture and literature at the same time that it reinforces mainstream notions of Indian stereotypes.³

Other charges by Bird are patently unfair to both Alexie and *Reservation Blues*, as when she finds the novel inferior in comparison to canonical classics of Indian literature such as N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) or Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). Bird's vision for new Indian fiction espoused in "The Exaggeration of Despair" and elsewhere has little room or tolerance for satire or irony; her desire to refashion Alexie's fiction into work that resembles the "sweeping, lyrical prose" of Momaday, or into something "dense with meaning" (50) like Silko's, overlooks, ignores, or refuses to accept what Alexie achieves in his satiric fiction.⁴ For Bird, *Reservation Blues* exhibits Alexie's strongly personal vision of reservation life and experience at the same time that it exploits, in Spike Lee-fashion, the very community and culture from which it arises and that it claims to represent (49). "As a native reader," Bird explains, "my concern is with the colonialist influence on the native novel, and how that influence shapes the representation of native culture to a mainstream audience" (48). In other words, her concerns are for the kinds of new Indian fiction being produced and selected for mainstream publication, the "right" of authors to write new Indian fiction, the moral obligations of those authors to Indian cultures, and how that art may be perceived and received by "reservation tourist" and Indian readers. Indian culture(s) should not be fictionally envisioned in terms established by white culture or to affirm long-established preconceptions and inbuilt prejudices of that culture.

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Sioux) takes Bird's stance a step further in her criticism of new Indian fiction in general, and the work of Alexie and other writers in particular, when she 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 or pop" (132), 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" (126). As with Bird's general take on *Reservation Blues*, 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. 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 reinvent them with meaning. Note Bird's interest in how "colonialist influence . . . shapes the representation of native

culture to a mainstream audience” (48). The desire to constrain literary representation and thematic issues within simplistic, cause-and-effect boundaries, which are themselves artificial and rhetorically polar (as though to oppose “colonialist influence,” is by definition always negative, versus “native culture,” which is inherently always positive), actually may foster or promote the replication of stereotypes, good and bad.⁵ Cook-Lynn boldly casts the issue into prescriptive terms:

I have not heard much discussion from the Modern Language Association scholars or from literary critics (mostly white) or from inner circles of Native writers who must know . . . that bad art has a harmful effect on society. Native scholars often suggest that to be critical of the work of fellow Indian writers is a function of jealousy or meanness. It is my opinion that literary fiction can be distinguished from popular fiction. I think a responsible critic will challenge the generic development of what is called Native American fiction by using the idea that there are such concepts as (1) moral fiction and (2) indigenous/tribally specific literary traditions from which the imagination emerges. (131)

One of Bird’s most serious charges against Alexie is that in *Reservation Blues* he “prey[s] upon” his community and culture in perpetuating damaging stereotypes, including that of the drunken Indian.⁶ As she puts it, “Stereotyping native people does not supply a native readership with soluble ways of undermining stereotypes, but becomes a part of the problem, and returns an image of a generic ‘Indian’ back to the original producers of that image” (49).

Of the centuries-old stereotype of the drunken Indian, Fergus Bordewich writes: “Although perhaps less openly acknowledged than it once was in this era of politically correct skittishness, it is an image of the Indian that is as deeply entrenched in the popular psyche as that of the Noble Red Man and encapsulates within it a widespread perception of modern Native Americans as fundamentally pathetic and helpless figures, defeated by a white man’s world with which they cannot be expected to cope” (246). Neither Bird nor Cook-Lynn, however, apparently sees or is willing to credit Alexie’s essentially moral aims in writing poetry and fiction that is heavily infused with irony and satire, including his ethical reversal or extension of stereotypes in order to establish new valences of imaginative literary realism. C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon’s well-known and broadly inclusive definition of “satire” clearly matches the tenor of Alexie’s artistic intent in fashioning realistic Indian survival literature: “A literary manner that blends a critical attitude with humor and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity. True satirists are conscious of the frailty of human institutions and attempt through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling” (447).

Again, much of Alexie's work to date comprises a modern survival document from which his readers gain strength by actively participating in the recognition of reality as viewed through Alexie's satiric lens or from the reflections of his satiric mirror. As with all literature generally, and literature that reflects oral tradition techniques in particular, the author (speaker)–audience (listener/-reader) dynamic implies and requires mutual participation for the making of meaning. As with any author, reading Alexie always is a consensual act.⁷

For some reason Bird never mentions Alexie's supposed replication and reinforcement of the drunken Indian stereotype in his works preceding *Reservation Blues*, works virtually saturated with images and characters that reveal and embody the devastating, debilitating, and destructive effects of alcohol on Indian culture. Bird's oversight in this regard, taken with her almost exclusive focus on *Reservation Blues* (her article *is* a review of the novel), clearly underscores her concern for the mainstreaming of those literary features for a reservation tourist readership. Bird concedes, however, that "The portrayal of alcoholism that has been rampant through the generations cannot be denied and presents a paradox with which native writers must grapple" (51). Certainly, Alexie's fictional realism in his portrayal of the effects of alcohol on reservation life meets head-on the facts of real Indian existence and experience.

Indeed, sobering statistics from Bordewich's own work are reflected variously in characters, incidents and situations, and themes throughout Alexie's work:

The cumulative effect of alcoholism on Indians is staggering. According to the Indian Health Service, Indians are three and a half times more likely than other Americans to die from cirrhosis of the liver, a benchmark of addiction. They are also four times more likely to die from accidents, and three times more likely to die from homicide and suicide, in all of which alcohol is usually present. Between 5 percent and 25 percent of Indian babies may be born mentally and physically damaged by fetal alcohol syndrome, compared to less than one-fifth of 1 percent in the general population. Alcohol is also at least a contributing factor in many, perhaps most, Indian deaths from pneumonia, heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer, and it ultimately accounts for perhaps as much as 70 percent of all the treatment provided by the Indian Health Service's hospitals and clinics. . . . Alcohol also takes an immeasurable toll in chronic disability, lost earning capacity, unemployment, emotional pain, family disruption, and child abuse. (248)⁸

Compare, for example, this stark recitation of real human destruction with Alexie's initial description in *Reservation Blues* of the habitual felon and all-around "loser" Michael White Hawk, nephew of Spokane Tribal Council Chairman David WalksAlong:

Michael's mother had died of cirrhosis when he was just two years old, and he'd never even known his father. Michael was conceived during some anonymous three-in-the-morning powwow encounter in South Dakota. His mother's drinking had done obvious damage to Michael in the womb. He had those vaguely Asian eyes and the flat face that alcohol babies always had on reservations. But he'd grown large and muscular despite the alcohol's effects. (39)

White Hawk grew into a dangerous bully, the passage goes on to reveal – and worse. Like Victor and Junior's pathetic attempts at appropriating shabby features of white popular culture, White Hawk tries to energize his essential Indianness during spells on another kind of "reservation," the prison, in a reverse form of the same impulse: "White Hawk took off his t-shirt to show his uncle the dozen tattoos he had received in prison. There were dragons, bears, feathers, and naked women. There was a naked Indian woman with braids on his back and a naked Indian woman with unbraided hair on his stomach" (39). For Alexie, White Hawk is neither a modern Queequeg nor a "good" Indian. The negative valences in the portrait of Michael White Hawk are entirely purposeful, however. In them, Alexie the moral satirist displays for his readers the image of an Indian destructively encoding his own body with cheesy, almost profane, images that themselves reflect prejudicial white stereotypes of his own culture and heritage.⁹

Speaking in terms of her own work, Muskogee poet Joy Harjo, Bird's coeditor of *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* (1997), perhaps would support (conceptually, at least) Alexie's morally satiric purpose in confronting the effects of alcohol on his literary version of the Spokane Reservation: "Alcoholism is an epidemic in native people, and I write about it. I was criticized for bringing it up, because some people want to present a certain image of themselves. But again, it comes back to what I was saying: part of the process of healing is to address what is evil" ("A Laughter of Absolute Sanity" 140). One must wonder why Bird never mentions what she calls the replication of a dangerous stereotype in the small press poems of Harjo, whose volume of poetry *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* (1994) has been reprinted by Norton for a mainstream audience. For example, Harjo glosses the prose poem "Mourning Song" by commenting

Because my family has suffered from the destruction of alcohol, as have most Indian families in this land, I don't want to encourage the drinking with spare change, but I also understand the need to deaden the pain. It's a quandary I haven't settled. (20; italics in original)

Immediately following is the powerful "Northern Lights," a poem that relates

the near-destruction and ultimate survival of Whirling Soldier and his daughter from white weapons of war: Vietnam and alcohol.

In Yuma, in the hangover of a dream of his mother beading a blanket in his honor, . . . [Whirling Soldier] tore the medals from his pack and pawned them for a quart. He snuffed his confusion between honor and honor with wine, became an acrobat of pain in the Indian bars of Kansas. (23)

Yet, like Alexie, Harjo at times also can be humorously ironic concerning the effects of alcohol. The speaker in “Witness,” for example, recounts spending an evening with a friend, “driving the back roads around Albuquerque, the radio on country and a six-pack”; “Soon there were sirens, turning lights and she pulled to a stop at the side of the road. Damn the cops. She rolled down the window, wailing Jennings tearing up the cab. They cited her for weaving! (She came from a family renowned for weaving.)” (42). From Bird’s perspective, the difference may be that Alexie’s mainstream fiction, starting with *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* and concluding with *Reservation Blues*, has reached an extended audience for its consumption – hence, the widespread dissemination of what she views as a troublesome collection of images that are further cheapened by Alexie’s “gimmicky” appliqué of base elements from popular culture.

For Bird, “the representation of alcoholism in *Reservation Blues*, however accurate, still capitalizes upon the stereotypical image of the ‘drunken Indian.’ It’s not the kind of ‘mirroring,’ portraying colonial impact, that non-native people want to accept – and is a sore subject for Indians because it is all too familiar for most of us” (51). Oppressed peoples rightly are sensitive to the many forms of damage that negative stereotyping can cause, and one can sympathize with Bird’s concern about this issue.¹⁰ But she fails to credit the artistic and moral strengths that are found in Alexie’s depictions of the drunken Indian in the poems, stories, and novels that he has produced throughout his career. In the collaborative making of meaning between Alexie and his readers, images of the drunken Indian function as “open containers” (pun intended) to house or decant realistic valences of meaning for modern reservation life and people. These forms function positively in terms of the original notion of the term *stereotype*, or “mold” – but with an important difference. Whereas usual notions of stereotype generally reflect “commonly held and oversimplified mental pictures or judgments of a person, a race, an issue, a kind of art” (Holman and Harmon 481), Alexie’s purportedly stereotypical drunken Indians achieve and convey for readers vital resonances of realism when he uses them to express the recursive, historical patterns of defeat and exploitation of Indian peoples by white civilization. As demonstrated in a number of his works, Alexie certainly would agree with James Welch’s contention that, more than a century after the Battle of Little Big Horn, “Custer seems to be alive and well and rid-

ing in our midst” (226). That is, the endlessly recursive cycle of defeat on multiple modern battlefields (cultural, economic, geographic, and more) with which the “victors” of Little Big Horn have been rewarded, has become institutionalized in the fabric of reservation life. Alexie’s moral role as a poet and fiction writer enables him to construct through imaginative literary realism a viable means for his peoples’ survival – through works that are ironic, self-reflexively satiric and, at times, suffused with wit and humor. Bird’s complaint that Alexie’s portrayal of alcoholism extends well beyond the simplistic blaming of the problem on “colonial impact” perhaps reflects a certain cognitive dissonance toward the issues. Alexie’s poetry and fiction sometimes locate the problem within the historical terms of colonial impact, to be sure, but just as often he insists on confronting, through satire and irony, the culturally embedded patterns of modern Indian defeat, of which alcohol-related problems are symptomatic.

Alexie’s drunken Indian appears as early as page one of his first collection of stories and poems, *The Business of Fancydancing*, and alcohol-related images occur in more than half of the volume’s pieces. As will become his stylistic and structural hallmark, Alexie wields the pen of irony and satire powerfully at times, at others with touches of self-reflexive cultural humor and, if the volume is considered as a whole, always with the sense that his community *must* and *can* survive cultural extinction. (Indeed, the idea of survival in its various permutations may be seen as the overarching theme of *Old Shirts*.) For example, “Traveling,” the first story of *Fancydancing*, depicts the young narrator watching as his father is pulled over by a state trooper for “weaving” (a cultural cliché, noted above in the example from Harjo) and then humiliated by being forced to surrender to a catechism of white popular culture questions in order to test the depth of his “assimilation.” The poem “House Fires” presents an incident of family destruction by alcohol that Alexie will reprise in both *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* and *Reservation Blues*; here, the narrator’s father comes home drunk and smashes the furniture, leaving the narrator and his mother to escape to a better life. The theme of family destruction and personal abandonment due to alcohol appears again in the highly ironic and graphic poem “Futures”:

We lived in the HUD house
for fifty bucks a month.
Those were the good times.
ANNIE GREEN SPRINGS WINE
was a dollar a bottle.
My uncles always came over
to eat stew and fry bread

to get drunk in the sweatlodge
to spit and piss in the fire.
(*Fancydancing* 35)

Throughout *Fancydancing* Alexie presents an uncompromisingly realistic portrait of the reservation and its inhabitants in terms of their pain, the coping mechanisms they use for dealing with reality, their fear of personal relationships, and the oppositional pull of guilt for being made to feel responsible for their failed existence against the self-defeating need to forgive white civilization for destroying their lives. Alcohol and its effects infuse the majority of the pieces in *Fancydancing*, either as the cause or as the effect of situations and characters' behaviors.

But it is in poems like "Evolution" that Alexie's satiric impulses blend most effectively with fictional realism to revitalize Indian history in terms of modern realities. Here the historically transcendent and ubiquitous figure of Buffalo Bill enters the world of contemporary Indian poetry to conquer again, when he "opens a pawn shop on the reservation / right across the border from the liquor store" (*Fancydancing* 48). The border crossing from reservation to liquor store and back becomes a powerful metaphor of recurring Indian defeat by white civilization and the white-conditioned habit of Indian self-defeat (a "trail of beers," Alexie's voice later quips in "Poem" [*Old Shirts* 77]). In "Evolution, reservation Indians pawn everything, even their bones, in order to cross the road for alcohol. Buffalo Bill collects and catalogs everything the Indians have pawned and, when he has acquired it all "closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old / calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES / charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter" (lines 13–15).

Alcohol and its attending complex of issues for Indians continues in Alexie's collection of poems and stories *First Indian on the Moon* (1993); he again reveals the devastation and destruction of personal relationships by alcohol and the constrained ability of characters to cope with an alien, bicultural reservation environment, as in the satiric burlesque of Alcoholics Anonymous in "A Twelve-Step Treatment Program" (33–35). The speaker in "The Alcoholic Love Poems" (36–37) poses an historically persistent and contentious question that for some Indians has distinctly racial overtones: "*Is alcoholism genetic / or conditioned*" (No. 3; lines 1–2). Until the appearance in 1996 of *Indian Killer*, the number of alcoholics that populate Alexie's literary version of the Spokane Reservation seems to be equally matched by the number of recovering alcoholics (who are consumers, along with Indians afflicted with diabetes, of oceans of Diet Pepsi), and characters who fear alcohol and its effects because of devastating family experiences (as earlier in "House Fires" [*Fancydancing* 29]). It is uncertain from the texts whether Alexie himself considers alcoholism as

heritable, as part of essential Indian DNA, or as culturally conditioned and perhaps a substitute outlet for vanished or suppressed modes of expressing warrior identity (an issue he addresses with loud irony in *Old Shirts*). What is clear, however, is that a number of his Indian characters themselves fear a genetic inheritance that may include the propensity toward alcoholism.¹¹ For example, the suicide-by-alcohol of Samuel Builds-the-Fire (a.k.a. “Drunk and Disorderly”) is movingly presented in terms of personal and familial destruction in the chapter of *Reservation Blues* entitled “Father and Farther” (93–129). Builds-the-Fire’s son Thomas, who does not drink, fears that alcoholism may be genetic, his “destiny,” part of his Indian DNA (114–16).¹² Indeed, except for Thomas all the principal Indian characters in that novel (including the Warm Water sisters) either drink or are children of alcoholic parents:

Victor had started to drink early in life, just after his real father moved to Phoenix, and he drank even harder after his stepfather moved into the house. Junior never drank until the night of his high school graduation. He’d sworn never to drink because of his parents’ boozing. . . . Thomas’s father still drank quietly, never raising his voice once in all his life, just staggering around the reservation, usually covered in piss and shit. (57)

While killing time in Seattle’s Pike Place Market before their gig at the Backboard Club, members of the band Coyote Springs encounter a number of drunken Indians who call this urban reservation home: “Junior left Victor to the drunks. Chess thought those drunks scared Junior. He might have seen himself in their faces. Junior wondered if their disease was contagious. A fall-asleep-on-a-heating-grate disease. Junior was frightened” (*Reservation Blues* 151).¹³ The narrator continues, with not a little irony: “As a child, each member of Coyote Springs had run from drunks. They all still ran from drunks. All Indians grow up with drunks. So many drunks on the reservation, so many. But most Indians never drink. Nobody notices the sober Indians. On television, the drunk Indians emote. In books, the drunk Indians philosophize” (151).

A fine and clearly moral synthesis of irony and satire that Alexie uses to address the issues of alcohol in *First Indian* appears in the poem “Freaks” (49), when the speaker encounters on the Seattle waterfront “three Indians sharing a bottle of wine and a can of Spam” (lines 1–2). In conscious self-humiliation the winos initially claim Yakima and Lakota Sioux heritage, only to reverse themselves jokingly into an Indian version of the Three Stooges, and in so doing manipulate their author’s satiric mirror, escaping into an image from low-brow white popular culture. The habitual self-defeat that forces the trio to re-fashion themselves in this manner clearly is their coping mechanism for dealing with the never-ending defeat of Indians by white civilization through “shots” of alcohol.¹⁴ Alexie’s fusion of satire and irony here is an example of his

moral strength as a poet for his people – though it is exactly this technique that Gloria Bird deplors about *Reservation Blues*. Perhaps the best poem in *First Indian* in terms of theme, richness of exposition, and the reworking of Indian history into a survival document for contemporary reservation experience, however, is “The Native American Broadcasting System” (83–87), which stylistically may be likened to an Alexian “Prufrock,” complete with multiple levels of narrative consciousness and intrusion of voices from the mythic past. Along with another cultural hero-villain, Buffalo Bill, Custer forever is “alive and well and riding in our midst” (Welch 226):

Custer came back to life in Spokane managing the Copper Penny
Grocery, stocked the rubbing alcohol next to the cheap wine:

RUBBING ALCOHOL 99¢
THUNDERBIRD WINE \$1.24

The urban Indians shuffle in with tattered coats and boots counting quarters
while Custer trades food stamps for cash, offering absolution. (*First Indian*
84)¹⁵

As earlier in “Evolution” (*Fancydancing* 48), Alexie masterfully coalesces Indian history and contemporary reservation reality to evoke the speaker’s pain of bicultural fragmentation. For the reservation “victors” the specter of Custer, though historically vanquished, remains ubiquitous, omnipresent, and victorious in countless daily struggles for survival.

The presence of alcohol and its abuses and effects diminishes considerably in *Old Shirts*, but the prose poem “Sundays, Too” (47) perfectly expresses Alexie’s take on a perhaps-flawed and certainly controversial attitude toward alcohol held by some Indians: that, deprived by white civilization of traditional social bonding mechanisms and outlets for expressing innate prowess as warriors, some Indians find in alcohol a medium to replace those elements. Bordewich’s study provides factual underpinning for Alexie’s fictional realism: “Some suggest that drunkenness among Indians is something fundamentally different from alcoholism among non-Indians and, indeed, that it sometimes even embodies positive traits, a spirit of camaraderie rooted in tribal tradition or an assertion of ‘Indianness’ in the face of a hostile white world” (255).¹⁶ “That was the summer all of us Indians drank the same brand of beer,” the narrator explains, adding that “At first, it was coincidence, economics. Then, it grew into a living thing, evolved and defined itself, became a ceremony, a tribal current, a shared synapse” (“Sundays, Too” 47). In this season of delusional tribal unity, the sharing of alcohol became “communion, baptism, confession” until the totemic Indian gods – Bear, Coyote, Wolf, Raven – became hideously transformed, distorted by white civilization through the agency of alcohol.

One cannot but wonder at the irony of the speaker's self-delusion voiced in the piece's concluding line: "There is nothing we cannot survive." For Alexie the moral satirist, the mirror that he turns toward his readers is minatory, admonitory, and shaming, beaming a reflection of false values that themselves must be defeated in order to insure real survival. There can be no mistaking that Alexie deplures self-destruction and the debasement of cultural values through alcohol, especially as it is rationalized through the easy illusion of tribal "unity."

Alexie's first foray into extended prose fiction, the group of interrelated stories that together form *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, is decidedly lighter in tone throughout, the satire mellowed somewhat by fuller views of characters who embrace life on the reservation as a humorous disjunction of traditional ways and modern reality – as defined, of course, by white civilization. Alcohol and its effects are omnipresent, as usual, but often in humorous contexts, as when Adrian momentarily forgets that he is on the wagon and asks Victor for another beer:

"How many times do I have to tell you? We don't drink anymore."

"Shit," Adrian said. "I keep forgetting. Give me a goddamn Pepsi."

"That's a whole case for you today already."

"Yeah, yeah, fuck these substitute addictions."

("The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore" 50)

A more somber view of alcoholism opens in "A Train Is an Order of Occurrence Designed to Lead to Some Result," where Samuel Builds-the-Fire Sr., grandfather of the young visionary Thomas, drinks to find the wisdom and courage to face his defeated existence, only to reach an epiphany of despair: "At the halfway point of any drunken night, there is a moment when an Indian realizes he cannot turn back toward tradition and that he has no map to guide him toward the future" (134). For Alexie's readers, however, the literary world in which Builds-the-Fire exists is precisely that: a modern map for negotiating the realities of contemporary reservation life that can lead to survival.

Undoubtedly Alexie's most sobering portrait of alcoholism in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* is in the story "Amusements" (54–58), in which the narrator, Victor, and his companion, Sadie, enjoy a little "fun" at the expense of another Indian at the carnival of reservation life: "After summer heat and too much coat-pocket whiskey, Dirty Joe passed out on the worn grass of the carnival midway and Sadie and I stood over him, looked down at his flat face, a map for all the wars he fought in the Indian bars" (54). Victor and Sadie persuade the roller coaster attendant to give the passed-out Indian a twenty-dollar ride, thereby displaying to the crowd of astonished white onlookers a palpable image of the prejudicial stereotype of the drunken Indian, his life defined

metaphorically as a perilous thrill ride. Self-reflexively, Victor and Sadie find *themselves* watching the whites watching the Indian carny show of drunkenness that they have staged. As Victor explains:

We sat there beside Dirty Joe and watched all the white tourists watch us, laugh, point a finger, their faces twisted with hate and disgust. I was afraid of all of them, wanted to hide behind my Indian teeth, the quick joke.

“Shit,” I said. “We should be charging admission for this show.”

“Yeah, a quarter a head and we’d be drinking Coors Light for a week.”

“For the rest of our lives, enit?” (55)

Thus the crowd of whites functions as “jury and judge for the twentieth-century fancydance of these court jesters who would pour Thunderbird wine into the Holy Grail” (56). Finally recognizing the inhumanity of their actions, and in attempting to rescue Dirty Joe, the tables turn, O. Henry-like, on Victor as he is pursued and finally captured in the fun house (that represents his personal reality) by the white keepers of the carnival of life:

Crazy mirrors, I thought, the kind that distort your features, make you fatter, thinner, taller, shorter. The kind that make a white man remember he’s the master of ceremonies, barking about the Fat Lady, the Dog-Faced Boy, the Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty. (58)

The story perhaps is Alexie’s most powerful statement on the exploitation of Indians through alcohol; here, however, Indians victimize another Indian in an ironic reversal of the usual historic relationship – that is, the “favorable” traditional depiction of Indian victimization by whites, what Bird calls the effects of “colonialist influence on . . . native culture” (48).¹⁷

Of course, the exhibition of the Indian for white amusement, itself a form of physical, cultural, and spiritual colonialism, has a long-established literary history as well, going back at least as far as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (staged in 1611). There Trinculo, stumbling upon Caliban, who is trying to hide from Prospero’s storm and spells, is astonished at the sight of the “salvage” and remarks,

Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver: there would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man: when they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. (2.2.28–33)

Shortly thereafter the drunken butler Stephano arrives on the scene and enters into a colonialist pact with Trinculo, not only to seize Caliban’s island but also to profit from exhibiting him for the amusement of whites. The Europeans conquer and enslave Caliban through the agency of liquor, and he comments,

“That’s a brave god, and bears celestial liquor: / I will kneel to him” (118–19). In “Amusements,” by contrast, Victor counters his own impulses: Alexie’s satiric mirror turns back on his readers a searing view of Indian self-victimization and shame, for Victor himself becomes not only a victimizer but also a victim of his own inhumane impulses, an “inside” agent for the defeat of Indians by white civilization through alcohol and humiliation – engaging in what Owens calls “inner-colonization” (82). Among a number of important differences that separate Shakespeare’s and Alexie’s satiric treatment of exploitation through alcohol is that Victor allows himself to be appropriated by white popular culture, and the results are both disgusting and maddening – not only because he wants to replace Indian with white DNA, but also because his efforts end in a pathetic, superficial, second-rate image of whiteness, something of a satirically inverse form of stereotyping that Alexie later evokes in vivid detail in *Reservation Blues*.¹⁸ “Amusements” does not depict “colonialist influence . . . and how that influence shapes the representation of native culture to a mainstream audience” in a positive way that Bird would condone (48). Alexie’s satiric mirroring back of the trope in ironic terms, however, is at once contemporary in tone and moral, and is a superb example of his imaginative literary realism as well.

For Alexie’s characters and their readers the most poignant and devastating moment related to alcohol and its effects is the incident, late in *Reservation Blues*, when Junior Polatkin commits suicide atop the reservation water tower after the band Coyote Springs fails to land a recording contract with Cavalry Records. That predetermined “failure” is yet another reworking, in pure Alexian fashion, of Custer’s defeat-victory at Little Big Horn for, finally, the white record producers do not really care about or need the band’s “Indianness,” actual or otherwise, just as long as the band’s surface image matches white preconceptions of Indians and Indian music. When the recording contract is preempted by the two vanilla groupies from comic-strip land, Betty and Veronica, in another sophisticated and modern defeat for Indians (one that is actually enhanced by popular culture connections), it sends the usually mild-mannered Thomas Builds-the-Fire into a rage in which he destroys their tape of pseudo-“Indian” rock music. The reaction of Victor Joseph to Junior’s suicide draws strong criticism from Bird, though she overlooks Alexie’s depiction of the characters’ marginal lives at the beginning of *Reservation Blues*, as well as his representation of the depth of Victor’s reaction to the tragedy.

Early in the novel Alexie’s narrator calls Victor and Junior “two of the most accomplished bullies of recent Native American history” (13). Victor’s self-usurpation by shabby externals of white popular culture makes him “the reservation John Travolta,” a misfit Indian whose “wardrobe made him an angry man” (12). His sidekick is figured in similar terms:

A tall, good-looking buck with hair like Indians in the movies, long, purple-black, and straight, Junior was president of the Native American Hair Club. If there had been a hair bank, like a blood bank or sperm bank, Junior could have donated yards of the stuff and made a fortune. . . . There were rumors he had fathered a white baby or two at school. (13)

The visionary Thomas Builds-the-Fire, however, sees through their façade: “He knew that Victor and Junior were fragile as eggs, despite their warrior disguises” (16). After the suicide, while Victor is parked on the shores of Turtle Lake, Junior appears to him in a vision and offers his friend a drink from his flask; Victor responds by imagining himself in the middle of the cult horror movie *An American Werewolf in London*; he tells Junior’s “spirit” that he has not taken a drink since the suicide.¹⁹ Silence reigns heavily during the scene, and the effect of the tragedy is compounded when Victor reveals his shallowness (and fragility) in resorting to the defense mechanism of dealing with the event in terms of popular culture. Victor communes with Junior’s spirit, and Junior passes along some realistic advice to his friend: “I think you should go get yourself a goddamn job. I ain’t going to be around to take care of your sorry ass anymore” (291).

Bird complains that popular culture references cheapen this episode, but she neglects to acknowledge the full development of Alexie’s morally satiric purpose: after the episode with Junior’s spirit, Victor, who already has stopped his suicidal drinking, puts together his sad résumé of skills and applies for Junior’s old job of driving the reservation water truck. Spokane Tribal Chairman David WalksAlong takes this opportunity, however, to strike a devastating blow to Victor by denying his application. The denial, defeat, and humiliation transmitted to Victor by white culture through the power invested in another Indian is wrenching – and note Alexie’s conscious connection of “shots” with both alcohol and bullets:

Victor left the office, feeling something slip inside him. He stole five dollars from WalksAlong’s secretary’s purse and bought a six-pack of cheap beer at the Trading Post.

“Fuck it, I can do it, too,” Victor whispered to himself and opened the first can. That little explosion of the beer can opening sounded exactly like a smaller, slower version of the explosion that Junior’s rifle made on the water tower. (292–93)

WalksAlong victimizes Victor in part because he fails to meet white (Walks-Along’s) expectations just as Victor humiliates (also in white terms) the inebriated Dirty Joe of “Amusements.” Again, alcohol defeats, destroys, and is used as a coping or avoidance mechanism for confronting the harshness of

reservation reality; in no way is Alexie's use of the "drunken Indian" here stereotypical or gratuitous. Victor's reaction to Junior's suicide mirrors many of the coping difficulties of Indian men who suffer one defeat after another and who succumb, like Victor, to various forms of addiction. As with Thomas Builds-the-Fire's fear of a genetic "destiny" he may have inherited from his father's and grandfather's alcoholism, Victor literally is the product of an alcoholic legacy that he reveals in the story from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* entitled "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock": "I was conceived during one of those drunken nights, half of me formed by my father's whiskey sperm, the other half formed by my mother's vodka egg. I was born a goofy reservation mixed drink, and my father needed me just as much as he needed every other kind of drink" (27). The extended context of Junior's suicide, which includes Victor's reaction to the event and ultimate defeat by Walks-Along, therefore must be considered in its totality – and the overall picture is by no means pleasant, uplifting, or ennobling. Its harsh realism cannot be denied, however, especially when one considers the fact that Victor's addiction to the shallow and cheap manifestations of white popular culture actually defines his precarious sense of identity, a constant struggle to deny his Indianness. In his defeat at the hands of another Indian, albeit through white mechanisms, Victor must face the reality that he can never be white enough.

Though she admits the very real problem of alcoholism in modern reservation life, Bird argues that Alexie's portrayal of the addiction in *Reservation Blues* is nothing short of cheap, a pandering to preconceived white prejudices:

The buffer in *Reservation Blues* is to sugarcoat the picture with enough side-tracks and comic scenes to tone down the real issues. Despite the verisimilitude of Alexie's portrayal of alcoholism and its impact upon individual lives, he does not attempt to put the social problems of economic instability, poverty, or cultural oppression into perspective. Instead, alcoholism and drinking are sensationalized: Lester is "the most accomplished drunk on the Spokane Reservation" (151), a notoriety that wins him "tribal hero" (151) status. Victor, incapable of coping with rejection, turns to the bottle for solace, the tragic failed artist. (51)

Bird's criticism of Alexie is strong here; it also suggests that she does not recognize or admit that irony and satire are essentially moral elements of his artistry. The ongoing character of Lester Falls Apart serves almost as a unifying feature of Alexie's work, from his first appearance in the second poem of *Fancydancing* ("13/16" [16–17]) to a cameo in *The Summer of Black Widows*. Lester, in fact, is nearly archetypal, something of a presiding spirit for Alexie's work, an aggregate of the forms of Indian defeat, including alcoholism, that he rep-

resents.²⁰ Returning to Holman and Harmon's broad definition of satire, Alexie's impulse in his works up to and including *Reservation Blues* is not to destroy the reservation, but rather to mirror his vision of its present reality for the moral purpose of refashioning it and its members.

In a 1997 e-mail posting in which he commented on Bird's response to *Reservation Blues*, Alexie expressed concern over what he considered her harsh assessment and at least partial misunderstanding of the novel – especially for what she termed his depiction of the “exaggeration of despair” on the Spokane Reservation:

[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. They're Crips gang members. 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, and how good it can be, on my reservation. (“Re: Alexie Article”)

Alexie's response only lends credence to the surveys of reservation addiction and dependency outlined in the studies of Bordewich, Donald Fixico, and others. In his 1996 volume of poems, *The Summer of Black Widows*, Alexie formulates in satiric verse the rationale for his fictional realism in the poem entitled “How to Write the Great American Indian Novel” (94–95), a scathing catalog of the stereotypes, formulas, and clichés that together comprise the “artistic repertoire” of some Indian writers. Interestingly, the poem that follows, “The Exaggeration of Despair” (96–97), clearly alludes to the title of Bird's review-essay of Alexie's *Reservation Blues*. Here Alexie's imaginative literary realism and ironic and satiric impulses are compressed through the medium of poetry into his harshest vision of reservation reality ever. After a litany of images that expresses the omnipresent Indian inheritance of cyclical defeat and self-defeat, the speaker closes the poem by repeating its opening lines: “I open the door / and invite the wind inside” (97).

The year 1996 also marked the appearance of Alexie's second novel, *Indian Killer*, the title of which plays, in typical Alexian fashion, on the notions of “Indian killer” (as in Custer) and “killer Indian” (247). Where in *First Indian* (1993) Alexie's speaker claims that “The highways are closed / between Spokane, the city / and Spokane, my reservation” (“Fire Storms” 23), the author's vision of contemporary reservation reality both expands *and* dilates in *Indian Killer*. That is, from a broad view the entire United States is conceived as a reservation contained and managed by whites, while under Alexie's satiric lens Seattle, the “urban rez,” becomes a microcosm of that larger phenome-

non. Moreover, in *Indian Killer* Seattle is a modern site for yet another of the endless reenactments of the Battle of Little Big Horn. Indeed, the coming of title character John Smith is seen as a latter-day incarnation of the promise of Bigfoot's Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee in 1890:

The word spread quickly. Within a few hours, nearly every Indian in Seattle knew about the scalping. Most Indians believed it was all just racist paranoia, but a few felt a strange combination of relief and fear, as if an apocalyptic prophecy was just beginning to come true. (185)

Marie Polatkin, ever confrontational, ever the voice of conscience, ever the stereotype, attacks Professor Mather (who teaches "Ind. Lit." using forgeries) late in the novel in terms reminiscent of passages previously cited from both Bordewich and *Reservation Blues*:

"If Crazy Horse, or Geronimo, or Sitting Bull came back, they'd see what you white people have done to Indians, and they would start a war. They'd see the homeless Indians staggering around downtown. They'd see the fetal-alcohol-syndrome babies. They'd see the sorry-ass reservations. They'd learn about Indian suicide and infant-mortality rates." (314)

In *Indian Killer* Alexie's satiric mirror functions inversely to reflect the notion that homeless, "invisible" urban Seattle Indians do not drink, though often they are mistaken for drunks by white characters who *do* drink and continue to harbor prejudicial stereotypes of Indians. Alexie's title character, driven by the knowledge that he is "an Indian without a tribe" (35), clearly is aware, though naively and with some paranoia, of the "colonialist influence" (Bird 48) of alcohol:

John knew his co-workers wanted to poison him with their alcohol and mean words. They wanted to get him drunk and helpless. John had never taken a drink of alcohol in his whole life and he was not about to start now. He knew what alcohol did to Indians. Real Indians did not drink. (131-32)

The satirically appropriate venue for Indian-white socializing in the novel lies downtown, in Big Heart's Soda and Juice Bar, a time-warp where Pepsi-drinking Indians dance to white country western and pop music and Terrible Ted, "an especially drunk and belligerent homicide detective" (237) rages, consistent with the *white* stereotype, that Indians are "fucking drunks and welfare cheats. They ain't got no jobs. They're lazy as shit" (240). Alexie's use of stereotypes in *Indian Killer*, including prejudicial images held by whites, must be seen to take on, as his work usually does, a moral function through satire and irony: they are the "open containers" holding negative "familiar" notions of Indians that add texture and valences of meaning to the novel's mythic di-

mension through their inversion, demolition, and defamiliarization. In other words, Alexie tends to turn inside out stereotypes such as the drunken Indian; refashioned through satire and irony, these “open containers” can resonate with fresh values.

The frequency of images of the drunken Indian in Alexie’s work nearly vanishes with the appearance of *Toughest Indian*, perhaps the author’s most mature handling of the themes of racial essence (“Indianness,” “whiteness,” mixed-blood dilution), assimilation (nuanced by notions of racial/cultural betrayal), and sexual identity. Indeed, the overarching theme of the volume may best be expressed in the insistent question “*What is an Indian?*” (218; italics in original), a question that punctuates the book’s final story, “One Good Man.” As in *Indian Killer*, the ethos of a number of stories in *Toughest Indian* arises in part from the urban rez setting, with all the physical, historical, and metaphorical implications that the concept and contemporary Indian reality suggest for Alexie’s satiric artistry. His conventional use of stereotypes, even for satirically moral purposes, which has marked much of his work heretofore, seems to disappear in this volume or to be renewed in terms of different valences. In stories like “Assimilation” and “Class,” for example, Alexie fashions a relatively new Indian character type: the sophisticated, upwardly mobile urban Indian who drives a Toyota Camry, Saab, or BMW, wears Polo, Tommy Hilfiger, or designer leather, smokes chic *faux* cigarettes, and who, just as important, is espoused to a white partner. Mary Lynn, a full-blooded Coeur d’Alene character in “Assimilation,” and Edgar Eagle Runner (formerly Edgar Joseph), who appears in “Class,” both feel a racial longing for completeness that, they both come to realize, can only be regained through sexual intimacy with another Indian – an expression of the theme of “going home,” a jumping of the roadblock that separates rez from city, which informs the entire volume. As Mary Lynn’s chemical engineer husband, Jeremiah, crudely says to her, “Fucking an Indian doesn’t make me Indian” (10). The idea also is developed in another way in the male homoerotic relationship between the nameless Indian journalist and the fighter-hitchhiker in “The Toughest Indian in th World.” Mary Lynn, the upscale lawyer Eagle Runner, and the journalist are light-years apart from Junior and Victor of *Reservation Blues*. Their problems are different as well, as each has acquired a certain kind of status from pawning much of their essential Indian DNA in exchange for the spiritual emptiness of the white American Dream. Both characters return, it must be mentioned, from their sexual excursions into “Indian Country” to the security of their white spouses.

Alcohol figures prominently in the story “Class” in a satiric way never before attempted by Alexie. Instead of beaming the reflection of the drunken Indian stereotype onto other characters and his readers, Alexie’s Edgar Eagle Runner turns the mirror back on himself: “I don’t drink alcohol, never have,

mostly because I don't want to maintain and confirm any of my ethnic stereotypes, let alone the most prevalent one, but also because my long-lost father, a half-breed, is still missing somewhere in the bottom of a tequila bottle. I had always wondered if he was a drunk because he was Indian or because he was white or because he was both" (47). Eagle Runner gets his kick not from alcohol but from substitute addictions, like gassed "yuppie water" (Perrier or Pellegrino, for example), with its class-conscious cachet. For Eagle Runner, who always has pursued assimilation to white culture, it is the very act of drinking, through which he can socialize with and confront his pawned DNA, that really matters. In "Class" he feels the pull to unify himself sexually with another Indian, only to call an escort agency and hook up with a white prostitute who stages herself, with conscious irony, as "Tawny Feather." Left unsatisfied, he goes off to Chuck's, an "indigenous bar" where, in drinking the tap water that can serve as a vehicle to return him home, he "heroically" and aggressively engages in a fistfight with an Indian bully – named Junior, of course. After physically surviving his personal barroom Little Big Horn, in which he fights the demons of race, identity, and desire, Eagle Runner returns to the white bed that he has carefully made for himself. A masculinized mirror of Mary Lynn's experience in "Assimilation," Eagle Runner's spiritual defeat in "Class" represents Alexie's admonitory satiric mirror turned inward on the character and outward toward his readers. No substitute addiction, not even tap water, can temper the conclusion of Eagle Runner's narrative of his odyssey to regain lost Indian identity:

Without changing my clothes, I crawled back into bed with Susan. Her skin was warm to the touch. The house ticked, ticked, ticked. In the morning, my pillow would be soaked with my blood.

"Where did you go?" Susan asked me.

"I was gone," I said. "But now I'm back." (56)

The force of assimilation wins again, but the surrender or "defeat" of Eagle Runner, like that of Mary Lynn in *Toughest Indian's* first story, is only a partial or qualified surrender, since both characters return to the homes they have chosen and made – and both actually love their white spouses.

On the surface it may seem that Alexie contradicts himself by using in his own work some familiar Indian character types, including stereotypes such as the drunken Indian, when he inveighs against their use, along with other tired, formulaic literary features found in other recent Indian fiction. (Considering the decidedly infrequent appearance of the drunken Indian in Alexie's works that appeared following Bird's review-essay of *Reservation Blues*, it is difficult to ascertain the influence of such criticism on his apparent aesthetic shift in *Indian Killer* and *Toughest Indian*. That aesthetic shift may be just that – appar-

ent – for Alexie continues to confront contemporary issues in those works as well, though in new ways.) The difference is that Alexie uses conventional forms and stereotypes satirically and ironically, often by inverting, demolishing, or defamiliarizing their accepted meanings, yet always with the moral purpose and social conscience that marks the true satirist. While Bird is uneasy with Alexie’s modern “edginess,” contending that he exploits his people and culture (49) and fashions a satiric mirror that reflects (she might say “distorts”) unpleasant reservation realities, Cook-Lynn finds work such as Alexie’s disturbing because, as she argues, it does not “suggest a responsibility of art as an ethical endeavor or the artist as responsible social critic” (126). True, Alexie does not produce work in the grand tradition of Momaday and Silko – nor does he seem to care to. Clearly a critical misunderstanding of Alexie is going on here, especially considering the overall character of his work in terms of the definition of satire given earlier: “A literary manner that blends a critical attitude with humor and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity.” Further, Cook-Lynn claims that the “responsible critic” should judge modern Indian fiction on the degree of its “moral” character and how well it reflects or sustains “indigenous/tribally specific literary traditions from which the imagination emerges” (131).

The abundant examples of Alexie’s moral use of the drunken Indian stereotype discussed in these pages amply demonstrate that his satiric artistry actually functions in ways valued and prescribed by Cook-Lynn. Despite the fact that he wrote as a white male in the European tradition, the words of the great literary critic, social critic, and satirist Oscar Wilde help to explain Alexie’s aesthetic purpose for using elements such as the drunken Indian stereotype in his imaginative literary realism:

All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals. Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art’s rough material, but before they are of any real service to Art they must be *translated into artistic conventions*. The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything. (319; emphasis added)

Indeed, Wilde’s remarks are applicable to any writer of satiric forms in English.

At their best, Alexie’s poetry and fiction often are risky, edgy, and smart; his satiric and ironic tone and his use of certain character types and stereotypes doubtless are unsettling to some readers, including those who would rather be reading Momaday and Silko. Of course the mirrors and lenses on society that are the satirist’s tools, including the uses of potentially troubling character types and stereotypes, are not meant to disclose comfortable images; doing so would defeat the satirist’s inherently moral function and social conscience. Like any satirist, sometimes Alexie succeeds, sometimes he does not – but that

is a different critical issue to be debated. That is, one may disagree with or critique the work of any author on political, moral, or cultural grounds – but that is a separate issue from addressing the work *as art*. Likewise, work that may satisfy on political, moral, or cultural grounds also may fail *as literature* – propaganda, for example. What is of paramount importance in evaluating Alexie’s satiric artistry is the fact that he uses stereotypes, like that of the drunken Indian, in new and entirely moral and ethical ways, drawing his readers in to participate with him in the creation of meaning – a familiar oral tradition technique, as mentioned earlier. In this way Alexie’s “open containers” function as key elements in his ongoing construction, through his use of imaginative literary realism, of a viable survival document that enables his readers to cope with the issues of contemporary reservation reality.

NOTES

1. See Holman and Harmon on irony (264–65) and satire (447–49). Herein the term “irony” is used in its most basic sense of “referring to the recognition of a reality different from appearance” and “to describe a poet’s ‘recognition of incongruities’ and his or her controlled acceptance of them” (264). Though Alexie rarely writes pure examples of the two forms, the majority of his work is both *ironic* and *satiric*, exhibiting tonal and intentional relationships to irony and satire.

2. For Alexie’s most extended treatment of Coyote, see the poem “That Place Where Ghosts of Salmon Jump” in *The Summer of Black Widows* (19).

3. Valuable recent treatments of Indian stereotypes, including that of the “drunken Indian,” include Fixico (26–42) and Mihesuah.

4. Harjo and Bird’s introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language* (19–31) serves as a prolegomenon for a new, exclusive, “purist,” almost “privatized” Indian fiction.

5. See Holman and Harmon, s.v. “stereotype” (481).

6. Owens (74–76) finds himself “in strong agreement with Bird’s and Cook-Lynn’s critiques” of *Reservation Blues* (76), though he considers the latter’s take on Alexie in some ways “idiosyncratically skewed” (75).

7. In *Reservation Blues*, the narrator remarks that Thomas Builds-the-Fire “had always shared his stories with a passive audience and complained that nobody actively listened” (212).

8. For the statistical effects of alcohol on Indian peoples, see also Fixico, Mancall, Mihesuah, Unrau, and Vizenor (which is an extended version of his earlier essay, “Fire-water Labels and Methodologies,” *American Indian Quarterly* 7.4 [fall 1983]:25–36).

9. As mentioned earlier, Owens – who contends that Alexie is a “perhaps unwitting product of the dominant culture he abjures in his writing” (77) – perhaps might find this and comparable episodes in Alexie’s work not satirically salutary, but negative examples of what he terms “inner-colonization” (82). See Owens 76–82.

10. See, for example, the personal accounts of alcoholism collected in Vizenor and Bordewich (240–69).

11. Contrast Fixico's chapter, in which he maintains that "One false assumption attributes alcoholism to heredity among American Indians" (87), with Bordewich's survey of the literature (252–56).

12. Alexie addresses alcoholism and other father-son issues in his extended poetic portrait of the Indian father, which shares the title "Father and Farther" in *The Summer of Black Widows* (40–43).

13. In one sense the journey of the band Coyote Springs away from the reservation toward its confrontation with Cavalry Records (a modern reenactment of the battle of Little Big Horn on the very different battlefields of white popular culture and economics) is organized around gigs in successive bars – the Powwow Tavern, the Tipi Pole Tavern, Toadstools Tavern, and the Backboard Club, for example.

14. More than once Harjo equates "shots" of alcohol with "bullets," as in the poem "Northern Lights" (*The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* 22). In the same volume she also puns on the double meaning of "alcohol" and "spirits" ("The Song of the House in the House" 31).

15. Compare the companion poems in *Old Shirts*: "Custer Speaks" (36–38) and "Crazy Horse Speaks" (61–63).

16. Bordewich dismisses as an extreme form of rationalization Michael Dorris's claim, espoused in *The Broken Cord* (1989), that some Indians drink as a way of "affirming group identity" (qtd. in Bordewich 255). Compare, however, Vizenor (307–12) and Fixico's discussion of Indian "bar culture" (45, 162) and "group drinking" (91–92). Note that the Indians who gather socially at Big Heart's Soda and Juice Bar tend to drink Pepsi and, their essence diminished, dance in ceremonial fashion to white country western music (*Indian Killer* 275–76).

17. See Owens's quite different analysis of Alexie's authorial stance in this episode, about which he comments that "it is a shrewd posture for an author who wishes to have an essentialist cake and sell it, too, even if he does not perhaps understand what he is doing" (80). See also note 9 above.

18. See Chess and Checkers Warm Water's discussion of Indian men, DNA, and racial loyalty (*Reservation Blues* 82), as well as John Smith's imaginative contemplation of himself in terms of "real" Indian essence: "[H]e also knew that he shared genetics and common experiences with his mother, that they were paragraphs that belonged next to each other. John saw his tribe as a series of paragraphs that all had the same theme. They all belonged to the same tribe, shared the same blood" (*Indian Killer* 291).

19. See Harjo's metaphorical connections of shots of alcohol with "bullets" and alcohol with "spirits" (note 14).

20. A reading of the poem "The Unauthorized Biography of Lester Falls Apart" (*Old Shirts* 48–52) is essential for understanding the importance of the character in Alexie's

work in *Reservation Blues*. See also “The First and Last Ghost Dance of Lester Falls Apart” (*The Summer of Black Widows* 18).

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