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# Ethnicity and Accountability: Recent American Fiction

**STEPHANIE LAWRENCE**

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In a 2003 interview with Native American author Sherman Alexie, Robert Capriccioso asked whether fame has made the writer “play more to the mainstream.” Alexie wittingly answered, “No. I don’t even know how. My ethnicity automatically limits me, and then my personal aesthetic limits me even more. And my politics limit me even more. So, even if I had those ambitions, it would be impossible for me to get there” (Capriccioso). Alexie, who has become one of the leaders in Native American literature, recognizes the strong limitations placed upon him as an ethnic writer; he must struggle to create art that appeals to his own aesthetic and politics, while being limited by his ethnicity. He has also recognized how the expectations of others, due to his identity as a Native American, causes hostility and conflict in the literary world.

For the past several years, critics have argued over the degree of responsibility ethnic writers have to represent their people. Minority groups want to be viewed in a positive light. However, this can be problematic for ethnic writers because positive representations may directly conflict with an author’s experiences or accuracy. This drastically limits ethnic writers, and if they choose to avoid this so-called responsibility, they experience public scrutiny. In Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*, the relationships and descriptions of characters in the Band, Coyote Springs, translates to the larger scale dilemma of responsibility for ethnic writers to represent their people. Furthermore, I propose that even though Alexie does write literature with his people’s best interests in mind, he should not always be expected to portray his people positively because he has mixed responsibilities as a Native American and as an artist.

The characters in *Coyote Springs* and other Native Americans’ reactions to the Band portray Alexie’s views on the issue of representation. As the lead singer of Coyote Springs, Thomas Builds-a-Fire is constantly given a position of power and represents all members of the Band. Alexie emphasizes this numerous times throughout the text. While driving to a performance, Coyote Springs gets lost and stops to ask an old woman and her granddaughter for directions. Before answering, the women ask, “Who’s the lead singer?” Thomas answers and the granddaughter explains the directions, speaking directly to Thomas. Junior is angered by this, saying, “Ain’t that the way it always is? They only want to talk to the lead singer. All they want to know is the lead singer. Lead singer this. Lead singer that” (Alexie 51). This issue comes up numerous other times throughout

the novel. Each time a character specifically asks for Thomas because of his title as lead singer, Thomas seems completely unamused. He does not necessarily want the burden of being the spokesperson for the Band; that role is just assigned to him automatically by other people.

Alexie has created a character who is given the burden of representing others, which parallels his responsibility as a Native American writer to represent his people. The degree of responsibility ethnic writers have to accurately display their culture is a highly debated issue. "Aren't writers of one ethnic group or another inevitably labeled as being spokespeople, whether or not they desire this designation?" (Milofsky). Kenneth R. Roemer questions the role of the American Indian writer. He asks, "Should (he) be a committed and independent artist, a representative, a mediator, an advocate? The ethical pull toward representation and advocacy is strong. But how can one voice represent more than 560 federal recognized (and several hundred hope-to-be recognized) tribes?" (Roemer 19). Alexie recognizes this dilemma and calls attention to it in the interview with Capriccioso. When asked, "Would you consider yourself a self-promoter or an Indian promoter?" Alexie answers, "I'm not an Indian promoter because I don't know Indians; I don't know all of them. Comparatively, I know very few. How many Indians am I close to? 500, 200, 100, 10? I didn't know anybody can promote a race. I just laugh when I hear Indian artists say, (stoically) 'I'm doing this for my people.' Bullshit!" (Capriccioso). Alexie sees that, like Thomas trying to play his music, he cannot write literature without understanding and reacting to his identity as a Native American because society has already determined that as an ethnic writer, he must write literature that represents his people, ideally in a positive way. It is clear that Alexie realizes the absurdity of this because one man cannot stand in for a universal "Indian identity." With nearly 600 different tribes, each having completely different customs, traditions, and practices, it is unfair and impossible for one man to stand in for and please everyone.

Since much of the literary world seems to think a spokesperson is necessary, it raises the question, Who should be allowed to be the voice of the people? Who will represent the majority? Roemer believes that:

The authority is primarily grounded in the experience of 'being Indian'. . . But defining who is an 'insider' today can be difficult. Considering the diversity of tribal cultures and the fact that more than half of the Native American population lives in diversified cities and suburbs, it is not surprising that different groups of Indians and non-Indians emphasize different Indian identity criteria, especially blood quantum, tribal membership, community opinion, commitment, and self-concept. These different emphases,

combined with valid anger about pretend Indians and their publishers with sometimes less-than-valid hostility fueled by personal motives, can generate great tensions within the community of Indian writers.

(Roemer 18)

Alexie addresses this issue in *Reservation Blues* using the simplified model of the Band. Betty and Veronica, two white women, are the groupies for Coyote Springs. These women "both had long blonde hair and wore too much Indian jewelry. Turquoise rings, silver feather earrings, beaded necklaces" (Alexie 41). These women cause turmoil among other Native Americans when they join Coyote Springs as back-up singers. It is controversial because they are pretending to belong to a culture that is not their own.

Betty and Veronica represent those authors who write Indian literature in order to gain fame and feel accepted. Once Coyote Springs fails their audition, Betty and Veronica are signed by Cavalry Records and will pose as Native Americans. When trying to convince the manager to sign the women, Sheridan claims that the women are part Indian because, "they had some grandmothers or something that were Indian. We can still sell that Indian idea. We don't need any goddamn just off-the reservation Indians. We can use these women. They've been on the reservations. . . Don't you see? These women have got the Indian experience down" (269). In his essay, "Muting White Noise: The Subversion of Popular Culture of Narratives of Conquest in Sherman Alexie's Fiction," James Cox believes Sherdian is implying that, "with modern technology, anyone can be Indian, as long as they are Euro-American defined and constructed. Vanishing race rhetoric is implicit in these passages; to have Indian music, Cavalry Records does not need Indians" (Cox 63). Again, Alexie includes Betty and Veronica's characters to make a statement on the issue of representation.

The reactions of other Native Americans to the band in the novel can be compared to how Native Americans react to Alexie's fiction and other authors writing Native American literature. In an Open Letter to the Spokane Tribe, the Weillpinit Rawhide Press writes about the ability of Coyote Springs to represent the Spokane people. Alexie writes:

As you know, Coyote Springs, our local rock band, has just returned from Seattle with two white women. They are named Betty and Veronica of all things. I'm beginning to seriously wonder about Coyote Spring's ability to represent the Spokane Tribe. . . Secondly, the two Indian women in the band are not Spokanes. They are Flathead. I've always liked our Flathead cousins, but Coyote Springs is supposedly a Spokane Indian band. We don't even have to talk about the problems caused by the white women. We have to remember

that Coyote Springs travels to a lot of places as a representative of the Spokane Tribe. Do we really want other people to think we are like that band? Do we really want people to think that the Spokanes are a crazy storyteller, a couple of irresponsible drunks, a pair of Flathead Indians, and two white women? I don't think so. (Alexie 176)

This can be almost directly compared to how many Native Americans probably viewed *Reservation Blues*. The Spokane people want to be represented positively, both in the novel and in reality. Like the newspaper asking "Do we really want other people to think we are like that band?" Spokane Indians clearly do not want other people to think they are the way they are often represented in Alexie's literature.

One way to approach this problem is to consider that all authors, regardless of their skin color, should be able to create literature that satisfies their need to create art. All artists have a responsibility to themselves to use art as a means of expression, a way to say whatever needs to be said regardless of how other people will respond. Oftentimes, authors write about what they know and what most affects their life. Therefore, it makes sense that authors like Alexie would write about reservation life and their struggles as Native Americans. From an artistic perspective, it is an author's right to create fiction based on these experiences; it does not have to be accurate or show people positively. Alexie completely recognizes this and has been violently critiqued because of it. In the Cappricioso interview, Alexie was asked, "Do you feel like you have sold-out your own people?" Alexie responds:

I've made my mistakes about subject matter, things I probably shouldn't have written about. And that was a personal and moral choice to stop writing about those events. I didn't have to, and even if I had continued to write about them, it was my prerogative. You know, as an artist, it's not my job to fit in; it's not my job to belong. I'm not a social worker; I'm not a therapist. It's my job to beat the shit out of the world. I'm not here to make people feel good. (Cappricioso)

Alexie understands his role as a writer is to create his art. He is often criticized for showing Native Americans in a stereotypical light. However, it is his right as an author to do this. He tells his audience, "That's another thing about being Indian and an artist, people assume I have some sort of social responsibility to everyone. I don't. All I owe to the world is my art. People can either read it or not watch it, that's their decision" (Cappricioso).

Despite, Alexie's perspective on writing, critics continue to frown upon Alexie's characters, claiming that they do not show Native Americans positively. Author and critic Louis Owens writes in his book, *Mixed Blood Messages*, how:

Alexie's fiction...too often simply reinforces all 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)

Although Alexie does sometimes create stereotypical characters, Alexie's character Thomas defies the stereotypical Native American often pictured by uneducated readers. Unlike other Native Americans on the reservation, Thomas does not drink. In addition, "Indian women had never paid much attention to him because he didn't pretend to be some twentieth-century warrior, alternating between blind rage and feigned disinterest. He was neither loud nor aggressive, neither calm nor silent" (Alexie 4). Unlike Victor and Junior, Thomas has no interest in white women and instead falls in love with Chess and treats her with the utmost respect. Thomas is a perfect example of a character who rises above his circumstances and makes a better life for himself. By creating Thomas, Alexie is dealing with a complicated issue. By juxtaposing Thomas with other stereotypical Native Americans, the reader sees a positive image of a Spokane Native American, but Alexie is still able to represent reservation life the way he sees fit as an artist.

Alexie makes it very clear that it is the white man who has put and kept the Native Americans in their current situation. The motif of the screaming horses repeats throughout the novel. The horses represent the epitome of vulnerability because they had no way to fight back against the white invaders. Similarly, the Native Americans not only suffer because of their past abuse, but the limited resources provided by the government have made it difficult for them to escape the reservation. Again, this can be compared to the Band. Coyote Springs needs money in order to make a better life for themselves. But to do this, they are completely dependent on agents Wright and Sheridan. Alexie was sure to give them the same names as General William Sheridan and General George Wright, who were two real army officials responsible for the genocide of the Native Americans. Just as these military men oppressed the Native Americans in the past, present day white figures are oppressing Native Americans today. Alexie is showing the struggles Native Americans are still facing because of white mistreatment, and through Thomas, he is showing that it is possible to step forward and overcome oppression. Therefore, he is writing fiction that is representing his people beneficially.

Sherman Alexie is a clever Native American writer who has managed to subtly depict the conflict of an ethnic writer's responsibility to portray others by using the characters in the Band, Coyote Springs, in his novel, *Reservation Blues*. An ethnic writer is constantly faced with the demand to create art that will represent his/her people in a positive way, but the writer will never be able to please everyone. For this reason, I believe critics and readers should consider that ethnic writers have a responsibility to both their art and to their people. Authors should be allowed to create art that will satisfy their needs as artists without automatically limiting themselves in order to please others. If ethnic writers such as Sherman Alexie were not "automatically limited" by their race, there is no telling what more they may be able to contribute to the world.

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