



America, Americas, America(s): Sherman Alexie and the Question of Accurate Representation

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Abstract

Spokane writer Sherman Alexie's poetic oeuvre has been marked by sustained problematizations of a triumphalist American nationalism and a challenging of glorified nationalist self-perceptions. Alexie's poetic articulations, often dark, humorous and satirical, respond to various facets of the apparent normalcies crystallized as the American Nation. Despite the profusion of critical attention and praise Alexie's poetic repertoire has garnered, questions of accurate depiction have emerged, with Native American critics like Gloria Bird accusing him of exaggeration and misrepresentation. In this regard, it remains to be examined whether aesthetics are privileged in his poems at the expense of a 'realist' representation as they purportedly provide a disruptive, alternative narrative of America. This article attempts to appraise the particularities of Sherman Alexie's rebellion against dominant American representations, as well as the alleged problems in his poetic effort, through a study of his poems as well as of the scholarship around his work.

Keywords: America, nation, representation, authenticity, poetry.

*"Let us now celebrate
poets and liars, liars
and poets
for we are both of those things...
Let us now celebrate the
lies

that should be true because they tell us so much"
(Alexie 30)*

- Sherman Alexie, “Open Books”, *One Stick Song*

Introduction: Sherman Alexie’s Dissidence against A Monocultural America

Spokane poet, novelist and filmmaker Sherman Alexie’s repertoire has been the subject of a profusion of literary criticism in its rupturing of a sanitized and glorified representation of the American nation. Alexie shatters singular narratives about the American nation-state by tearing out images of oppression, suffering and discrimination from dominant representational panoramas and forging contradictory and discordant images of America. His collages of the nation-state juxtapose American triumphalism with its excesses and the iniquities imposed upon the dispossessed Native American populace. While Alexie has also been an illustrious novelist and short story writer, his “writing life begins with poetry, returns continually and relentlessly to poetry” (Lewis 18). His career took off upon winning a “prestigious National Endowment for the Arts fellowship for poetry” (Donovan 23) in 1992 and Alexie has continued to be a poet, irreverent to a point to have attracted a reception that is noteworthy for its compliments and skepticisms, celebrations and criticisms. In all cases, however, his poems remain opposed to what Lewis quotes J.J. Phillips calling, “the negative, exclusionary paradigm advanced by those who cling with desperate tenacity to the myth of a western European-American monoculture” (Lewis 3).

This opposition to monocultural impositions is potently pronounced in the realms of both culture and politics, and Alexie’s poetry gravitates towards de-pedestalizing illustrious and celebrated icons, authority figures and long-revered mythologies. A poem like ‘Dear Emily Dickinson’ that appears

in a 2012 issue of *The American Poetry Review* furnishes suitable illustration.

*“As you looked out your windows
And wrote your God-hungry poems
(Which were also God-defying),
I wonder, with equal parts love and scorn,
If you knew that Indians (and whites) were dying
In the greasy grass at Little Big Horn.” (Alexie 20)*

Apart from indicting cultural behemoths, Alexie eagerly exposes the foundational myths and the ‘salient’ features of American culture, unsparingly commenting on religion, capitalism and racism and America’s mechanisms of neutralizing violence in public consciousness. In a work like ‘Crow Testament’, featuring a litany of Biblical allusions, Alexie foregrounds the role of religious morality in the othering and persecution of Native Americans.

*“Cain lifts Crow, that heavy black bird
and strikes down Abel.*

*Damn, says Crow, I guess
this is just the beginning.*

[...]

*The white man, disguised
as a falcon, swoops in
and yet again steals a salmon
from Crow's talons.*

*Damn, says Crow, if I could swim
I would have fled this country years ago.*

[...]

*The Crow God as depicted
in all of the reliable Crow bibles
looks exactly like a Crow.*

*Damn, says Crow, this makes it
so much easier to worship myself.” (Alexie 43-44)*

A close reading of these excerpts reveals that Alexie’s profanation of a Biblical myth has many implications. On one hand the “Crow” which arguably stands for the colonialist imposition on Native American identity, weaponized by Cain, representing the white settlers killing his sibling Abel, representing Native American people, exposing an America where these communities are bound in a fratricidal relationship where the excesses remain in a state of continuity. The repeated “Damn, says Crow” anaphorically links the form of the poem to the Psalms in the Bible, replacing the supplication with “Damn”, indicating a tone of discourtesy and irreverence. There are references to the theft of resources from the native populace as well as the foisting of an anthropomorphic religion on them, all conveyed in a flippant manner, trenchantly disrespectful of religious moralities and the role they play in genocidal endeavour.

Alexie’s shattering of a singular myth of America and the injustices perpetrated therein also decries the excesses of capitalism. In a poem like ‘Evolution’, he chronicles not just the plundering of Native American resources by deploying historical figures like the white hunter Buffalo Bill and recreating him as a modern businessman, but also how

colonized lives are itemized, commoditised and then sold to everyone, including the dispossessed themselves.

"[...] Buffalo Bill takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it

all catalogues and filed in a storage room. The Indians

pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last, they pawn

their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin

and when the last Indian has pawned everything

but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks

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."
(Alexie 41-42)

Alexie's works became crucial in representing alternative realities of the American nation against celebratory monocultural myths, articulating the collective trauma of Native Americans and were met with widespread acclaim, awards and recognitions, enabling a proliferation of scholarship around his writing as "full-length studies of Alexie began to seem like plausible projects" (Lewis xi) in mainstream academia. Today, Alexie enjoys the status of celebrated figure, as a novelist, short story writer, poet,

screenwriter and filmmaker¹ and his “impact on the zeitgeist” (Lewis vii) remains significant for nonconformist representations of America.

Representation Trouble: Authenticity, History and A Native American Poet

Yet, Alexie’s wide-ranging and profound criticisms of the American nation, which indict the American establishment and illuminate multiple Americas have elicited strong critiques of their own, including sharp criticisms from Native American scholars. Leon Lewis, quoting Spokane critic Gloria Bird and Sean Kicummah Teuton summarizes the views,

“Bird addresses a fundamental issue for Native critics when she states, “This review questions the assumption that because someone is Indian what they produce is automatically an accurate representation.” A continuing controversy, highlighted by Alexie’s refusal to be restricted to any projection of American Indian reality other than his own, is given expression by the distinguished scholar Sean Kicummah Teuton when he asks, “What right does Alexie have to share with general readers our most painful realities of poverty and social dysfunction?” (Lewis viii)

The debate on authenticity vis-à-vis literary representations has been a prominent one and has found loci in many cultural contexts. M.K. Naik, for instance, attacks British and Anglo-Indian novelists for displaying “insensitivity to cultural nuances” (Naik 84) in something as seemingly basic as naming characters and particularly critiques L.H. Myers, who in his assessment, “employs Akbar's India as his setting but he uses it more to project his own philosophy of life than to

¹“In His Own Literary World, a Native Son Without Borders”, *The New York Times*, 2018.

present an accurate historical picture” (Naik 79-80). However, Alexie is no outsider to his own community by any means, being a Spokane writer, and his case is unarguably more complicated. Criticisms such as the ones posed by the likes of Bird and Teuton have accused Alexie of not just preying upon a “variety of native cultures” (Bird 192) omitting the core concerns of Native American communities, exaggerating “despair without context” (Bird 197) but also painting an unflattering picture of his own people. However, it is worth noting that if Alexie has rebelled against a monocultural America, his poetic effort is also a rejection of all monolithic representations of the Native American communities as well, as he problematizes and refuses to pander to dominant cultural representations from all sides of the American spectrum.

For instance, the Native American community is not painted as pure and blameless, as Alexie examines how whiteness as an ideology and the forces of capitalism permeate the ‘traditions’ of the dispossessed community and makes them enact exploitative manoeuvres. In the poem, “Sonnet, with Slot Machines,” Alexie sheds light on the presence of the practice of gambling on Indian reservations, accomplishing a mingling of capitalism and Indian traditions through an industrial apparatus.

“1. Gambling is traditional. 2. So is the sacrificial murder of mammals, but who is going to start that up again?

[...]

6. So what about Indian casinos? 7. It’s all about economic sovereignty for indigenous peoples! 8. Well sure, but can’t a slot machine ritually murder a gambler’s soul? 9. The Indian woman, defending her tribe’s casino, says “The average

patron only gambles \$42 dollars a night.” (Alexie 32)

The Indian casino is a site for capitalist exploitation and yet, it is perceived as a stairway to economic prosperity by the Indians in the poem, who have been numbed to the excesses of a colonialist-capitalist culture and actively participate in profaning their traditions alongside participating in the larger exclusionary and dehumanizing American capitalist project. Thus, Alexie brings to light, a difficult image of his own people, who have suffered at the hands of white settler colonialism, instead of an image of absolute and compulsory victimhood. In conveying this complexity, Alexie resists the flattening out of Native American identities and the violence ‘authenticity’ might perpetrate. To this end, Gareth Griffiths notes,

“The mythologising of the authentic [. . .] is then in many ways itself a construction which overpowers one of the most powerful weapons within the arsenal of the subaltern subject: that of displacement, disruption, ambivalence, or mimicry, discursive features founded not in the closed and limited construction of a pure authentic sign but in endless and excessive transformation of the subject positions possible within the hybridised. I want to argue that authentic speech, where it is conceived not as a political strategy within a specific political and discursive formation but as a fetishised cultural commodity, may be employed [. . .] to enact a discourse of “liberal violence”, re-enacting its own oppressions on the subjects it purports to represent and defend.” (Griffiths 241)

Furthermore, it is necessary to look at the complexities inherent in the literary representation of an event and claims

to *historical* accuracy before endorsing criticisms of misrepresentation. Hayden White rejects a convenient separation of history and fiction and in his book, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, he argues that the two are inextricably tied. White finds historiography an endeavour of storytelling, where fragmented data is woven into a narrative.

“[N]o given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story elements. The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the plot of a novel or a play. [...] By implication, no singular story of the past can be unravelled through given “elements.” The past is not a transparent realm that can be accessed through history. Like any moment in reality, the past is understood through language and narrative. Acknowledging that history is constituted by and as fiction “in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as [that which provides] a kind of knowledge.” (White 84-85)

On a related note, the project of authentication has several limits of its own. In a much celebrated 2017 poem, ‘Hymn’, written in response to the Charlottesville Protests which took place against the “Unite the Right Rally”, a white supremacist demonstration and the killing of Heather Hayer, one of the

protestors through a vehicle-ramming attack², Alexie decries a culture of hatred brewing in Donald Trump's America and takes a jibe at his familial history. He writes,

"Hey, Trump, I know you weren't loved enough

*By your sandpaper father, who roughed and
roughed*

And roughed the world." (Alexie)

Public records have chronicled the relationship between Donald Trump and his father, Fred Trump. The relationship has been described variously by different sources— as one where Trump labelled his father his "hero", one where no actual communication took place and one marked by austere parenting and one that eventually had shades of rivalry³. Yet, it remains almost impossible to conclusively establish love or the lack of it between Trump and his father, not just owing to the complexity of their relationship but also because of contradictory narratives which have reported it. One can only speculate if there was love in Trump's heroic envisioning of his father, or that there can be none in a white Christian patriarchal household which adhered to strict and conservative moralities. However, Alexie's linking of Trump's exclusionary projects in the aforementioned poems to his personal history of not having experienced love, remains something which cannot be out rightly refuted or validated, but certainly considered, for bringing to light a worthy

² "Hymn: A New Poem by Sherman Alexie", *Early Bird Books*, 2017, "What We Know About James Alex Fields, Driver Charged in Charlottesville Killing", *The New York Times*, 2017.

³ "Making the man: to understand Trump, look at his relationship with his dad", *The Guardian*, 2016, "16 Things You Didn't Know About Donald Trump's Father, Fred", *Town&Country*, 2020, "How Donald Trump's Mother Did—and Didn't—Shape His Life", *Vanity Fair*, 2020

interpretation of the events which unfolded under Donald Trump's regime.

Therefore, Alexie's 'misrepresented' America might arguably be made of images that unsettle all communities, problematizing their own self-images in the wake of constructed binaries; for while he attacks the White American culture, he does not refrain from complicating the representations of his own people, prising open the heterogeneity of American and Native American experience. He also speaks of ideas which are difficult to authenticate but worthy of consideration and allows for a reinterpretation of established factual history in his poems. Jeff Berglund, interestingly makes the case for Alexie's poetic license, responding to criticisms of misrepresentation,

"The exaggeration and blurring of truth in art is a common theme in Alexie's writing [...] For the poet, finding truth in lies and appropriating and modifying others' truths and experiences are not problematic in themselves. [...] What does this have to do with Alexie? It certainly impacts his writing and the expectations placed on him as a Native American author. Different paradigms of interpretation condition the way readers receive his work. Unfortunately, misunderstandings about tribally specific approaches or aesthetic theories linked to nationalism have too often dismissed a popular, defiant, wiseass writer such as Alexie. Rather than analyze Alexie's work in opposition to such thinking, it's worth considering the specific ways his writing demonstrates key elements of a culturally centered approach, which, at its core, is interested in the tension among past, present, and future traditions within a particular framework. Alexie's writing focuses attention on the

heterogeneous nature of tribal life and the reinterpretations of traditions that are accompanied by vital intracultural debates (i.e., sovereignty, tradition, nationalism, and so forth).” (Berglund 310, 317)

Alexie’s America(s): Weaving Communities with Contradictions and Solidarities

Alexie’s representation of America does not adhere to any restrictive concerns of authenticity, as he conveys complexities about the American cultural milieu where experiences are not reduced to dominant pre-packaged notions. Alexie’s America is an America of contradictions, where no community is exalted and it is also an America of solidarities, an envisioning of the nation-state that is not predominantly celebratory like Walt Whitman’s America, nor is it divisive on identitarian premises. Even in a poem like ‘Crow Testament’, where the excesses of the white population on Native American communities is most commonly noted, it is necessary to discern that the two groups are still imagined as brothers, notwithstanding the heavily unequal nature of their relationship.

In fact, Alexie takes many more liberties to represent the interlink between the communities which make up America and imagine a solidarity of survivors and a better order. As Carrie Etter remarks, keeping in mind a poem where both Jews and Indians are referred to by Alexie as “survivors and children and grandchildren of survivors” (Alexie 49),

“The Game Between the Jews and the Indians Is Tied Going into the Bottom of the Ninth Inning” demonstrates this cultural dialogic most effectively. Alexie recognizes a similarity between the Jews and Indians—a history of suffering and injustice intertwined with a history of survival.

The cultural contact is not between two hierarchically divided groups but between two groups engaged in a similar struggle for cultural survival. The very act of this imagined game—tied at the bottom of the ninth—goes beyond the memories of suffering to create a reminder of their joint survival, offering action (the reminding) in place of passive observation.” (Etter 166)

While this forging of a community of the oppressed might seem benign or problematic from different critical perspectives, such juxtapositions also reveal the dilemma that Alexie faces vis-à-vis the uncertainties of identity. After all, why does the Native American experience have to be compared to other grim events in human history? To this end, he states in a conversation with Ase Nygren,

“I think the strongest parallel in my mind has always been the Jewish people and the Holocaust. Certainly, their oppression has been constant for 1,900 years longer, but the fact is that you cannot separate our identity from our pain. At some point it becomes primarily our identity. The whole idea of authenticity—”How Indian are you?”—is the most direct result of the fact that we don’t know what an American Indian identity is. There is no measure anymore. There is no way of knowing, except perhaps through our pain. And so, we’re lost. We’re always wandering.” (Nygren 282)

This tension is never conclusively resolved in Alexie’s writing. Even as he articulates rage against white settler colonialism, the Native American self is not singular, not pure and not static. To represent without claiming an authorial or proprietorial authority on the Native American identity, while being a Native American is a contradiction that Alexie embraces, and opens up new possibilities for looking at American lives outside simplified binarisms and hierarchies. Lived experience or the Native American body is not the only site for theorising or imagining for Alexie, for he looks at a

particular life in relation to other lives and larger political and historical factors which unite or divide them.

The White people are united with the Native American populace in terms of how whiteness permeates communities across America and participation in capitalism, with the Jews in terms of suffering on account of the sharing of genocidal histories. Yet, these people are not all the same in Alexie's poetry. Differences are articulated, alongside the uneven power dynamics and the excesses of colonialism are not spared. Alexie's effort, however, is to draw connections, to shatter unitary and stereotypical constructions of identities and demonstrate how they are, or *might be* related to one another.

This inter-relating is what reconciles a monolithic image of America with the multiple Americas that Alexie brings to light, putting them together in what might be termed as 'America(s)', a unity of contradictions, where differences and divisions abound and yet, communities can be related. This is a precursor to forging solidarities, as Alexie, in the aforementioned poem, 'Hymn', writes against a regime of hatred, noting how he would continue to feel his anger and yet, will embrace the unfamiliar and the other to fight against political segregation,

"I will sing for people who might not sing for me.

I will sing for people who are not my family.

I will sing honor songs for the unfamiliar and new.

I will visit a different church and pray in a different pew.

I will silently sit and carefully listen to new stories

About other people's tragedies and glories.

I will not assume my pain and joy are better.

I will not claim my people invented gravity or weather.

And, oh, I know I will still feel my rage and rage and rage

But I won't act like I'm the only person onstage.

I am one more citizen marching against hatred.

Alone, we are defenseless. Collected, we are sacred.

We will march by the millions. We will tremble and grieve.

We will praise and weep and laugh. We will believe.

We will be courageous with our love. We will risk danger

As we sing and sing and sing to welcome strangers. (Alexie)

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