

The Perfect Colonizer: Understanding Alcoholism and its Treatments in Native America through Humanistic Inquiry

Kevin P. McPherson^a and Peter Wakefield^a

According to the Indian Health Services, the rate of alcoholism among Native Americans is six times higher than the U.S. average, while one in every ten Native American deaths are a result of some alcohol related cause. Even before colonization, alcohol and its consumption were depicted in many trading exchanges between early settlers and Native Americans. In present day, alcohol has presented itself as a problem to Native Americans: commonly known by many as the “perfect colonizer” one which “has no conscience [and] shows no remorse for the modern-day holocaust for which it has caused.” The current study seeks to answer the following questions: with Native Americans being intimately tied to alcohol via history, stigma, and disease prevalence, why do Native Americans hold the belief that alcohol is the “perfect colonizer”? And, on the auxiliary, why are modern treatments (e.g., AA’s 12 Step Process) ineffective in treating alcoholism in Native populations? Through various modes of humanistic inquiry, probing philosophy, film, and modern-day intervention techniques, we have found that the model to understanding alcoholism is illustrated via a three-column system, holding up the definition of alcoholism as the “perfect colonizer.”

Keywords: Native Americans; Alcohol; Alcoholism; Sherman Alexie; Colonization

Introduction: A Brief History of Alcohol Pre-Contact

Prior to the 16th and 17th centuries, alcohol and the consumption of fermented beverages were primarily confined to the Native American groups of the southwestern United States (Abbott, 1). The group considered the most influential in alcohol’s presence in this geographic region was the Mayans, who produced a wine made from honey and harvested balche bark. The Mayan’s use of “balche” is thought to have influenced the Aztec, who concocted the mild wine drink “puique,” using the sap of the *Agave americana* (Waddell & Everett, 453).

The Aztecs use of puique or “ochtl” was protected by detailed ceremonial processes and social rules, mostly due to the belief in its origin. Puique was thought to have supernatural origins, originally given to the Aztecs by the deities that looked over them. Therefore, this wine was sacred and never used in secular or social settings. In addition, because all Aztec ceremonies were heavily supervised, drunkenness was seen as a serious crime unless it was ordered for during ceremonial practices (Abbott, 2). The principles and the complex, described by Abbott (3-4) as the “alcohol-intoxication-agricultural ritual complex,” permeated as far north as the Pima/Papago and Apache tribes of present-day Arizona. Records of Native Americans in other parts of the country taking part in this type of alcohol making, one driven by agricultural or ceremonial processes, are few and far between, indicating no widespread practice. (Abbott, 3, 5-7).

It wasn’t until contact with white colonizers that Native Americans encountered distilled beverages in large quantities (Beauvais, 253). Early traders traversing the lands in during the 1700s and 1800s started to garner demand for alcohol by using it as a trading commodity for land, resources, and sexual favors (Beauvais, 253). Since the spread of white colonizers happened fairly rapidly and with variable

circumstances of contact, it is thought that Native Americans had little time to develop social, legal, or moral guidelines on how to treat alcohol. In fact, many Native Americans who encountered alcohol provided by early Europeans responded with “remarkable restraint while in their cups” (Coyhis & White, 160). As a result, Native Americans learned from these early traders and pioneers how alcohol “should” be consumed: in large quantities with the goal of wild, often violent, intoxication. Records have also appeared depicting traders and colonial citizens using free alcohol to provide an advantage in trade negotiations (Beauvais, 253). By the time Lewis and Clark set out on their expedition, most Native Americans they came in contact with had prior contact with the European version of alcohol (Abbott, 7).

Methods of Inquiry & Proposed Direction of Thesis

Surveying the spread of alcohol throughout the United States from the viewpoint outlined in Section II gives us interesting insights on alcohol, both its enjoyment and consumption, by early Native Americans. From historical accounts and circumstances, one could make the argument that not only was alcohol an *acquired taste* but the enjoyment of its consequences are a *learned trait*. Even more shocking is the use of alcohol by early settlers to gain advantages over these indigenous people.

Here, alcohol takes on an insidious form – being used as an agent of manipulation. Early Europeans mirror Albert Memmi’s definition of the colonizer, described in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* as they “[realize] that [profit] is so great only because it is wrested from others” (Memmi, 346). Thus, by Memmi’s definition, alcohol is the colonizer’s right-hand man, so to speak. Alcohol makes it possible to reap the benefits, and alcohol acts as a catalyzer to do so. However, unlike Memmi’s colonizer, alcohol does not

“discover the existence of [itself] as [it] discovers [its] own privilege” (Memmi, 346). Alcohol is effectively free of Memmi’s colonizer definition at this point. It cannot recognize, reflect, or react like its human counterpart. It becomes an object of inhumanity.

The inhumane nature of alcohol appears to be a widespread belief of Native Americans. Native Americans, from Lakota (Thin Elk, 55) to Mohican (Coyhis & White, 160), are keen to the spread of alcohol throughout the American continent, and the Europeans direct responsibility for such a contagious spread. Particularly interesting was the description I encountered while exploring the blogosphere. The National Relief Charities (NRC), a Native American-run non-profit organization whose mission is to “reduce immediate need on the reservations,” (NRC Website “The NRC Way”) describes alcohol as the “perfect colonizer [...] [it] has no conscience. It feels no remorse or regret for the modern holocaust it has caused” (Bentley, “Alcohol: It’s Different for Native Americans). The blog post’s title (“Alcohol: It’s Different for Native Americans”) asserts itself as a singular voice for Native Americans who deal with alcoholism. If different tribes converge on the similar idea that alcohol was only ubiquitous until after contact with European settlers, then how did the NRC (and the groups it represents) come about this definition?

As I focus in on interdisciplinary inquiry, I will encounter many questions surrounding the Native American belief of alcohol being the “perfect colonizer.” As I approach this definition, I will answer the following questions: what principles do Native Americans follow to be in line with Native American culture? How does being a Native American effect how Native Americans deal with contemporary issues? With what means do Native Americans convey the issues of alcoholism and seek help for it? Are there unique ways in which Native Americans solve such problems of addiction that reveal new insights into what it means to be Native American? Are new insights revealed about alcohol as it is defined as the “perfect colonizer”?

By answering these questions from the research that follows, I have found that the definition of alcohol as the “perfect colonizer” is upheld by many sources of cultural consequence, including the philosophies of Viola Cordova (Jicarilla Apache), the stories of Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene), and the healing practices of Gene Thin Elk (Lakota). Using Alexie’s stories as a springboard, it is clear that alcohol is not only the “perfect colonizer” but an agent of isolation amongst Native American people, taking them away from their communities and families and ultimately away from the most important unit of well-being in their lives. Alcohol’s identity as an agent of isolation underlies how it is understood by Native Americans and how alcoholism is treated in Native American communities. In summary, we can model the identity of alcohol as the “perfect colonizer” in a three column model defined by the philosopher (Cordova), the artist (Alexie), and the interventionist (Thin Elk) to elucidate a spatial and temporal definition of alcohol in Native American societies.

Results

Defining the Past: the Philosophies of V.F. Cordova

Before her death in 2002, Viola Faye (V.F.) Cordova (Jicarilla Apache) sought to establish a philosophy for all Native Americans. In her philosophies, she hoped to establish what it means to be Native American by “[looking] at Native American knowledge systems and languages across the country, encompassing a history of continent-wide pain and the effects of European colonization [...] and bringing to words how all our Native systems derive from the heart of place.” Cordova emphasizes that colonialism has not impinged on the Native American philosophies that she has summarized, and that, “Even when we have been sent away from that place and not learned our own languages, we still have it.” (Cordova, *viv*). In this way, Cordova describes Native American philosophy as something distinct and unique from other philosophies of Western culture. In her book *How It Is*, Cordova summarizes a Native American philosophy by answering three ordering questions: “(1) What is the world? (2) What is a human being? (3) What is the role of a human being in the world?” (Cordova, xv).

Cordova’s establishment of a pan-tribal Native American philosophy seeks to explain a specific way of living for Native American people. By answering questions (2) and (3) particularly, we can come to specific conclusions about how Native Americans view their place in the world. Throughout her seminal work *How It Is*, Cordova describes her perceptions of a basic Western creation myth. She states that of the creation myths she has studied, she notices one salient theme: almost all humans are created from an extraterrestrial god out of “dumb matter from an inanimate planet” (Cordova, 145). This is highly distinct from creation myths of many Native Americans: “In a Native American worldview, there is no divinity that exists outside the universe – primarily, because there is no ‘outside.’ Whatever *is*, is an indivisible, infinite, and divine *something*. All things are perceived as either *participating* in this one thing or being *manifestations* of the one thing.” (Cordova, 146). Cordova goes on to explain that “individuals are not created, except as ‘first man’ or ‘first woman,’ but they are, in their inception, a group, a people” (146). Therefore, Cordova postulates, it is important to understand that the Native American human is a part of whole that is greater than the individual. Here, the individual is deemphasized for the sake of the larger purpose and whole. The Native American human is not apart from the rocks, trees, water, and mountains, but a natural part of it. This is a connective philosophy that binds the Native American to be a “herd being,” as Cordova calls it (151).

Cordova expands on the idea that Native American society is not individualistic like that of the surrounding United States. People in Native America do not assume an individual role and are not granted respect because they are individuals with unique talents and skills; rather, the Native American is granted respect out of participating in the process of being. Finally, there is no sense of causation, there only *is* something (Cordova, 146).

All of these elements are present when we examine creation myths. The Creek creation story is one that comes to mind. Although these myths seem like children’s stories, the Creek take them very seriously, often not referring to them as not myths but truths. The acceptance of these creation stories

as truth mandates that a Native American act and operate in a specific way with the world (McCombs-Maxey).

As Creek minister and language teacher Rosemary McCombs Maxey comments on the creation story, she mentions that in no way do the Creek people fear any sort of being outside of themselves (because, remember, there is no being outside of them). They merely “praise the things that help them,” (McCombs-Maxey). For instance, in the case of their creation, the Master of Breath is not above them but is in cooperation with the Muscogee to blow away the fog on their journey (“How the Clans Came to Be”). The Creek people are also cognizant, by nature of their creation and commandment by the Master of Breath, not to be a detriment to the animals for whom their clans are named after.

In addition, the Creek, within their myths, emphasize a balance in being with the earth and establishing brother- and sisterhood, all the while in harmony with all the elements that make up their physical and natural environments. They do not wish to disturb things unnecessarily (McCombs-Maxey). In reality, they operate in the same manner: for instance, Rosemary, who is also a farmer in her free time, often mentions that she seeks not to disrupt things as they are. If there is a tree within her farm that seems to be “in the way” she decides to grow her vegetables around it, rather than cut it down (McCombs-Maxey).

Rosemary’s commentary on the Creek creation myth illuminates another important factor of Cordova’s philosophies, specifically answering the question “what is the role of a Native American?” If the Native American assumes this oneness with the earth, the sky, and all the flora and fauna in the universe, then how does the Native American have any detriments or accentuations to his/her being? This appears to be a valid question; however, Cordova argues that although each human being is a divine manifestation of the greater being, they can be negatively or positively affected by that same being, no matter what object it assumes (146). For instance, “Navajo feel that wind is symbolic of [of being]; what we perceive as ‘things’ come into existence through some sort of specific wind; a vortex of some kind becomes a ‘thing’ that exists for a time [...] some manifestations of this wind [may be] harmful to humans, but not intentionally so.” (Cordova, 146). If we consider alcohol in this context, the barley and distilled plant materials may be detrimental to humans when consumed, but may not be intentionally so. It is only until we examine the purpose of human beings that we uncover the true perception of alcohol.

Towards the end of *How It Is*, Cordova examines a particular instinct that Native Americans believe human beings have. This “instinct” that Cordova describes is one that “draws them to others” (Cordova, 183). Cordova expands on the instinct, saying that it is “the basis for cooperative behavior” (Cordova, 183) and that “cooperative behavior is ‘right’ and ‘normal’” (Cordova, 184). Furthermore, Cordova says that naturally humans within the Native American worldview want to maintain membership within the group, so they naturally act in an ethical manner (Cordova, 183-4). Cordova closes with mentioning that the individual is dependent on the group for survival, as much as the group is dependent on the individual’s cooperation for survival (183).

If we examine the history of alcohol with Native Americans in light of this philosophy, we can see that Native Americans view alcohol as anything but a natural, non-

intentional poison. As described in Section II, alcohol of the European variety came to the Americas and was used to gain advantage over Native Americans in trade situations (Beauvais, 253). Zooming out, and relying on the assumption that Native Americans know modern statistics surrounding alcoholism, contemporary Native Americans recognize the widespread damage alcohol has caused. It then becomes clear that alcohol has been and was used in an unethical manner by Europeans, violating the natural instinct Native Americans believe humans have. Alcohol, again being a partner to European manipulation, wields a power so destructive that its effects have echoed over many hundreds of years since its introduction. By consequence, alcohol has killed off many Native Americans, destroying individuals of larger tribes, and destroying the well-being of the individual, halting the cooperation of the individual within the tribe. Therefore, alcohol acts as an inhibitory object, isolating the individual (by death, disease, etc.) before the individual can fulfil his/her natural instincts.

Dealing with the Present: the Stories of Sherman Alexie

Alexie Sherman (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene) would describe himself as anything other than the typical Native American (Alexie & Peterson, 18). He attended an all-white high school and ended up going to Gonzaga University (and later Washington State) on academic scholarship (Alexie & Peterson, 18). However, as Alexie drifted through academia, he found discomfort in not knowing what plan his life would take on. He struggled with alcoholism, sometimes drinking as much as a fifth of tequila and a twelve-pack of beer in one sitting (Alexie & Peterson, 18-19). During his bouts with alcoholism, he wrote two of his most famous novels, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *The Business of Fancydancing*. Subsequent books would later go on to win prestigious awards like the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature (2007 National Book Award Winners & Finalists). As in *Lone Ranger and Tonto* (and its screenplay *Smoke Signals*), Alexie is known for depicting alcoholism on the reservation as he sees it: a real thing, not a stereotype meaninglessly attached to Native Americans’ personas (Alexie & Peterson, 189). Alexie also grew up with an alcoholic father, often times leaving Alexie for months on end. Therefore, Alexie’s work provides an autobiographical treasure trove of evidence to analyze how alcohol and alcoholism are perceived in contemporary Native American society.

In Alexie’s screenplay *Smoke Signals*, the audience encounters a young man named Victor Joseph. Victor and his meek friend Thomas embark on a journey to see Arnold Joseph, Victor’s alcoholic father. Prior to Victor’s journey, the audience is given a significant background story about Arnold. Arnold saves baby Thomas from his burning house during a 4th of July celebration by catching baby Thomas as he falls from the window. The families reflect on the horrific fire that consumed Thomas’s mother and father, and Thomas’s character always remembers Arnold for saving him from the fire.

After the fire, however, Arnold cuts his long brown hair, and he is seen sitting in his truck with his new hair-do, guzzling down multiple bottles of beer. This scene is significant in that the cutting of Native American hair is seen as a religious act, only to be cut when family members die

(Bentley, "Why Do Indians Have Long Hair?"). Although it is not known whether Thomas's and Victor's families were related, Arnold's choice to cut his hair and his simultaneous chugging of alcohol appear, at that point in the movie, to be the display of a new Arnold: one who is not *truly* Native American, for *that* is the character that died the night he saved Thomas. Arnold is now separated from the tribe not only in sheer appearance, but in remorse and guilt for starting the fire which was caused by his drunken use of fireworks.

Throughout the movie, Victor and Thomas remember Arnold very differently. Victor remembers his father as a monster created by alcohol. Thomas remembers Arnold as a hero and a nice person. On their journey to Phoenix, Thomas is constantly telling stories about Arnold, bringing up the one clear memory of Arnold taking him to Denny's. Here appear two different portraits of a father: one (Thomas's view) where Arnold is gentle and kind, not tied to alcohol in any way; the other (Victor's view), where Arnold is inseparable from alcohol, and is seen as cold and unloving. From an abstract viewpoint, it can be argued that Arnold embodies Memmi's "colonized", where "the mythical portrait of the colonized includes an unbelievable laziness" (Memmi, 1129). Arnold's inability to heed his responsibilities as a father to Victor is a direct cause of his relationship with alcohol; alcohol has taken the place of Victor as the thing he cares for most and has made him lazy in his attention to Victor.

Victor remembers his father as this destructive alcoholic parent; Arnold leaves Victor and his mother for permanent residence in Phoenix. Victor is forced to grow up *isolated* from his father, with no role model during his teenage years. Isolation and separation take on new meaning, building up to Arnold's departure when Arlene (Victor's mother) gets in an explosive argument with Arnold about not financing his alcoholism. As Victor peers out the doorway, down the road where his father just left, Arlene says, "Yeah, your daddy's magic, isn't he? He sawed us into pieces, didn't he? I feel like my head's in the kitchen and my belly's in the bathroom [...] You feel like that too, don't cha?" As Victor nods, we can truly see Cordova's philosophies of interconnectedness and group dependency come to life. Both Victor and Arlene feel as though they are not physically whole with Victor's father gone, but even more so, they are an *incomplete* family unit. This trauma compounds in Victor almost immediately, as Victor beats up Thomas for asking why Victor's father left. Alcoholism in this scene is the impetus for the broken family, and also spills out into the making of a tense bond between Victor and Thomas (an intra-tribal group connection).

Smoke Signals is not the only story Alexie has written that portrays alcoholism as a great divider and substance that mutates Native American characters. In his 2007 novel *Flight*, his character Zits is able to embody different people in Seattle by using a technique known as the Ghost Dance. One of the people Zits embodies is his own father, a street drunk in the city of Tacoma, whom Zits hasn't seen in years. As Zits shambles through the alleyways, he encounters a white couple trying to help him. Zits recognizes that his character has hesitance to accept their help, and instead wants to yell "fuck you" and other profanities their way (Alexie, *Flight*, 1474). Zits reflects on the internal struggle he faces, taking on his father's persona as he yells at the couple: "White people did this to Indians. You make us like this." I don't even know if I believe that. But I think this homeless body believes it. I think

this fifty-year-old guy wants to blame somebody for his pain and hunger" (Alexie, *Flight*, 1474). Again the reader encounters isolation due to alcohol: not only is Zits not able to see his father for years, but he is unable to comprehend his father's own emotions because he is so detached from the situation (not being an alcoholic himself). Zits is stripped of his empathetic interconnectedness with his father because he has been separated from him for so long.

We also see that again, responsibility is stripped from the alcoholic Native American. Who to blame clouds Zits's father's actions, rather than being preoccupied about how to overcome his current situation, as he vomits mass amounts blood in that alleyway. Taken with Arnold Joseph's escape from his family, the reader can recognize that both Zits and Arnold spend an exorbitant amount of time in a mental and physical hell, distracted by the mess alcohol has caused. Surely, these characters can sympathize with recovering alcoholic of Alexie's *The Alcoholic Love Poems* when he scribes, "all my life in the past tense" (Alexie, *First Indian on the Moon*, 37). It can be argued that the characters' preoccupations with alcohol and blame often consume both Arnold and Zits' father to the level of obsession, and colors Alexie's characters as the perfectly *colonized*.

Healing for the Future: the Methods of Gene Thin Elk

Moving toward the future, Native Americans who deal with alcoholism obviously seek treatment for their addiction, and they do it in a variety of ways (Coyhis & White, 1927). In reflecting about their variegated modalities, the question then becomes "which treatment method is most effective for Native Americans?" On the NRC's comment section to their blog post "Alcohol: It's Different for Native Americans," the moderator to the sight commented "[...] Native Americans seem to prefer or excel in other modes of treatment that incorporate Native American traditions and spirituality" (Bentley, "Alcohol: It's Different for Native Americans"). The moderator goes on to cite that although common methods such as Alcohol Anonymous's 12-Step Program work OK, but they are usually supplemented or supplanted by alternative methods like a program called *the Red Road to Recovery*. Curious about what the *Red Road* incorporates, I sought out more information about the Native American recovery process.

In 1987, Newsweek published their feature "100 New American Heroes." Among those names was Gene Thin Elk (Lakota), revered for his work developing alcoholism treatment programs for Native Americans. In Thin Elk's *Red Road to Recovery*, Thin Elk emphasizes a return to traditional values (Thin Elk, 55). When asked about what it means for children and families to experience alcoholism, Mr. Thin Elk stated that such an environment was one that was "unnatural" (Thin Elk, 54). Thin Elk says that by growing up in an alcoholic's household, "Children [...] are neither acculturated to the dominant society nor enculturated in tribal ways" (55). Thus, in many ways, they are set adrift without identity, which leaves them vulnerable to alcohol's lure. This characterizes alcohol in such a way that it is seen as a monster outside of Native American *natural* existence, which harkens back to violation Cordova's philosophies. Alcohol, in this light, can be argued to be an object of mystery or object of fear and undesired control (née oppression).

Thin Elk reports that the *Red Road* gathers its strength from tackling intergenerational trauma from alcoholism of a parent that could manifest in alcoholism of the children in the family. *The Red Road to Recovery* is a “. . . holistic approach to mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional wellness based on Native American healing concepts and traditions, having prayer as the basis of all healing” (Coyhis & White, 1934). As a consequence, prayer and other activities usually happen in groups, family, or smaller tribal units (Coyhis & White, 1934-35). Thin Elk asserts that *Red Road's* holistic approach is unique and that other approaches are one dimensional in nature (Thin Elk, 54).

Perhaps this is the basis for why these one dimensional approaches do not work quite as well for Native Americans as other people. For instance, the 12-Step Program's unidimensionality most likely comes from its emphasis on individualistic tendencies and other tenets that violate Native American beliefs (see Section IV). The values a 12-Step program emphasizes is admission to *self*, submission to a higher being, and taking personal inventory of one owns will, among other things, to fight addiction (Alcoholics Anonymous, Chapter 5: How It Works, 59). Instead, *the Red Road to Recovery* emphasizes *belonging* of the addict to a caring circle of relative, *generosity* towards the addict, and *responsibility* to the impact of others (Thin Elk, 57). We can see that in effective Native American treatments such as *Red Road*, the emphasis is placed more on acceptance of the addict back into the group as soon as possible rather than further mental and/or physical isolation of the addict until the addict is healed. The 12-Step Program does much of the latter, leaving the participant with only a single mentor, but never mentioning time for group therapies or activities (Alcoholics Anonymous, Chapter 5: How It Works, 58).

Ironically, Sherman Alexie's art also satirizes the effectiveness of 12-Step Programs in his short story “A Twelve-Step Treatment Program.” In the story, Alexie tells the tale of a recovering addict who is “on the wagon” to recovery. The structure of the story is broken down into 12 sections: *Communicate Educate, Instill Self-Esteem, Give Love and Time, Teach Values, Talk About Drugs, Discipline, Establish Rules, Stop the Enabling, Motivate, Seek Help, and Help Others*. In each section, Alexie outlines the intergenerational problems that cause Native American characters to drink – from brothers calling up each other to haul kegs to friends sharing stories over drinks. Alcohol is inevitable because it is all around. There are scenes at the bar where son, father, and grandfather enjoy drinks in the bar together (Alexie, *First Indian on the Moon*, 35). There are also scenes where Native American characters are told to individualize themselves and “discard [their] cultural baggage and concentrate on the future” (Alexie, *First Indian on the Moon*, 33), only to return to drinking and forget about their college education. Alexie's prose metaphorically laughs at the 12-Step Program in this sense, pointing a figure to his non-Native audience and proclaiming, “can't you see that escaping alcohol isn't that easy?”

Just as the character in Alexie's short story writes “maybe all of us Indians don't drink so much because we're Indian. Maybe we drink so much because all of you are so white,” (Alexie, *First Indian on the Moon*, 33) Alexie's short story has an air of historical consequence. This sentence seems to hold a specific value: that drinking is *not* a natural

Native American trait, but rather a problem inherited long ago and perpetuated by the trauma alcoholism has unleashed via its introduction by colonizers. Alexie's story concludes with a somber “and [I] go out to change my life,” (Alexie, *First Indian on the Moon*, 35) as the once-recovering alcoholic can feel himself slipping into the cycle of alcoholism again.

Discussion and Concluding Analysis

Understanding alcohol as the “perfect colonizer” involves a rigorous examination of literatures from past, present, and future. Surveying each is an effective way of understanding alcohol and alcoholism in Native American societies.

Through Viola Cordova's philosophies, one is able to make the case that alcohol violates the natural state of being and well-being of the Native American population, due mostly to the nature by which it was introduced to Native Americans after contact with white colonizers. Alcoholism violates many of the philosophies and inherent instincts Native Americans have and believe in. To be Native American, is to be a “herd being” (Cordova, 151), committed to the well-being of the group. Alcoholics, then, represent metaphoric holes cut from the fabric of the group.

As these holes “drop away” from the fabric, Sherman Alexie picks them up and describes their situation in the present. Alexie's novels, screenplays, and short stories often depict families separated and isolated by alcohol. Alcohol then becomes the agent of isolation for many interconnected units in the family and tribe of the present-day. Alexie's characters depict a certain trauma and obsession with the past (i.e., the consequences of their alcoholism) that seem inescapable. In such a way, Sherman Alexie conveys his Native American characters as being *perfectly colonized* by alcohol and its oppressive presence. Therefore, Alexie is merely a messenger of this definition of alcohol being the “perfect colonizer”, and he is responsible for transmitting it to generations of Native Americans.

As Alexie scribes his message, Gene Thin Elk tries to mend the fabric that is lost. Through unique techniques of returning to cultural values, Thin Elk provides services for these future generations of Native Americans who are cognizant of alcohol's harmful effects. Thin Elk emphasizes the inclusion and return to a “group mentality”, woven together by the acceptance and generosity of the people who make up the familial or tribal unit. By undertaking Thin Elk's methods, Native Americans turn back to their roots of the past, before contact with white colonizers, to the inherent values they hold tightly.

Thus, a cycle is complete. Alcohol as the “perfect colonizer” is upheld by each of these figures in their own unique way. The philosophies of Native Americans uphold a past way of being, revered and honored in the teachings and ways of Native Americans; while alcoholics represent a divergence from such teachings. The stories of contemporary Native Americans dealing with alcoholism are transmitted by Alexie, who emphasizes isolation via alcohol, a lack of interconnectivity between Native American people, and an obsession with remorse and guilt. Finally, the methods of Thin Elk heal the alcoholics and restore the fullness of Native American being, all the while reminding those in the throes of alcoholism of the philosophies of their ancestors. This model

can be best synthesized in three individual columns: *the philosopher, the artist, and the interventionist*.

Alcohol as the “Perfect Colonizer”: A Three Column Model

The cultural model chosen to describe my findings mimics the famous Greek Parthenon, supported by three different columns that uphold the idea of alcohol as the “perfect colonizer.” Please see the Appendix (Section X) for a complete graphic. If we assume that each pillar represents oneness (past), brokenness (present), and return to oneness (future), then we can point to alcohol as not only the perfect colonizer, but an agent of isolation in the community. This trait underlies its definition, identification and treatment. The pillars are as follows: The Philosopher (past): responsible for setting about an American Indian-centric philosophy that describes the natural way of life. *My model: Cordova (Jicarilla Apache), McCombs Maxey (Creek-Muscogee)*. The Artist (present): responsible for translating new philosophies and ideas, as well as issues/diseases/disorders within the community through the medium of visual or literary arts. *My model: Sherman Alexie, prominent Native American (Spokane, Coeur d’Alene) author*. The Interventionist (future): responsible for transmitting beliefs to those dealing with alcoholism; responsible for healing the community through rebuilding bonds broken. *My model: Gene Thin Elk (Lakota), creator of Red Road to Recovery*.

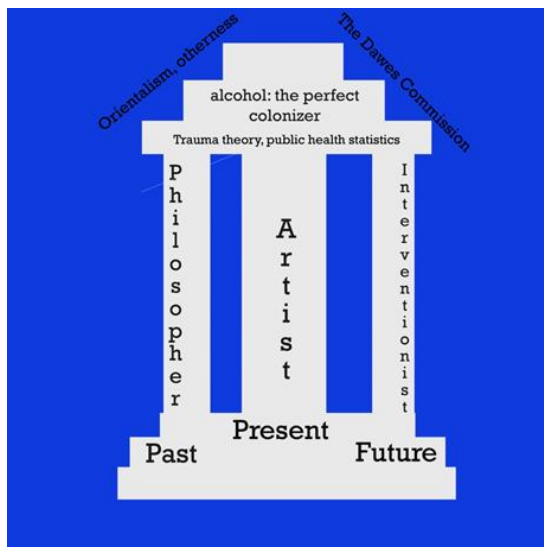


Figure 1: A proposed three column model to understand how alcohol is viewed as the “perfect colonizer” in Native American societies.

There are three columns that uphold the definition of the “perfect colonizer”: the philosopher, the artist, and the interventionist. The Artist is placed in the middle because it is most responsible for transmitting the definition, as it is understood, to future generations. The words that surround alcohol’s definition at the top all have some sort of influence on the definition. In my essay, I emphasized otherness and colonizer/colonized as defined by Memmi, but the public health statistics, some trauma theory and other elements show up in my paper (they are not explicitly discussed).

References

“2007 National Book Awards Winners and Finalists, The National Book Foundation.” *2007 National Book Awards Winners and Finalists, The National Book Foundation*. National Book Foundation, n.d. Web. 18 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2007.html>>.

Abbott, Patrick. “American Indian and Alaska Native Aboriginal Use of Alcohol in the United States.” *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research* 7.2 (1996): 1-13. Print.

Alexie, Sherman, and Nancy J. Peterson. *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2009. Print.

Alexie, Sherman. *First Indian on the Moon*. Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose, 1993. Print.

Alexie, Sherman. *Flight: A Novel*. New York: Black Cat, 2007. Kindle.

Beauvais, Fred. “American Indians and Alcohol.” *Spotlight on Special Populations* 22.4 (1998): 253-59. Print.

Bentley, Andrew. “Alcohol: It’s Different for Native Americans.” *National Relief Charities Blog*. National Relief Charities (NRC), 30 July 2013. Web. 18 Dec. 2013.

Bentley, Andrew. “You Wanted to Know: Why Do Indians Have Long Hair?” *Native American Indian Blog by National Relief Charities*. National Relief Charities, 25 Sept. 2012. Web. 18 Dec. 2013.

“Chapter 5: How It Works.” *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976. 58-71. Print.

Cordova, V. F., and Kathleen Dean Moore. *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova*. Tucson: University of Arizona, 2007. Print.

Coyhis, Don, and Richard Simonelli. “The Native American Healing Experience.” *Substance Use & Misuse* 43.12 (2008): 1927-949. Print.

Coyhis, Don, and White William. “Alcohol Problems in Native America: Changing Paradigms and Clinical Practices.” *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 20.4 (2002): 157-66. Print.

“How The Clans Came to Be.” *Creek Indian Legends*. Web. 16 Dec. 2013.

“How We Work.” *National Relief Charities*. Web. 18 Dec. 2013.

Eisen, Arri, and Peter Wakefield. “Science and the Nature of Evidence: Truth, Mind, & Body - Syllabus.” Rpt. in *Blackboard Learn*. Atlanta: Emory University, 1-5. Print.

McCombs Maxey, Rosemary. “Commentary on Creek Creation Story.” E-mail interview. 11 Nov. 2013.

Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. New York: Orion, 1965. Kindle.

Smoke Signals. By Sherman Alexie. Prod. Sherman Alexie. Dir. Chris Eyre. Perf. Adam Beach, Evan Adams, Irene Bedard. Miramax Films, 1998. DVD.

Thin Elk, Gene. “Walking in Balance on the Red Road.” *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 2.3 (1993): 54-59. Print.

Waddell, J.O., and M.W. Everett. “Drinking Behavior among the Southwestern Indians. Jack O. Waddell, Michael W. Everett.” *American Anthropologist* 85.2 (1983): 453-54. Print.