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Sherman Alexie

CONTENTS

Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie

John Purdy 1

White Shadows: The Use of Doppelgangers in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

Karen Jorgensen 19

Sherman Alexie's Polemical Stories

Ron McFarland 27

Magic and Memory in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

Janine Richardson 39

Muting White Noise: The Subversion of Popular Culture Narratives of Conquest in Sherman Alexie's Fiction

James Cox 52

Rock and Roll, Redskins, and Blues in Sherman Alexie's Work

P. Jane Hafen 71

FORUM

Calls for Submissions 79

REVIEWS

***From the Glittering World: A Navajo Story.* Irvin Morris**

Susan Brill 80

<i>The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year.</i>	Louise Erdrich	
Susan Castillo		89
<i>Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition.</i>	Kimberly M. Blaeser	
Craig Womack		97
<i>CONTRIBUTORS</i>		101

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Crossroads:

A Conversation with Sherman Alexie

John Purdy

This conversation took place on 4 October 1997, a rainy, early autumn morning in an east Seattle café near Sherman Alexie's home. It is an interesting neighborhood, for it sits on a clearly demarcated boundary: on one side, the intercity struggle for survival—economic and otherwise—and on the other the affluent mansions lining Lake Washington. The café sits directly on the line.

My colleague and former student, Frederick Pope, went with me to talk with Alexie, who is in much demand; in fact, that evening he was scheduled to read at Left Bank Books, for a benefit to provide books for Native American inmates of this country's prisons. As always, it was an interesting and dynamic discussion and, on our trip home, Fred and I agreed; it was candid, wide ranging, profoundly playful.

We began with a discussion of his recently completed movie. As with his writing career, his film involvement seems to be progressing rapidly. Two weeks after our meeting, the film was screened at Sundance for the annual film competition, and later for the major film distributors of the country. There can be no doubt that Sherman Alexie is wonderfully full of ideas, and that those ideas will work their way into art that will be both imaginative and engaging.¹

John Purdy: I understand the filming of the movie went well?

Sherman Alexie: We're premiering, screening at Sundance October fifteenth. We'll know shortly after that if we're in [the final competition] or not.

JP: Fantastic. . . .

SA: We developed it there, so . . . we're in, but we need to get in the competition, and that's only sixteen films. We need to be up for the awards. [*The film made the final sixteen.*]

JP: Lots of good films have come out of Sundance.

SA: Yeah, but ours is better.

JP: Tells us a bit about the movie.

SA: It's a story; it's from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," that story. Victor and Thomas go to Phoenix to pick up Victor's dad's remains, so it's a buddy movie. It's pretty funny. Thomas is Thomas. The actor who plays him is amazing. Evan Adams. He's had small roles in Canadian productions; he's a First Nations guy from up there. He's just amazing. He's sort of taken Thomas. I can't write about . . . I tried to write a short story with Thomas in it but I couldn't. I kept seeing him. . . .

JP: Seeing Adams?

SA: He's taken him away from me. He's so convincing, so real, so Thomasy. He's an adjective now.

JP: So he's type-cast . . . as Thomas?

SA: He's so right for the role it's scary to think that he's always going to be playing some weird Indian.

JP: I don't recognize the name.

SA: No. The movie has Gary Farmer in it, from *Pow-Wow Highway*, Tantoo Cardinal. . . .

JP: *North of Sixty*. . . .

SA: Yeah. Adam Beach who was Squanto. Harvey Bernard. Michele St. John, Ella Miles, from *Northern Exposure* . . . am I missing anybody? Buddy Lightning, who was in *Grand Avenue* on HBO. Baker, who's on *North of Sixty*. Tom Skerritt has a role, Cynthia Geary, who was on *Northern Exposure*. . . .

JP: That's a good cast. And what kind of role did you have in it? Did you have much control over it?

SA: Oh yeah. I wrote the screen play; I was the co-producer. Five songs of Jim Boyd's and mine are in there. Two '49s in there I wrote. So. . . .

JP: You can do it all. . . . You're doing '49s now?

SA: For good or bad, whatever, is in there.

[Interruption]

JP: So, did you have fun making the movie?

SA: No (laughs). Yeah, yeah I did. The scary thing is that it was so fun, and so intense, so immediate, that if I start doing really well at this, I might wind up being a good screen writer. I'm going to direct *Indian Killer*. I'm scared that if I make it I'll give up writing books.

JP: Whoa. And move to Hollywood. . . .

SA: No (emphatically). The thing I think about is that probably five percent of Indians in this country have read my books. *Maybe* that much. Probably more like two percent, or one. You take a thing like *Pow-Wow Highway* and 99% of Indians have seen it.

JP: Well. It's a powerful medium. So you didn't make Gary Farmer wear a wig did you?

SA: For the first scene. Then he doesn't have it. Then we let him be Gary. But, he gets to be young in the movie. Twenty years difference.

JP: It's just that the one he wore in *Highway* was so much a wig. So you're directing *Indian Killer*? Are you dealing with the same [film] people? I hadn't heard about that.

SA: It's not official yet, we haven't signed the contracts, but it's happening.

JP: Where will you shoot it?

SA: Seattle. Right here.

JP: This all sounds time consuming. Do you get to write, other than what you're working on [for the movies], or is the schedule so intense that it takes you away from writing?

SA: I'm working on a new novel.

JP: Want to talk about it?

SA: Yeah, but I don't know if it's going to be the next one published. I've sold it, but I don't know if it's going to be the next one. Essentially what it's about is . . . it's set in the future, although it's set in the 1950s, an alternate 1950s, and I don't want to give too much of it away, basically scientists have discovered the cure for cancer involves the bone marrow of Indians.

JP: Carrying the cure for the world, huh?

SA: Yeah, essentially we start getting harvested.

JP: You and the yew tree.

SA: It's called *The Sin Eaters*. Pretty intense. And I'm working on one about the Mafia in the '20s and '30s and Indians, but I don't want to give away more than that, though.

JP: I think that's what they call the tease. . . .

SA: And it's based on a true story about the Mafia and the Spokane Indians in the 1920s.

JP: Oh no. Well, we have our research cut out for us now. Interesting.

SA: Well, actually, it's based on a true *sentence*. There's only one sentence that mentions this Mafia connection in one book. I came across it and I can't find anything else about it. I'm taking that one sentence to create a whole story.

JP: So it's the greatest cover-up in the world. One sentence and all the other information's yours.

SA: Exactly.

JP: I love the life of a novelist, right?

SA: I'm going to use that one sentence as the first sentence in the book.

JP: The one set in the alternate '50s, you say you've already contracted that. When do you think that will come out?

SA: Next year. Same press: Atlantic.

JP: And now into movies and writing '49 songs.

SA: I've been doing that forever, did that long before I ever wrote a book.

JP: Did you play around with songs, then, when you were young?

SA: Yeah. I quit for a long time, sort of getting back into it again, and realizing I forgot how to sing. Maybe it's a mental or emotional block.

JP: You were playing with the language, then? Is that attractive to you? My son and I do that all the time. We take a song and rewrite it, play with the language, it's fun.

SA: Exactly. '49s are just fun that way.

JP: Well, I didn't know you were doing a movie of *Indian Killer*. You did the script *and* you'll direct?

SA: I'm doing the screenplay right now. Just about done.

JP: One of the questions I wanted to ask you is what you have envisioned for your future. It sounds like you don't have time to envision a future.

SA: Yeah, well, movies, definitely. I mean, I feel the only concept for me is poetry. I kind of get bored with other things. Novels take so much energy; it's so *hard*. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pages of writing. They're *hard*. I think I'm just a decent fiction writer. I tell good stories, but sentence to sentence, verb to verb, noun to noun, I don't think I'm all that, you know. . . . Everybody else seems to think more highly of my work than I do. Suppose that's a good thing, eh? But I like the poetry; I think I'm good at that.

JP: So you still work at it?

SA: Oh yeah.

JP: What have you done with it?

SA: Publish it. I just had a new book out last year, which makes seven books of poems now.

JP: True. I remember when *Fancydancing* came out, I was on a flight, one of those small commuter flights, practically falling out of my chair. I had a colleague sitting in front of me who said "What are you laughing at?" and I said, "Here, read this." Spoonfeeding bits and pieces of the book to him, and not just the humorous ones. Comes pretty quickly though doesn't it? A lot's happened to you since then.

SA: That was published in January of '92. Yeah, I mean five and a half years later I'm an 800-pound gorilla. (Laughter, of course.)

JP: One of the things that came to mind as we e-mailed back and forth about this interview is the memory of hearing you read, at places like Village Books. It's fun. But when you read at Bellingham High a few years ago, with Dian Million, Tiffany Midge, Ed Edmo, it was a different thing. Do you see your audiences as different in some sense?

SA: Oh yeah. When you're inside a bookstore it's much more static; there's many more expectations of what's going to happen. I like to play with them. I've come out and done my characters, or come out and been Angry Indian Guy, or Funny Indian Guy, took on a persona and messed with the crowd.

JP: And you do it well, by the way. I want you to know. When you read

with Linda Hogan that one time, you could hear the hackles on the back of their necks going up. And you, just looking back at them, with a smile on your face.

SA: Oh yeah, I had a good time with that reading. Part of that was good time, part of it was just a *bad* mood. It depends on the environment. At Village Books, everybody's crowded into such a little space, you have so little room to work with up in front, it's really much more of a reading reading, but if I'm on a stage, I'll get nuts.

JP: It was fun that night at the high school. Jim Boyd was there, too. You were working on *Reservation Blues*, then. You were running some things by us, and there were a couple of times when you'd stop and say, "Yeah, that works. The audience bought that. Let's try something else over here."

SA: That's a way of doing it. I mean, you always get tired of the question, y'know, of "How does your work apply to the oral tradition?" It doesn't. I *type* it! (Laughter.) And I'm really, really quiet when I'm doing it. The only time when I'm essentially really a storyteller is when I'm up in front of a crowd. Growing up with traditional and non-traditional storytellers, and they're always riffin' and improvvin'. . . .

JP: That's the fun of it.

SA: Sure. You can just imagine! The reason, I tell people, that Indians . . . that whites beat Indians in wars was not because they were tougher; I mean, we'd beat them, on any one given day. But then the whites would want to fight the next day again, and we just didn't want to do that. We'd want to go talk about it. You can hear the stories, the next day the warriors going "Man, remember when you dodged that bullet?" and the day after that it was "Hey, remember when that guy shot you nine times and you survived?" After the next day "Remember when you jumped over that cactus, got shot nine times, grabbed that horse, crawled inside of it, hid for nine hours while they stampeded around you, jumped back out, grabbed the general by the throat, slapped him twice and ran away?" *Yeah. . . .*

JP: Yeah, tell it again.

SA: I come from a long line of exaggerators.

JP: One of the problems with editing a journal is we have people who get interested, get caught by those stories and then read a lot, but all of a sudden someone comes through with a new novel that does something else, something that comes around for the first time, and we're right back

to where we were in the '60s and there's a raging debate about "Is this Indian?"

SA: Actually *SAIL* is just fine. I've been subscribing for the past four years. Some essays are great; I've never seen a wider difference between good or bad in any academic journal. The bad ones are even more interesting, because they embrace, hang on to old ideas. I mean they're not bad scholarship, they're not badly written. What I mean is that no one has figured out a new way to look at Indian literatures. Above all *Indians* aren't looking at Indian literature. There are very few Indian scholars, very few Indian literature critics examining it. Those who do, like Gloria Bird, or Robert Warrior, or Liz Cook-Lynn, are still using the same old lit-crit tools. I think we have been far too nice to each other for too long now. I think Indian writers have grown enough, that we're not going to get any better unless we really start hammering on each other.

JP: I think that's true in the scholarship, too. One of the things we try to do in the journal is that, rather than get everyone to follow in lock-step, to take articles with widely varying points of view so sometimes we have two essays in one issue that give opposing arguments. It is tough, too, not only for the people who submit but for the people who read the submissions, because those people cover the spectrum, too. We often have two readers, one who will say publish, this is great stuff, the other saying throw it out. O.K. What do you do now?

SA: The thing that gets me with that is the Vizenor thing. I mean he's the god of the Indian lit-crit people.

JP: Why do you think so?

SA: It's obtuse prose, a lot of word play and word masturbation, essentially, that results in, nothing.

JP: Did you ever read his *Narrative Chance*?

SA: Yeah. I mean, I can get into it, it's fine, but I've sort of been struggling with this idea, what does Indian literature mean? If Indian literature can't be read by the average 12-year-old kid living on the reservation, what the hell good is it? You couldn't take any of his books and take them to a rez and teach them, without extreme protestation. What is an Indian kid going to do with the first paragraph of any of those books? You know, I've been struggling with this myself, with finding a way to be much more accessible to Indian people.

JP: I was at a workshop once in Santa Fe and Vizenor was there, Owens, Anna Lee Walters was there, and some other people from the Navajo

reservation. Someone asked her, “So who are you writing for, Anna?” She said “Young Indian kids on the rez.”

One thing I like about my classes is that sooner or later students are going to be asking that same question: “What is this Indian literature?” And then they wrestle through all those questions of audience, and definitions, by biology or whatever, and just when they start to feel comfortable, then we complicate it. Take the book for the book.

SA: But see, that doesn’t work.

JP: What?

SA: Taking the book for a book.

JP: In what way?

SA: In an Indian definition, you can’t separate the message from the messenger.

JP: That’s not the same. I think “the book” can carry that. Your work carries it.

SA: Yeah. But I think you’re referring to identity questions and such.

JP: Oh. That’s how the issue shakes out, because that’s what the students are interested in, but the question is how to take them back to the book, to the story itself.

SA: Most of our Indian literature is written by people whose lives are nothing like the Indians they’re writing about. There’s a lot of people pretending to be “traditional,” all these academic professors living in university towns, who rarely spend any time on a reservation, writing all these “traditional” books. Momaday—he’s not a traditional man. And there’s nothing wrong with that, I’m not either, but this adherence to the expected idea, the bear and all this imagery. I think it is dangerous, and detrimental.

JP: It’s the nineties, and now it’s time to move on. So, we get back to the discussion of what “it” is.

SA: Well, I want to take it away. I want to take Indian lit *away* from that, and away from the people who own it now.

JP: I think you do, in your writing.

SA: That’s what I mean. I’m starting to see it. A lot of younger writers are starting to write like me—writing like I do, in a way, not copying me, but writing about what happens to them, not about what they wish was happening. They aren’t writing wish fulfillment books, they’re writing

books about reality. How they live, and who they are, and what they think about. Not about who they wish they were. The kind of Indian they wish they were. They are writing about the kind of Indian they are.

JP: Sure, and it makes sense. Whenever you have any group of individuals in any literature who start to define the center, then everybody has to ask whether or not that's sufficient over time.

SA: We've been stuck in place since *House Made of Dawn*.

JP: But there's some interesting work coming out. Have you read Carr's *Eye Killers*?

SA: I hate it.

JP: You did? Well, that's right, it does have that traditional thing going on, but to move into the genre of the vampire novel I thought was interesting.

SA: That's fun, but I thought that book was blasphemous as hell to Navajo culture, the way he used ceremonies and such. I have a real problem with that. I don't use any at all. And a white woman saved everybody.

JP: But she was a teacher. (Laughter.)

SA: But it read like a movie turned into a novel. I was supposed to review it, and I didn't.

JP: Tell me this. What do you see coming out right now that is doing what needs to be done?

SA: Irvin Morris. I like his book [*From the Glittering World: A Navajo Story*]. I think Tiffany Midge has a good future, once she stops copying me.

JP: She did a great reading that night in Bellingham High.

SA: The thing is she was so into my work then, she's not so much now. That night, ask the people who saw me read before that night, she read exactly like me. So even that night I had to change the way I read. I'd never heard her read in public before, and she got up and read and I thought "O my god, that's me, that's my shtick." So I, literally, had to figure out a different way to read.

JP: Do you see anybody coming up through Wordcraft Circle?

SA: I'm in Wordcraft Circle; I'm a board member and all that. But I get worried. I think it's focusing too much on the idea of publication. The idea of writing as a career. It's becoming very careerist.

JP: So you either make it . . . if you don't publish and not doing it for your whole life then you shouldn't be doing it? Is that the danger you see?

SA: Well, it's becoming less and less about art. The whole thing is full of publication opportunities, money to win, scholarships, news about Indian writers publishing. . . .

JP: "Done good."

SA: Done good, yeah. Which is all fine. We're having a meeting soon and I just want to share my concerns with them that I'm worried that the focus has gone wrong.

JP: That the joy of it is not there?

SA: Exactly. One percent of one percent of the people in Wordcraft are going to have a book published. I think it's setting up unrealistic expectations.

JP: There's a group that Liz Cook-Lynn is involved with, a storytellers' circle, and they publish what they come up with, themselves. The focus isn't on selling it, but on doing it.

SA: Yeah. The act is the thing. I know people who would rather be where I'm at now, but I'm jaded as hell. About publication, about the "art" of it. I sound like I'm complaining. I'm glad to be where I'm at; I worked hard to get where I am. But there's also a lot that's shady about it. Being a successful Indian writer, and being an Indian, a "good Indian" (in quotes) are often mutually exclusive things, and there's a lot of pressure. I spend a lot of time alone, working. Selfish. My friendships suffer, my relationships with my family suffer, my health suffers. To be where I'm at, to do what I do, you'd have to be an obsessive compulsive nut (much laughter) and I don't think we should be encouraging our children in that direction. (More laughter.) Or at least letting them know. I mean, Wordcraft should be talking about the ugliness, too. This is what happens. Hard truths about publishing.

JP: The reality rather than the ideal image of the author dashing about the world, vacationing on sunny beaches.

SA: Exactly.

JP: But there are other rewards, right? The joy?

SA: Money and attention.

JP: Besides that.

SA: Don't let any writer fool you.

JP: Now, a little bit ago you said the poetry was still there, that that's.

...

SA: Yeah, but nobody buys that.

JP: Yeah, true. I almost said that. But they buy movies and they buy novels.

SA: First and foremost, writers like to get attention. Don't let any writer tell you different.

JP: Yeah, well, in my world it's tenure and promotion, so. . . .

SA: Which is attention. We want to be heard. We're standing on street corners shouting. If that's not a cry for attention, I don't know what is. And Indian writers, all writers in general, but Indian writers, too, were the weird kids, the bizarre kids. The ones who question institutions, the one who were not all that popular. The ones who people looked at weird. There are big burdens involved in all of this, you know.

[Interruption]

JP: You were on the state governor's book award board, and one winner was Carolyn Kizer. She has a great poem, "Afternoon Happiness." It says the poet's job is to write about pain and suffering, all that is "grist for me," but all she wants to do is write a poem about being content, and this poem does it.

SA: Actually, I'm doing it, too. My next book is all happy rez poems.

JP: That ought to start a buzz.

SA: Yeah. All the joy I remember from growing up.

JP: Good. Think it will sell well in Europe?

SA: It's not corn pollen, eagle feathers, Mother Earth, Father Sky. It's everyday life. Remembering taking our bikes and setting up ramps to jump over the sewer pit. That kind of stuff.

JP: And making it!

SA: Yeah, yeah. Or *not*. (Laughter.) And some of it a little sad. I'm working on this poem; it's not very good right now, I just wrote it last night, but I remember, I remember, I dreamed it a couple of nights ago, but during the winter we would, in winter, we'd take our gloves and put them on the radiator in the old school whenever they'd get wet. But, I remembered some kids didn't have gloves, because they couldn't afford it, they were too poor. And I didn't have gloves this one winter, and I

remembered that. And so I had this dream where I was sitting in the classroom and there were 12 pair of gloves on the radiator and 13 kids in the classroom, and so everybody's looking around trying to figure out who's the one who doesn't have gloves, so everybody's hiding their hands. So, I'm working on that poem, and that image of everyone hiding their hands so nobody will know who didn't have gloves. Kind of sad, kind of nostalgic. . . .

JP: But positive in ways. . . .

SA: And that is also funny, I mean. Another one's about . . . there's this series of lullaby poems, actually, that I've written, they're really rhyme-y lullaby poems. Pow-wow lullaby poems, I call 'em, 'cause where we live on the Spokane rez the pow-wow ground is a couple of miles away, and at night you can hear the drums and the stick game players playing all night long, and that would put me to sleep at night during pow-wows. I'm writing poems about that feeling, or walking in the dark back from the pow-wow grounds, hearing the drums or walking to the grounds at night, or falling asleep in teepees, or in Winnebagos, or when we were real little, at a pow-wow in Arlee or wherever, and you'd end up sleeping in cousins' teepees in just a big pile of Indian kids. Those are the kinds of poems I've been writing.

Like the last book, *The Summer of Black Widows*, I thought was technically good. My last book of poems, technically good. I thought is was probably my best book. But very few of the poems Indian people would relate to. Whereas a book like *Fancydancing* I think is incredibly Indian. I want to go back to writing the kind of poems I wrote in *Fancydancing*. I'm more happy now. I'm a happier person. When I wrote these books . . . I'm getting happier and getting healthier. Some people say I always write about drunks. Well, no I don't, but if you look at the books you can see a progression, actually. The alcohol is dropping out of the books, because the alcohol is dropping farther and farther out of my life, as I've been sober for more and more years.

JP: And I can see a bunch of kid poems coming out in the near future, then?

SA: No. No, I won't write about him, I mean I write about him but I won't publish them unless he's old enough to let me know it's O.K.

[Interruption]

JP: What's needed, then, is a new press.

SA: I'm going to do it. Actually, next year I'm going to start up a

literary journal that's called *Skins: The Poetry Journal for Indians and People We Wish Were Indians*. I figure to start publishing books out of that.

JP: Fantastic. Great. It's been done. Lots of people have started presses that way.

SA: I've the money and the influence. I can print 1000 copies of a poetry book, I'll be able to do that kind of thing, and I can get distribution. Poetry books will still only sell three hundred copies, but I can get them out there.

JP: Well, even one, two or three.

SA: One a year, two a year maybe.

JP: How long have you been thinking about this?

SA: Since the beginning. I just had to get to a place where I had the finances to do it. I didn't want a little mimeograph, I wanted a very, very professional journal, ah, very beautiful. The very best paper and the very best design. I wanted to wait until I had the finances there to have the best looking journal possible. I just said *Skins* and I can see it. *The Poetry Journal for Indians and People We Wish Were Indians*.

JP: People have talked about it over the years and presses have come and gone, presses have had interest in it and other times none, and I bring that up because we get back to that model "if it's not like this . . ." we don't buy it. The reason some young writers get caught in trying to write like that, the convention, is that they might get published.

SA: That's all they know. That's all they've read or been shown. I don't know about you, but growing up all I got exposed to was Mother Earth Father Sky stuff, or direction stuff. That's how I thought Indians wrote. I didn't know I could write actually about my *life*. (Laughter.)

JP: The first revelation, right?

SA: Yeah, I could write about fry bread and fried bologna. And the great thing is I didn't know you could combine, the traditional imagery and fried bread and fried bologna. The way I lived my life, and the way inside me, and the way I thought, which is a mix of traditionalism and contemporary culture.

JP: Right, which is reality.

SA: Which is reality. I didn't realize I could do that, something you can. I can write about, you know, Raybans and pow-wows.

JP: How soon do you think you will do that, *Skins*?

SA: Next year some. We haven't figured out submission policies, yet. For a while I think we'll just recruit, get it established and then open it up to submissions. But with editorial guidelines—"no lyric poetry." (Laughter.) "We want narrative."

JP: No lines that end with the word "blue."

SA: Right.

JP: Well, *The Bellingham Review* has been around for 17 years or so, started by a colleague of mine, who has retired.

SA: Yeah—a guy named Knute.

JP: Yeah Knute.

SA: He rejected me like ten times while I was in college. I bet eventually he probably rejected half the *Fancydancing* manuscript.

JP: Oh, wow. "Click!" That's interesting. He wasn't the colleague on the plane with me who I showed the book to, but he did, though, what you're talking about. He set up a press with just that idea, that out of the journal submissions he took some poets and made them books. And it worked.

SA: Do you know Jim Hepworth? Confluence Press? He rejected *Fancydancing*, the book.

JP: Good. I mean, oh, that's too bad.

SA: No. I harass him constantly. He goes, "Oh I didn't read it, I couldn't have read it, one of my readers must have. I would have remembered it." And I started laughing. I said, "Jim, you sent me the letter. I still have the letter. You said, 'This is encouraging, this shows lots of potential. But not ready for publication yet.'"

JP: Yeah. I know. So do you send him reviews of the book on the back of royalty reports?

SA: Well, he knows what happened.

JP: Wish you the best of luck on that project. It's good.

SA: It's going to . . . the reception we get at literary journals is terrible. The standard literary journal rarely publishes us. And when we do it's always part of a "special issue," or a special section. "The Literary Reservation." I'm looking for new young writers, the undiscovered voices, who are telling us things. I want to read poems where I recognize

the characters, and I recognize the words. Where, ah, I'd also like to publish poems that people will not get, at all.

JP: Insider jokes.

SA: Yeah, I load my books with stuff, just load 'em up. I call them "Indian trapdoors." You know, Indians fall in, white people just walk right over them.

JP: I thought it was supposed to be the other way around. Hmm.

SA: Ah. So that's the kind of thing I'm imagining. Poems that work in all sorts of ways, but I really want the subtext for Indians.

JP: This is exactly how, as we were talking earlier, it will be done, how it will move on. Others have been at work doing it, like *Greenfield Review*. Now that things are established, it's time for the next phase. *Skins*.

SA: And just stay with poetry, because fiction costs too much.

JP: Yeah, yeah. Takes up a lot of space: more short stories, you have fewer poems.

SA: And I'm sorry, but I think generally speaking, Indians just don't write good fiction: it's not in us.

JP: I take it then, that you're not going to do a serial of *Almanac of the Dead*?

SA: No. I just don't think . . . it's just not natural for us. I think we're meant to write poems. All of our traditional communication, it's about poetry. So I think in some sense, genetically, we're poets. Culturally speaking, we can become fiction writers. We can sort of . . . but it's one of the problems with some of the criticism, some of the criticisms directed by Liz Cook-Lynn, and Gloria Bird, and Robert Warrior talking about how there needs to be more tradition in Indian writing. I thought. . . .

JP: What's more tradition?

SA: But also, I mean, we're writing in English, 99% of our audience is going to be non-Indian, so how the hell do we do that?

JP: And, if you take that a step further, then should you?

SA: Exactly. We shouldn't be writing about our traditions, we shouldn't be writing about our spiritual practices. Not in the ways in which some people are doing it. Certainly, if you're writing a poem or story about a spiritual experience you had, you can do it. But you also have to be aware that it's going to be taken and used in ways that you never intended for it

to be. I think it's dangerous, and that's really why I write about day-to-day life.

The responsibilities of being an Indian writer are enormous. Even more so than any other group of people because we have so much more to protect.

JP: (An aside to Fred: "You ever heard this before?")

SA: I mean and it's so funny, people, like some of these writers, will think of me as being this very contemporary, very non-traditional guy, and I am, but I'm a lot more conservative in my take on Indian literature than any of those people are. I think . . . like some of the Navajo stuff and some of the traditional chants, or like some of Momaday's stuff, when rendered into English, means nothing. Means *nothing*. Our traditions are all about being, about taking place in a specific time and a specific geography. But when in a book that goes everywhere to anybody, it's like a traveling road show of Indian spirituality.

JP: Think of it this way, too, one of the elements behind that is the impetus for putting it in English and putting it in a book.

SA: To sell it. There's no Indian who would stand—well very few—on a roadside singing traditional songs to make money. Yet they will put it in a book and sell the book. To make money. I think the passage of money invalidates any sort of sacredness of any of the ceremonies that are placed within a book.

JP: Someone asked, I think it was Vine Deloria, Jr., how to tell a plastic shaman, and he said to just ask how much they charge. Pretty well says it.

Well, I'm glad you're going to do that; it's a really good idea, the journal and the press, and to put out the poets who come through who have promise. That's good.

SA: Yeah, I'd like to nurture careers. And to have a space for Indian writers to develop. I mean like this idea of featuring a poet per issue, a young, unknown person, featuring them, and also charting the growth of these young poets over a few years, and then into a book. I've seen a number of first books by Indian poets recently that really needed editing help.

JP: I've noticed that, too, lately. Even fairly well-established presses are putting out things maybe too quickly, not carefully enough.

SA: And then the books, because they're bought, disappear, and it does a disservice to the writers. That's one of my problems with Wordcraft,

it's rushing people into print before they're ready. And when you get a bad poem published, or a flat poem published, you don't learn anything. They've published bad poems of mine, and I've suffered for it. There are bad poems of mine in books.

JP: It becomes embarrassing later as well. (Laughter.)

SA: "Oh my god, I wrote that? No, somebody slipped that in there when I wasn't looking."

JP: It's a strange business, isn't it? I'm glad that you're keeping at the poetry, some balance. So when's the movie coming out?

SA: We're doing distributor screenings over the next couple of weeks, for Miramax, Sony, and all of that. All the big ones. If there's been an independent movie over the last five years, whoever's released it, they're coming. It's a good movie, comparable in level and quality to *The Full Monty*, the performances are amazing. These actors finally got a chance to play human beings, rather than wind-o-bots. I think it's really going to go. I think we'll get an awakening here, and we'll get about a three year window to make Indian films.

JP: The doors will open quickly. . . .

SA: And close quickly. What's going to happen is there will be a flood of Indian movies, most of them will be bad, they won't make money, and then the door will close again. We'll have the chance for a couple years here I think.

JP: Just like we were talking about a while ago, things get rushed into production instead of. . . .

SA: What I'm hoping to get from this movie is so, . . . we told the story but at the same time it is also very subversive, to take on "Indian cinema" and the images in the movies: about the Warrior, about storytelling, there's all sorts of little jokes along the way about the ways Indians get viewed in the movies, and in culture, as we're telling the road movie stories. I'm hoping it will kill, make it impossible for anybody to make this type of movie again. Like the way *Blazing Saddles* killed the Western for twenty years.

JP: If it accomplishes just ten years, it'd be wonderful.

SA: Six months, three days, two hours. For dinner after they see the movie, if they can see Indians as nothing else but human beings, it'll be a success.

JP: We could boycott the whole thing, Hollywood. One day.

SA: One day. One day of no anti-Indian thoughts. Not going to happen. I can dream.

JP: So you have a something going on tonight?

SA: It's called for Books for Prisoners. It's affiliated with Left Bank Books.

JP: Well, I hope you have fun.

NOTE

¹Aaron Gorseth did the initial transcription of the audio tape of this conversation. It has been edited slightly from the audio, mostly to remove slight repetition and the usual, inconsequential utterances, like "oh" and "ah," which unfortunately includes most of the laughter. Even more sadly, there is no way to convey the inflections, grins, and body language that animated most of the conversation with a playful edge.

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White Shadows: The Use of Doppelgangers in Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues

Karen Jorgensen

It is true that all things have two faces,
a light one and a dark. . . .
—Thomas Carlyle (qtd. Miller viii)

The universe of Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* is a symmetrical, ordered one. Nothing in it happens by chance: "In the one hundred and eleven years since the creation of the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1881, not one person, Indian or otherwise, had ever arrived there by accident" (Alexie 3). In part, the symmetry derives from characterization. We find later in the novel a clue to Alexie's rationale for assembling this particular cast of characters. When Victor and Junior puzzle over the meaning of a store named "Doppelgangers," Junior explains: "I think it means twin or something. Like a shadow of you" to which Victor replies "White shadows, enit?" (44). Indeed, the book is comprised of a series of Native American characters who are shadowed by representative non-Indian doubles. This elaborate system of doubles exposes the complex differences and similarities Alexie observes between the mores of the two cultures.

The functional effectiveness of the Doppelganger may be better understood by examining the theory of the early twentieth-century critic, Ferdinand de Saussure. Examining language at its rudimentary level, Saussure explained that it is the relative difference between the "signifier/signified" which provides definition in language (Saussure 721). On a macroscopic level, when writers assemble the building blocks of language into a literary composition, it follows that a similar bi-polar contrast, such

as that which would be achieved by the Doppelganger, would enhance the meaning of the work as a whole. Analogous to the implementation of intense chiaroscuro in a work of art, this side-by-side placement of character pairs *by virtue of their differences* accentuates the unique meanings of either one alone. In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie makes particularly efficacious use of Doppelgangers: they serve as foils to each other, reflecting and elucidating the personality differences of the characters in the novel, but perhaps even more significantly, this literary technique of doubling also exposes correlations between characters where none would ordinarily be apparent.

C. F. Keppler notes that the Doppelganger relationship has psychological significance as well. In *The Literature of the Second Self*, he explains that "Doubles . . . are ultimately projections of their creator, who through them expresses and attempts to deal with his own internal conflicts" (186). Indeed, Alexie's concerns are evident in his novel's plot, which focuses overtly on the dangers of greed and potential success in the popular music industry in general, and how such temptations affect the lives of the poverty-stricken characters on the Spokane reservation in particular. However, on a much more subtle level, Alexie's Doppelgangers suggest his own "internal conflicts," observations about similarities that exist between what at first glance seem to be oppositional Indian and non-Indian characters.

The juxtaposition of Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Robert Johnson is one instance of Alexie's use of the Doppelganger. As the New Testament indicates, the name Thomas means "twin," and although they are Indian and non-Indian, Thomas and Robert are "twins": they are both creators, storytellers with words and music, who have an inherent need to tell their stories. Despite each one's involvement with the magic guitar, both of them are able to resist it in the end. Further, both of them realize that music is for the people and of the people, whether it is the mournful song of Negro slaves or the pained lamentation of Indians. Mostly, they both understand that music is sacred and should not be exploited.

An even more obvious instance of doubling is that of the female pairs of Chess and Checkers Warm Water and Betty and Veronica. Both Indian and non-Indian pairs are dissatisfied with their racial and cultural make-up and desire to be the opposite of what they are: each pair wants what the other has. The Warm Water sisters often "hate being Indian"; Chess remarks "Ain't that the true test? . . . You ain't really Indian unless there was some point in your life that you didn't want to be" (Alexie 98). Chess and Checkers are drawn to non-Indian culture and view themselves according to the terms of that culture. They favor attending the Catholic

church and seem to derive comfort from the structure of performing religious rituals. Moreover, although the Warm Water sisters view “white women” with some disdain, they sometimes express wishes to be white. As Checkers explains, “I wanted to be as white as those little girls because Jesus was white and blond in all the pictures I ever saw of him” (141). Despite Father Arnold’s explanation that Jesus was Jewish and most likely had dark skin and hair, the fair-skinned images of Christ are firmly implanted in her mind.

The “white shadows” of Chess and Checkers are Betty and Veronica. Whereas Chess and Checkers are drawn to the non-Indian world and Christian religion, Betty and Veronica are described as a pair of Indian “wannabes” with long blonde hair who wear more Indian jewelry, beads and feathers than “real Indians” do (41). They are attracted to Indian men and are interested in the glamor of Indian “culture,” but only from the more fashionable “New Age” mystical perspective.

We also observe the pairs’ crossed interests regarding their lifestyle choices. Chess and Checkers make decisions which suggest their affinity for the non-Indian culture. Although they did sing briefly with the Indian band, Coyote Springs, they ultimately prefer to sing with the church choir. Chess departs from the music business and takes a “regular” (i.e. non-reservation) job as a telephone operator; both sisters leave the reservation to live in the city. Betty and Veronica, on the other hand, get their wish to “be Indians” by signing a recording contract with Cavalry Records. They agree to capitalize on their minute amount of Indian blood and transform themselves into “merchandisable” Indians who will be “more reliable” than Coyote Springs, a band which was comprised of “real” Indians (272). By using tanning booths, plastic surgery, and costumes, the company seeks to remodel Betty and Veronica into an “Indian” band which can be exploited and controlled. These “white shadows” succumb to their greed by sacrificing their identities and their desire to play their own music. When the temptation of money and fame beckons, Alexie writes, “Betty and Veronica looked at each other. They could hear drums” (273).

In another set of Doppelgangers, Alexie re-creates the historical slaughter of Native Americans by the U.S. Cavalry by juxtaposing Coyote Springs band members Victor Joseph and Junior Polatkin and Cavalry Records producers Phil Sheridan and George Wright. Victor and Junior represent the Indians who battled against the Cavalry. Sheridan and Wright, ironically, are the names of two Cavalry generals who fought the Indians and slaughtered thousands of the Indians’ horses in the 1800s.

There is also a clear parallel between Wright and Junior and between

Sheridan and Victor. Both Wright and Junior appear as ghosts who have regrets about their lives. Junior's ghost expresses remorse to Victor over his alcoholism and the loss of the relationship with Betty and Veronica. He muses "Those two weren't bad. . . . Maybe we should've held on to them" (290). Like Junior, Wright also experiences remorse: he regrets his deeds against the Indians, disassociates himself from the business deal with Betty and Veronica at Cavalry Records, and leaves to go "home" (to the grave of General George Wright who died "July 30, 1865" in a ship which sank in the Pacific Ocean [270]). As he returns to the grave, he agonizes over the murders he committed during his lifetime and fully realizes his guilt.

Doppelgangers Victor and Sheridan, the "surviving" partners of the pairs, both remain tied to the power-hungry side of the music world. Victor continues to be lured by the magical charm of the devil's guitar. He wants to play the instrument again so much that prior to Junior's suicide he makes a deal with "the Gentleman." When the guitar speaks to him in a dream and offers to return to him so he can have fame and fortune, Victor seems willing to trade the person he "loves the most," Junior, in return for the guitar (255). In a similar way, Sheridan makes a questionable deal with Betty and Veronica to exploit their Indian ancestry, thereby enhancing their success in a popular economic market. Although both Victor and Sheridan are, to some extent, warned through their partners, the path of greed and corruption continues to draw them.

Perhaps the most powerful use of the Doppelganger in the novel is that which reveals the connection between Native and non-Native religions. The spiritual leaders of the reservation are Big Mom, the wise old medicine woman who lives on top a mountain, and Father Arnold, the Catholic priest. In this instance, the Doppelgangers are doubles in that they both are spiritual leaders, but they are also counterparts because they are each portrayed as a component of an even larger spirit. They represent different cultures as they do the different genders: blended together they would make a more complete whole. In fact, Checkers Warm Water writes about them in her journal: "I looked at Big Mom and thought that God must be made up mostly of Indian and woman pieces. Then I looked at Father Arnold and thought that God must be made up of white and man pieces" (205).

Representing the female aspect, Big Mom is a classic figure: a large woman—over six feet tall—with long braids and a grandmotherly face. No one really knows her age, but she is reported to have witnessed the slaughter of the Indian ponies by the Cavalry. She is "a musical genius" (201), a muse and mentor who taught many of the great performers from

all genres of music. Big Mom also works with Coyote Springs to prepare them for their audition with the record company in New York. However, her purpose is greater than just to provide music lessons. She knows the hazards associated with the glamorous world of musical stardom and she counsels the band members to be aware of those dangers. Big Mom mourns for her “children” who, despite her warnings, have fallen victim to their own success and lost their lives to drugs and alcohol abuse. As a nurturer she continues to try to help them learn to choose for themselves a path of integrity. She informs Victor that he has a choice about whether or not to keep the devil’s guitar, but she does not pressure him to relinquish it. Big Mom also embraces the female role of healer. When Robert Johnson comes to the Spokane reservation in search of a woman who appeared in his dreams, it is Big Mom whom he seeks and who eventually helps him to recover from the toll his trials have taken upon him.

Alexie portrays Big Mom’s counterpart, Father Arnold, as a patient and sympathetic father figure, a man of integrity, and a good priest who is very understanding about Indian cultures. Unlike the old-time Catholics in the congregation, Father Arnold does not condemn the members of Coyote Springs for playing popular music. In fact, he identifies with them because he once sang in a band and continues to enjoy singing at the church. He is not like the other priests Alexie mentions, such as the one who burned books because he decided they were the devil’s tools or the priest who sexually molested Victor when he was a child. Even when Father Arnold is drawn to experience sexuality, he practices “discipline” and restraint. Despite the mutual physical attraction between Father Arnold and Checkers Warm Water, they do not give in to their desires, although they do confess to them. Father Arnold, who always questioned the necessity of celibacy yet was willing to adhere to it as part of his religion, is prepared to leave the reservation and even the priesthood because of his feelings. Thus, like Big Mom, Father Arnold is a moral and spiritual leader who believes in the value of music as a way to bridge the gap between people and God. Ultimately, he provides another “segment of God” that fits with Big Mom’s “piece” to form a larger, more complete concept of divinity.

The blending of Christianity and Spokane culture—as opposed to having one philosophy preclude the other—is summed up in a conversation between Father Arnold and Big Mom. Big Mom tells him “you cover all the Christian stuff; I’ll do the traditional Indian stuff. We’ll make a great team” (280). Later, this unity is demonstrated in an amusing parallel to the biblical story of Jesus and the multiplication of the loaves of bread;

Big Mom feeds two hundred people with only one hundred loaves of fry-bread by breaking them in half. When asked to explain how she wrought this miracle, she smiles and says "Mathematics" (302).

Throughout *Reservation Blues*, Alexie uses Doppelgangers to comment on various nuances of Indian and non-Indian interactions. For example, the pairing of Victor and Junior with Sheridan and Wright suggests that the dissension between the Indians and the Cavalry still exists, only now the Indians struggle with modern-day captains of industry instead of captains of the Army. The rivalry between Betty and Veronica and Chess and Checkers Warm Water demonstrates a similar principle: in the job market, Indians are exploited and the better opportunities are given to those with the least amount of Indian blood. Furthermore, the popular resurgence of interest in Indian cultures has led to a new method of exploitation. The cultures have been commodified and commercialized for profit, stripped of their intrinsic significance by greedy industrialists.

By showing the present day Wright to be remorseful for his deeds, Alexie wryly acknowledges that there are some non-Indians who have learned to be more sympathetic about the plight of the Indians than their predecessors have been, but only as enlightened spirits from the afterlife. Further, in Alexie's pairing of Thomas Builds-the-Fire (the storyteller) and Robert Johnson (the musician) he combines two races that have been victims of prejudice but whose traditions have survived, just as Thomas' stories and Robert's music do.

Yet, regardless of the instances of prejudice and exploitation that Alexie depicts, he tentatively suggests a need for the recognition of unity between Indian and non-Indian cultures. Alexie implies that the spiritual world is larger and more complex than either the Indian or Catholic religion alone. Although he clearly denounces the corruption in the Catholic church and questions the rigidity of some of its doctrines, such as the need for celibacy, his portrayal of Father Arnold as a favorable counterpart to Big Mom indicates that in Alexie's vision there is a greater opportunity for connection between the cultures on a spiritual level. This multicultural perspective is reinforced in Thomas' appraisal of mixed marriages: "Thomas agreed with Chess [about the problems encountered by the mixed-blood children of such marriages], but he also knew about the shortage of love in the world. He wondered if people should celebrate love wherever it's found, since it is so rare" (82).

Alexie's use of Doppelgangers, then, provides character doubles with greater texture and definition, much like light and shadow sharpen the dimension in a work of art. When the characters are examined as cultural

symbols, the Doppelgangers illustrate the dynamics Alexie observes between the Indian and the non-Indian worlds: he shows us the two faces—the dark one and the light—and while he does not necessarily reconcile them, he does ultimately provide a vision of symmetry (and occasionally connection) between the cultures that are the focus of *Reservation Blues*.

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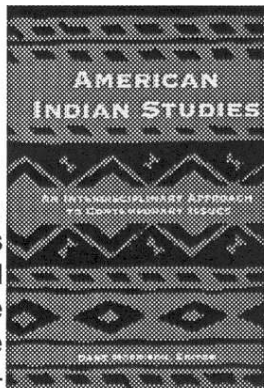
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Sherman Alexie's Polemical Stories

Ron McFarland

In "Imagining the Reservation," from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the collection of short stories which appeared in 1993, Sherman Alexie offers an equation: "Survival = Anger X Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation" (150). In his earlier book, *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993), the epigraph to the first section, Indian Education, is "Poetry = Anger X Imagination," and it is ascribed to one of his recurring characters, Lester Falls Apart. John and Carl Bellante questioned Sherman Alexie about that equation in an interview conducted for *Bloomsbury Review* and he responded, "Exactly what my attitude toward life is" (15). When the brothers Bellante asked what "precisely" about white culture so angered him, Alexie answered, "Pretty much everything patriarchal. We've resisted assimilation in many ways, but I know we've assimilated into sexism and misogyny. Women are the creators. We get into trouble when we try to deny that."

The interviewers did not avoid this potentially volatile issue in Sherman Alexie's writing. My title is intended to suggest that there is a combativeness about Alexie, that he is, in a way, at war, which is at the etymological roots of the word "polemic," the Greek word for war. In most of his writing, sooner or later, Alexie is a "polemicist," which is to say, a "warrior," and there is nearly always controversy and argument, implied or direct, in his poems and stories. "Do you ever worry about anger becoming a negative force?" the Bellante brothers asked. Citing Gandhi, Alexie answered that anger could be a positive force: "Anger without hope, anger without love, or anger without compassion are all-consuming. That's not my kind of anger. Mine is very specific and

directed.” This is not to say that this makes his anger exactly palatable. I have seen people leave Alexie’s readings feeling furious at what they have heard, and I suppose his response to that would be “no regrets.”

Part of what distinguishes the poems and fiction of Sherman Alexie is that they fall into neither of the two most common stereotypes that whites have fabricated: Noble Savage and Barfly. A Spokane/Coeur d’Alene who grew up on the reservation in Wellpinit, Washington where, he says in the interview, he felt himself an “outsider,” Alexie did much of his undergraduate work at Washington State University, which is just eight miles away, across the state line from the University of Idaho where I teach. I do “remember when” he was just an undergraduate there, but it is hard to wax nostalgic about a man who was just twenty-five when his first book, *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992), was getting raves in the *New York Times Book Review* only a couple of years ago. Still, I recall having heard him read the poem “Horses” (*Old Shirts & New Skins*) at a reading with other students and his professor and mentor, Alex Kuo, perhaps six years ago, and feeling that shiver that strikes you somewhere beneath the region of the rational.

Alexie himself has a strong historical sensibility. Consider the opening lines of “Horses” (*Old Shirts & New Skins*, 28), which refers to the shooting of horses by Cavalry under Colonel George Wright in the Indian War of 1858 at a site near Spokane called Horse Slaughter Camp:

1,000 ponies, the United States Cavalry stole 1,000 ponies
from the Spokane Indians, shot 1,000 ponies & only 1 survived,
shot 1,000 ponies & left them as monuments, left 1,000 ponies
falling into dust, fallen, shot 1,000 ponies & only 1 survived.

These four lines reveal a lot of what might be called Alexie’s poetics, which in this poem are clearly employed polemically. The poem ends,

I own no horses,
the Indian was measured before
by the number of horses he owned,

the exact number, I own
no horses, I own
no horses, I own
no horses.

This poem, the essence of “performance poetry,” is clearly intended to be heard. Perhaps I should add that no one who has heard Alexie read (or, more accurately, recite or orate) his poems is likely to forget it. I should also add that repetition, perhaps the fundamental tool of rhetoric, is one of the basic features of traditional Native American poetry and is

typical of oral poetry generally.

The foundation of Alexie's reputation, however, is most likely to be the short fiction scattered throughout his collections of poetry and the 22 stories that comprise *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, ranging from short-short, "sudden," or "flash" fiction of just three to five pages to more conventionally constructed stories that run nearly twenty pages. So far he has not shown himself inclined to write the longer, more fully developed sort of short story one associates with writers like Flannery O'Connor or, more recently, Robert Olen Butler, but it must be remembered that he is relatively new to the genre. Alexie's first three books are listed as "poetry" by the publishers of *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, even though parts of each of them are written in prose. The percentage may be debatable, but by my count 14 of the 42 titles in *Fancydancing*, maybe 10 of the 50 in *Old Shirts*, and 18 of the 42 in *First Indian on the Moon* (1993) are short stories ranging in length from a single paragraph of less than half a page to nine pages. It may be significant that his most recent and perhaps best collection of poems, *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), contains no more than two or three titles (out of 47) that could be possibly construed as some variety of short fiction. That is, Alexie may now be moving in the direction of sharper distinctions in genre.

Often a poetic technique will have direct impact on Alexie's fiction, as it does with the form of the round, which is used in four stories in *First Indian*. (I consider the round "Split Decisions" to be a poem.) My favorite among these is "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys," which parodies the popular Willie Nelson tune and the ninth section of which features Lester Falls Apart playing a reservation version of Russian Roulette in which he pulls the trigger five times "as he pointed the pistol toward the sky" (*italics added here and below*). The effect of the round form can be felt by continuing into the tenth section and the first two sentences of the eleventh:

10.

Looking up into the night sky, I asked my brother what he thought God looked like and he said "God probably looks like *John Wayne*."

11.

We've all killed *John Wayne* more than once. When we burned the ant pile in our backyard, my brother and I imagined those ants were some cavalry or another. (103)

That is, Alexie simply repeats a key word or phrase at the end of one section somewhere early in the next section, often with an ironic twist. Of

course it could be argued that such works should be regarded as prose poetry, but *Fancydancing* is described on the cover as “Stories and Poems,” and *First Indian on the Moon* is listed on the back cover as “Prose and Poetry.” I think Alexie is quite conscious of generic issues and distinctions and that part of his enterprise involves testing generic limits.

The nine-part sequence, “Fire Storm,” alternates between poetry and prose, and several works are set up like “Genetics,” in which the poem is transformed into prose, then back into poetry:

Fire
follows my family
each spark
each flame
a soldier
in the U.S. Cavalry.

First
it was the fire in 1973. Flames dropped from the attic of our
old house and burned every quilt we owned. Cousins and
neighbors came from miles away to carry furniture, clothes,
our smallest possessions from the house, but they all arrived
too late to save much. All we had left
was a family portrait
singed . . . (9)

In writing like this, the poem seems to invade the prose, and vice versa, as if neither genre could do justice to the event. Surveying the three books prior to *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* then, one might observe a sort of tension throughout Alexie’s work between prose and poetry, between sentence / paragraph and line / stanza. The lines of genre, however, do seem to be more clearly defined in *The Summer of Black Widows*, as mentioned above.

When he was asked by the interviewers for *Bloomsbury Review* if the transition from poet to writer of fiction was hard for him, Alexie answered that it was not difficult, that “my poems are stories. There’s a very strong narrative drive in all my poetry” (14). As his characters evolved, he found that they demanded “more space than a poem could provide. So it was natural to move on to short stories and now to a novel” (*Reservation Blues*, then in progress). As the interviewers noted from the outset, Alexie is “a storyteller [with] an unmistakable poetic streak.” His powers as a poet are primarily narrative, after that rhetorical, and only occasionally lyrical.

From the foregoing it should be obvious that Alexie’s is a rhetoric, whether in his poems or in his stories, of political commitment. In the

sixth section of "Split Decision," from *First Indian on the Moon*, Alexie writes:

My
 heroes
 carry
 guns
 in
 their
 minds. (89)

In "A Reservation Table of the Elements," under Oxygen, he writes: "An Indian man drowned here on my reservation when he passed out and fell face down into a mud puddle. There is no other way to say this" (40). In the story "Indian Education," from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, the first-person narrator (ironically named "Victor") finds himself at the end of the third grade standing alone in the corner facing the wall and waiting for his punishment to end, and he concludes, "I am still waiting" (174). In the eighth grade he finds himself growing "skinny from self-pity" despite the commodity foods, and he concludes, "There is more than one way to starve" (177). At the end of the tenth grade, having tasted "failure in the tap water," he concludes, "Believe me, everything looks like a noose if you stare at it long enough" (178). In his postscript concerning class reunions, Victor finds no need to organize one for the reservation high school: "My graduating class has a reunion every weekend at the Powwow Tavern" (180).

What makes the pain and anger bearable for the reader in Sherman Alexie's poems (some of which are prose poems) and stories (several of which would qualify as "sudden" fiction), is not so much the hope, love, and compassion to which he refers in the interview, but humor, a component left out of his formula, but certainly present, at least as a catalyst, throughout his work. Predictably, this humor is rarely of the gentle, tolerant, urbane variety (although it can be all of that at times), but most often the edged, scathing wit of the satirist. People, white and Indian as well, laugh out loud and often when Alexie reads, and in the former case, they are frequently laughing at themselves. Especially for non-Indians, it can get rather uncomfortable. In "A Twelve-Step Treatment Program" the speaker's friend tells him his college advisors wrote him a letter "'advising me to discard my cultural baggage and concentrate on the future. I wrote back advising them that 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'" (*First Indian* 33).

Alexie's poems and stories are filled with such moments of the

painful humor that defines his kind of “black,” or “absurdist,” or whatever one labels it, certainly very “serious” comedy. In terms applied by Shakespeare scholars, Alexie’s is not the world of “festive,” but of “problem” or “dark” comedy. When the speaker in “Giving Blood” gives his name to the white nurse, he tells her he is Crazy Horse, which is the historical name that recurs most often in Alexie’s writing. (In the Bellante interview he calls Crazy Horse “a spiritual figure, a savior whose example we need to aspire to.”) And when the nurse asks Crazy Horse how many sexual partners he’s had, he says, “one or two / depending on your definition of what I did to Custer” (*Fancydancing* 78). In “The Marlon Brando Memorial Swimming Pool” Dennis Banks appears as “the first / Native American real estate agent, selling a 5,000 gallon capacity dream in the middle of a desert” (*Old Shirts* 55). At a reading such passages often go over like punch lines delivered by a skilled stand-up comedian, but the context keeps the humor from being easy or warm. The impact is closer to catharsis than to escape.

As a writer of fiction, which is where he will likely have his greatest impact, regardless of where his talents lie, Alexie offers a terse, hard-bitten satiric style most often couched in conversational diction and short, simple sentences. In discussing the problems of writing a novel with John and Carl Bellante, Alexie notes, “A big description for me is saying somebody had blue jeans on” (26). He was being both candid and accurate. Those who prefer what has been called rich or densely textured prose will not take readily to Alexie’s work. His characters reveal themselves in what they say and do, and we become familiar with them because they inhabit a world that we accumulate as we proceed from book to book (HUD housing, commodity foods, powwows, bars, basketball courts, Spokane, 7-11 stores). We almost always know where the action takes place, but we are hardly ever offered a vivid image. Obviously, too, given the length of his stories, a complex or involved plot is not a common feature.

The question, then, is how to account for the considerable impact of his prose, which Reynolds Price in the *New York Times Book Review* praised for its “live and unremitting lyric energy” (15). I am inclined to say “velocity.” Every story is rapidly paced, and his frequent use of extended dialogue, which he handles adroitly, also gives the work dramatic impact. I have already mentioned his blending of humor, particularly satire, with anger in his polemical writing. Alexie’s flair for aphorism and metaphor also distinguishes his writing (all quotations from *Lone Ranger and Tonto*):

But all the years have changed more than the shape of our blood and eyes. We wear fear now like a turquoise choker, like a familiar shawl. (55)

Victor felt a sudden need for tradition. (62)

"What's real? I ain't interested in what's real. I'm interested in how things should be." (33)

Seems like I'd spent my whole life that way, looking for anything I recognized. (182)

Simon won the one-on-one basketball tournament with a jump shot from one hundred years out. (147)

Tonight the mirror will forgive my face. (113)

Books and beer are the best and worst defense. (122)

"Shit," he said aloud. "Nothing more hopeless than a sober Indian." (87)

As I have argued, much of Alexie's poetry and fiction works like a joke, and I do not mean this is any deprecatory sense. His jokes are both sharp-edged and perceptive and poignant. When the judge in "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" administers the oath and informs him he must tell "nothing but the truth," Thomas replies, "Honesty is all I have left" (96). Ironically, Thomas is the best storyteller in the tribe, but no one cares to listen to him. His testimony then does not concern any recent offense, but events going back to the Battle of Steptoe in 1858. (Reynolds Price lists this story as one of three in the book that could "stand in any collection of excellence." His other two choices are "Witnesses, Secret and Not" and "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation.")

Another aspect of Alexie's strength as a writer of short fiction is his capacity for building characters incrementally; that is, by accumulation in various poems and stories, after the practice of writers like Ernest Hemingway (with Nick Adams) or William Faulkner. In fact, the reservation world to which Alexie continually returns, with its HUD housing, Powwow Tavern and Breakaway Bar, is reminiscent in some ways of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, and is as recognizably located somewhere in the vicinity of Spokane, Washington as Yoknapatawpha County is somewhere in the Mississippi delta. Of the three characters who constitute what Alexie calls "the holy trinity of me" (cited above), Victor Joseph dominates the stories in *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, appearing in all but three or four of them and generally narrating those in which he does appear. Readers will probably associate Victor with the Nez Perce

chiefs who were named Joseph, but it would take more particular knowledge of the Spokanes to know that Junior's family name associates him with Chief Polatkin, one of whose daughters was married to Qualchan, who led the Spokane, Palouse, and Coeur d'Alene tribes in 1858 against Colonel Wright. In the aftermath of the so-called Horse Massacre by Wright's troops (mentioned above), Qualchan and six Palouse warriors were hanged near a site now called Hangman's Creek, about thirty miles south of Spokane. Some other recurring characters include Big Mom, the spiritual leader of the tribe; Seymour, the poet; and Lester Falls Apart, who is described in his "unauthorized biography" in *Old Shirts & New Skins* as "shoved into a bottle / of Thunderbird wine" (48). As these characters resurface in the poems and stories (nearly all of them appeared in Alexie's first book, *The Business of Fancydancing*) they become increasingly familiar to the reader and they acquire both depth and dimension.

Just five of the stories from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* were published before the book appeared, and only one of them, "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," was placed in a well-known magazine (*Esquire*). "A Drug Called Tradition," which appears early in the book and which involves all three of Alexie's "trinity" of selves, is perhaps as representative of Alexie's polemic as any single story might be. It opens with dialogue between Junior Polatkin and Thomas Builds-the-Fire:

"Goddamn it, Thomas," Junior yelled. "How come your fridge is always fucking empty?"

Thomas walked over to the refrigerator, saw it was empty, and then sat down inside.

"There," Thomas said. "It ain't empty no more." (12)

Having "just got a ton of money from Washington Water Power," Thomas is throwing "the second-largest party in reservation history," which means that it's not much of a party at all. The first-person speaker in the story, as is usually the case in this book, is Victor Joseph, and it is he who seems most willing to make sweeping generalizations about the way Indians think and act: "When Indians make lots of money from corporations that way, we can all hear our ancestors laughing in the trees" (13). Generally however, although Victor also appears to be Sherman Alexie's most direct "voice" in the fiction—and Alexie can be strident at times—his view of things is not narrowly ethnocentric. Here, for example, he adds, "But we never can tell whether they're laughing at the Indians or the whites. I think they're laughing pretty much at everybody." For the most part,

“laughing pretty much at everybody” is what Alexie does most often in his fiction. Another example of Victor as spokesman for Indians generally appears in the title story: “There’s an old Indian poet who said that Indians can reside in the city, but they can never live there. That’s as close to truth as any of us can get” (187). And in “Indian Education” it is Victor who says, significantly, “Sharing dark skin doesn’t necessarily make two men brothers” (178).

When Victor and Junior jump into Junior’s Camaro and skip out on the party, they encounter Thomas by the side of the road, and Victor invites him to join them down at Benjamin Lake, where they plan to try the new drug called “tradition.” “It’ll be very fucking Indian,” Victor says irreverently, “Spiritual shit, you know?” (14). But they insist Thomas tell them none of his “goddamn stories” until after he has taken the drug. As soon as he does, Thomas “looked around our world and then poked his head through some hole in the wall into another world. A better world.” There, Thomas sees Victor as a handsome warrior stealing a horse by moonlight. At this point in the story, following a gap in the text and a single sentence set in italics, Victor imagines himself in the scene Thomas Builds-the-Fire describes, and he quickly moves from the narrative past to the dramatic present tense:

I needed one of their ponies. I needed to be a hero and earn my name.

I crawl close enough to their camp to hear voices, to hear an old man sucking the last bit of meat off a bone. I can see the pony I want. (15)

When he asks the horse its name, the horse answers “*Flight*,” and at that moment Victor comes out of the story; that is, Thomas finishes his narration.

Then Junior takes the drug, and he sees Thomas dancing, and once again the effect is of a visionary experience. In this case Thomas is naked and dancing the Ghost Dance even as he is burning up with fever from the smallpox that has killed off the tribe. The word “dance” figures in each of the five paragraphs that make up this movement in the story, and in the last paragraph he envisions the whites leaving: “We dance in circles growing larger and larger until we are standing on the shore, watching all the ships returning to Europe” (17). At this point Victor yells at Junior, who has the car “spinning in circles, doing donuts across empty fields, coming too close to fences and lonely trees.” I suggest that it is in such figurative transitions as the “circles” and in such metaphoric play as the “lonely trees” that we detect the poet behind Alexie’s fiction.

After Victor gets the car stopped, he takes some of the drug himself, and at once he sees Junior on stage playing a guitar and saying, "*Indians make the best cowboys.*" Junior says the whites have to sit in the back if they want to listen to his "little pieces of Indian wisdom . . . because all the Indians get the best tickets for my shows" (18). But it's not racism, Junior insists; it's just that the Indians "camp out all night to buy tickets." In Junior's vision, or more accurately, in the one Victor has of him, the President of the United States is Edgar Crazy Horse, great-grandson of "the famous Lakota warrior who helped us win the war against the whites." In such a visionary state, a postmodernist sort of "revisionist" history readily becomes the norm.

As the drug wears off, the three men drink Diet Pepsi and agree to listen to Thomas tell a story. If Victor Joseph represents the rational aspect of Alexie's "trinity," Thomas embodies the inspired imagination; consequently, he is regarded as "strange" or "mad" by others in the community. His story involves all three of the men in the present, deciding "to be real Indians," and seeking their vision. When the visions arrive, they are carried to the past, where all three reject alcohol, sing, dance, drum, and steal horses. Not surprisingly, it is Victor who doubts the vision, and Thomas reacts by getting up and walking away: "He wouldn't even try to tell us any stories again for a few years" (21). But before he leaves, Thomas yells something which Junior swears was "not to slow dance with our skeletons." Following another gap in the text and another sentence in italics, a voice that appears to be Thomas Builds-the-Fire's informs us,

Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and
your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you.
. . . What you have to do is keep moving, keep walking, in
step with your skeleton. (21-22)

Moreover, we are informed that to Indians, all time is "now."

As dawn breaks, Victor has a vision of his grandmother walking across the lake toward them, and he throws away the rest of the "drug" and hides. Later that day they meet Big Mom at the Trading Post, and she gives Victor a tiny drum that fits in the palm of his hand. She says the drum is her pager. Victor explains that "Big Mom died a couple years back," and he has never used the drum, though he keeps it close by: "I guess you could call it the only religion I have, one drum that can fit my hand, but I think if I played it a little, it might fill up the whole world" (23). So the story ends, implicitly contrasting Victor's religion to the tribal Seven Drums Religion.

In fact, a good many of the stories (more than half by my reckoning)

do have "positive" or up-beat endings, but almost always in the mode of Chekhov's "laughter through tears." Because of what I would describe as his essentially comic vision, however, Alexie can offer an alternative to the traditionally bleak or at least dark or downbeat endings in Native American fiction. I am thinking here of such novels as D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, and James Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney*. In all of these, *despite* the clear indication that some sort of hope, redemption, or enlightenment results, we can only infer that the price for Indians involves considerable and apparently inevitable pain and suffering, and usually death. To these titles we may now add *Reservation Blues*, in which Junior Polatkin becomes the sacrificial lamb whose violent death accompanies the break-up of the blues band. His death is followed by an almost predictable rite of renewal, as Big Mom teaches new songs of protection and celebration, of survival and being alive. In *Indian Killer* the suicide of the protagonist (an Indian who is adopted by a white family in Seattle, does not know his tribal identity, and is ironically named John Smith) is also followed by epilogues in which the reader is assured that "Indians are dancing now" (418) and "the killer plans on dancing forever"(420). But in his short fiction the costs of survival and life seem not quite so great, and humor overcomes tragedy. "The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor" concludes with the observation that two things Indians are good at is "making fry bread and helping people die," which leads to the last, terse sentence, "And we laughed" (170). "The First Annual All-Indian Horseshoe Pitch and Barbecue" ends with a woman holding a child "born of white mother and red father" and saying, "'Both sides of this baby are beautiful'" (148).

Of course not all of Alexie's stories are so healing, but his efforts to promote a different image of Indians and reservation life are implicit, too, in the *Bloomsbury* interview when he points out that his three main characters, Thomas, Victor, and Junior, do not drink and that Thomas Builds-the-Fire never has. This, he argues, illustrates his antipathy toward the Indian Barfly stereotype. He is careful, however, to make it clear that the new image is not going to be drawn easily. His portraits of Indians, whether on reservations or in the city, are not Currier & Ives prints. Alexie's mother is a drug and alcohol awareness counselor on the Spokane reservation, and alcohol does play a major role in much of his writing. Most of his characters are either drinkers, or are in the midst of drinkers, or are intently aware of once having been drinkers. The fact that Victor and Junior (notably in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*) frequently reach for a Diet Pepsi does not alter that fact. On the

one hand, the state trooper who pulls over the van of Pepsi-drinking Spokane Indians coming back from a basketball tournament in Kamiah, Idaho in "Traveling," the first story in *The Business of Fancydancing*, is a racist for assuming that because they are Indians they've been boozing it up. On the other hand, in the title poem of the book the Indians are driving back from the fancydance finals in Arlee, Montana with "a case of empty / beer bottles shaking our foundations" (69).

While Alexie is taking steps to combat the Barfly stereotype, even as he demythologizes such Noble Savage stereotypes as the premise that all dark men are brothers, he cannot deny its foundation in painful reality, if only because he himself had to struggle to overcome its influence. Alcohol (not religion) is the available opiate of the poor and the oppressed, whether homeless whites, ghetto blacks or reservation Indians, for pain and anger, for defeat and despair. As he writes in *Reservation Blues*, "All Indians grow up with drunks. But most Indians never drink. Nobody notices the sober Indians" (151). It may be, as A. E. Housman noted so memorably in *A Shropshire Lad*, that "malt does more than Milton can / To justify God's ways to man," but perhaps when it comes to man's ways to man, words will do, provided they sustain genuine power tempered with humor and come from a writer who is mentally well armed and in control of his anger.

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Magic and Memory in Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues

Janine Richardson

In the opening *mele*¹ of Native Hawaiian singer Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's album *Facing Future*, Kamakawiwo'ole tells of his father—who has been dead for over twenty years—coming to him and speaking to him, an event that Kamakawiwo'ole says has happened before. Not only his father but his Mother and Auntie also appear, unbidden. This slippage between the worlds of the living and the dead, the present and the past, exists in other creative works of non-European artists in America, and is particularly prevalent in much of late twentieth-century ethnic literature: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a text dominated by a ghost; the narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* portrays a narrative consciousness haunted by ghosts from both Chinese legend and family history; and Tayo, in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, must lay family ghosts to rest before his cure into psychic wholeness can be effected, a cure that encompasses encounters with the world of both good sorcery and evil witchery.

In his first novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995), Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian Sherman Alexie, too, partakes of a literary altered reality. Investing his contribution to North American literature with a magical realism usually associated with the literature of modern Latin America, Alexie's 1990s characters are involved with a talking guitar whose incredible playing power derives from a Faustian deal with the Devil, encounter the living dead through reincarnated characters, and experience cosmic reactions to their human actions. Historic memory as well as

tribal and individual memory play strong roles in the world of this novel, and these elements all participate in and compete for narrative authority in *Reservation Blues*.

On the surface, Alexie's novel is a tale of twentieth-century American Indians trying to find their way into adulthood, as all post-adolescents must. They hang out with friends, drink, and kill time as their equally deprived counterparts do in other dead-end, small-town locales.² However, because Alexie's youths are reservation Indians, their passage into adulthood is problematized by the question of not only what they will do, but *as whom* they will do it: What kind of "Indians" they will be is the question they must answer. Do they stay on the reservation and remain a part of its "calcified society . . . checked by colonization" (JanMohammed 5) or do they acquiesce to assimilation within the world of their historic, white enemy? Through the consciousness of his characters, Alexie wonders: what do we owe to the nineteenth-century past when we live on the cusp of the twenty-first?

Reservation Blues grapples with significant questions of community and identity, but does so in a slippery textual form that features rapid shifts in narrative points of view as well as an achronological temporal dimension (akin to other works of Native American literature) that is in near-constant flux; it is not in the past, it is not in the present, but rather is in both places at once, for the past—via memory, dreams, and reincarnated entities—intrudes at will. In short, this novel's narrative structure and levels of discourse are as hard to pin down and as full of tricks as the confusing, contradictory, shape-shifting Coyote after whom the characters name their rock band.

In discussing the contemporary American Indian literary canon, Kenneth Roemer cites a "strong sense of responsibility" as being one of the hallmarks of such works (587). Alexie tackles this issue of responsibility by including events of the 1800s that affected the Spokane region. Facilitating this inclusion of history is his use of magical. A preoccupation with history is a frequent concern of the magical realist text, as Frederic Jameson has noted (304), and history's competing narrative, memory, is often an embedded critical paradigm in ethnic texts (Singh vii). For protagonists in such texts—ethnic and Latin American—their own memories of the past are assaulted by the dominant culture's desire and need to dictate an official history, and they experience, therefore, a near constant tension between their own remembrance of who they are in opposition to this "official story." Alexie's characters have their own view of the nineteenth-century westward expansion of the American nation, the particular historical event that defines them to the dominant

culture. Rebelling against the “official story,” the resisting ethnic writer—in this case, Alexie—asserts his side of the story and explores the relationship of history and memory to the present.

In the opening sentence of *Reservation Blues*, Alexie calls attention to the role that memory and the long march of history will play in his text: “In the one hundred and eleven years since the creation of the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1881, not one person, Indian or otherwise, had ever appeared there by accident” (3). In the view of Alexie’s protagonist, Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, nothing is by accident, and remembering and making sense of the past is crucial for the tribe’s psychic well-being. Five generations of Spokanes are buried on Thomas’s reservation at Wellpinit, Washington, sixty-five miles from Spokane, and, although the weight of being the tribe’s misfit storyteller, or cultural repository, has “bowed his legs and bent his spine” (6), he persists in telling stories that no one wants to hear. Thomas works against the willful forgetting and denial that is in operation on the reservation among the population at large. Regarding the tribal past and communal memory, the people have lost faith and “nobody believed in anything on this reservation. All the Indians just dropped quarters into the jukebox, punched the same old buttons, and called that music. Thomas shared his stories with pine trees because people didn’t listen” (28). When tribal memory is repressed, all that remains to reconstruct the past and one’s identity is the dominant culture’s “official story” as represented in historical monuments and markers. Cynically, Alexie portrays his people as choosing this form of history for monetary reasons. Of legendary bluesman Robert Johnson’s arrival he writes: “The whole event required the construction of another historical monument. The reservation had filled with those monuments years ago, but the Tribal Council still looked to build more, because they received government grants to do exactly that” (5). While Thomas tries to remember his cultural heritage and maintain traditional rules of Spokane conduct, “most Indians don’t follow those rules anymore” (5). He is a Don Quixote figure trying to be “as traditional as the twentieth century allowed” surrounded by those who are “as contemporary as cable television” (49). Thomas pities those around him, whom he perceives to be “as fragile as eggs, despite their warrior disguises” and wants to save this “little country” of the reservation (16).

When the magical, talking guitar comes into Thomas’s hands, the theme of remembrance is amplified: playing by itself a blues riff, the guitar tells Thomas, “The blues always make us remember” (22). And, when the blues sung by Robert Johnson, who sold his soul to the devil for that magical guitar, come drifting down the mountain into Thomas’s bed,

Thomas sees the Black man's history two generation's back, feels his pain, and, yet, also feels sustained:

Thomas listened closely, but the other Spokanes slowly stretched their arms and legs, walked outside, and would not speak about any of it. They buried all of their pain and anger deep inside, and it festered, then blossomed, and the bloom grew quickly. (175)

Music acts on memory and could be a healing force for those willing to submit to its powers. However, while Robert Johnson's blues "created memories for the Spokanes, . . . they refused to claim them. Those blues lit up a new road, but the Spokanes pulled out their old maps" (174). For Thomas, the silencing or ignoring of painful history—one's own as well as others'—leads only to a multiplication of anger and pain for those in denial. Much as in western psychotherapeutic theory, Thomas intuits that the buried pain needs to be brought to the surface and acknowledged, for only then can the past and the dead cease to contaminate the present.

Two generations later than Tayo, Silko's protagonist in *Ceremony*, Thomas is a member of the "global village," one reared in the world of mass communication technology and thus one of—if not at one with—the larger society in a way which previous American Indian literary characters, in general, are not. From this wider perspective and greater distance in time from Native American dispossession and forced relocation, Alexie—through Thomas and his peers—offers a new plot for American Indian literature, one not of the failure syndrome where the hero is tragic and must die or be imprisoned at novel's end, or the homing plot (Bevis 16) where the happy ending lies in going home to one's tribe and thus recovering a heritage once denied or otherwise lost. Instead, Alexie proposes a quasi-assimilationist possibility for twenty-first century Indians, one that is a beginning for Native Americans, not an ending, and—similar to Kamakawiwo'ole's admonition to "Remember the past but do not dwell there / Face the future where all our hopes stand"—Alexie's suggested plot declares that now is the time to slip the bonds of the nineteenth century, push beyond mourning, and move life forward towards celebration. But first, history must be laid to rest.

In Alexie's novel, history is the burden that everyone—black, white, or red—in America carries as an integral part of the American experience; it unrelentingly opposes perpetrator and victim in a deadly dance of giving and receiving pain until both parties work out a path to redemption. Explicitly, "redemption" is offered on the reservation through the presence of the Catholic Church. However, this path holds no power for

Thomas's generation, and the Church on the reservation stands only as a lackluster refuge for the old or unimaginative; history remains, in Wellpinit and beyond, the long nightmare from which Alexie's characters are struggling to awaken.

Fittingly, nightmares afflict nearly all the principle characters. Some have dreams that range across time and are inclusive or tribal; others have dreams limited to their own experience. All the members of Coyote Springs, the rock band that the novel pivots around, are dream-ridden. The dreams of those from the Spokane tribe—Thomas, Victor Joseph, and Junior Polatkin—and the dreams of the Flathead sisters Chess and Checkers Warm Water continually disrupt the narrative. The dream fragments and voices can be seen as a way of disordering and decentering the primary narrative and as a means to relate mimetically the historic voices of memory intruding on the writer's consciousness and manifesting in his characters (De Hay 43). It is a frequent device of ethnic texts and a way to include subaltern views of history. Paula Gunn Allen writes of this as being a Native American tribal writing strategy derived from oral tradition in which "memories, legends, histories, dreams, and visions" are all included along with the "action sequences" as a way of suggesting "the integrative nature of ritual consciousness" (94). It could be argued, however, that all ethnic writers draw on just such a background of orality.

Junior, Victor's sidekick, allegedly bases all his decisions on dreams and visions (18). Their counsel seems poor, however, for Junior and his buddy Victor are "two of the most accomplished bullies of Native American history" (13). Junior knows how to get through his daily routine of driving the water truck, but little more. His time off the job is filled with drinking and acts of aimless violence, and in his nightmares he is betrayed, unloved, and experiences death and loss. Sometimes he is a strong Indian warrior who survives an ambush by the U.S. Cavalry only to be swiftly hung on trumped up charges. Other times, he dreams of being left in charge of his siblings in a car parked outside the Powwow Tavern while his parents drink themselves into oblivion (110). In this dream, the children wander off, his inebriated parents blame him, and then Junior relives the stuporous, post-party car accident that actually killed them (119). Thoughts of an ill-fated affair with a white girl in college and the abortion that results from it also plague him; everywhere in his dreamscape is sorrow and loss. When things don't work for Coyote Springs, Junior has had enough of failure. He climbs the reservation's water tower and blows his brains out. After his suicide he appears before Victor, who wants to know why he killed himself. Junior answers, "Because life is hard. . . . Because when I closed my eyes like Thomas, I

didn't see a damn thing. Nothing. Zilch. No stories, no songs. Nothing" (290). This is a key point in Alexie's novel: while memory and historic knowledge as they manifest in dreamlife and in conscious awareness are painful, they can also be a sustaining force if you have the interpretive keys. When he "closed his eyes" he did see things, but Junior was unable to translate them into a strength-giving story with power and meaning.

Victor has nightmares touched by history, too. His historic memory, though, is not of nineteenth-century warriors but of a genocidal Catholic Church dominated by "black robes" who cut and burn by the shovelful long, black, Indian hair. In his characteristically isolated fashion (Victor has no friends except for his constant companion, Junior), Victor's nightmares take a private rather than tribal turn. He is haunted by memories of his parents, his stepfather, and his real father's unattended death, and by the memory of the priest who molested him at summer camp. He is last seen in *Reservation Blues* alone and heading down a suicidal path after the tribal official in charge of employment refuses to hire him for Junior's old job. Feeling something "slip inside him" after this rejection, he buys a six pack saying: "'Fuck it, I can do it, too, . . .'" as he 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" (293). Thomas is the only one of the three young men who survives *Reservation Blues* affirmatively. He dreams, too, and his dreams have nightmare details culled from history mixed with his own psychological concerns. Besides dreaming "about television and hunger" and of wanting more, like the white people who "owned everything," Thomas has nightmares of nineteenth-century cowboys and Indians. In Thomas's dream, the white man's latest communication tool—the telegraph wire—is used to electrocute three Indian warriors, who "danced crazily, unable to release the wire, and the rest of the Sioux Nation rode off in a superstitious panic" (70). This dream segues into a childhood memory of Victor and Junior's sadistic bullying, then finishes with a dream conversation on the possibility of Coyote Springs' musical success. "I'm scared to be famous," (73) says Thomas. Here can be seen Thomas's preoccupation with the danger of being an Indian in the white man's world, as well as the competing desire he has to communicate; the wish to be "out there" and to get attention for his accomplishments exists alongside the fear of what fame and exposure can bring.

Leslie Marmon Silko comments on this ambivalence in her review of *Reservation Blues*:

Alexie . . . casts an ominous light on talent. A gift for

making music or for writing sets you apart from others, family and friends, whether you want this distance or not. Alexie wrestles with this conundrum: Did their gift for music kill Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin or did the music sustain them and lengthen their time in this world? Is it better to throw away your guitar or word processor and live an ordinary life? Will you be happier? (858)

Checkers Warm Water's dreams are termed her "familiar nightmares" and involve Indian men who forcefully take her sexually, only to collapse after the act into pathetic, needy, and damaged men (114). For her sister, Chess, Thomas's girlfriend, the night brings dreams such as the graphically violent one about the "unpainted one" who is bayoneted by soldiers at a government fort (84-85). Checkers is "the most beautiful girl" on the Flathead Reservation, and, pursued as such, her dream explains itself. For Chess, the "unpainted one" could be Thomas, a gentle lamb among the wolves of the white world, and the Indians that play a part in the "unpainted one's" death could be the reservation Spokanes who turn against Thomas when he and his band initially leave the boundaries of the reservation to pursue success as Coyote Springs.

While dream life gives voice to subaltern views, it also gives vent to renegade views held by colonization's uneasy heirs, for white people have nightmares, too, as seen in the nocturnal world of Father Arnold. A young priest struggling to maintain his vows on the Spokane Reservation, Father Arnold is isolated by race as well by vocation. Although he sleeps with a traditional "dreamcatcher" above his bed to ward off nightmares, Father Arnold also dreams of history and in his dreams he is with missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, who ministered to the Indians until they were killed. Canonized as martyrs in traditional American history, in Father Arnold's dream the Whitmans are harsh tyrants who keep order among "their" Indians through the power of fear. They admonish the Indians to listen to Father Arnold's sermon "and believe": "Each placed a hand on a black box, and the Indians sat at attention. . . . Whenever an Indian's mind wandered, Marcus and Narcissa threatened to open the black boxes and the rebellious calmed" (165). The boxes are empty, but the Whitmans have told the Indians that they contained smallpox. When Father Arnold questions why they would do something like that, the Whitmans reply that "It's the only way to get them to listen. And you saw how well it works. . . . Religion is about fear. Fear is just another word for faith, for God" (165). Ultimately finding history's burdens too heavy to carry, Father Arnold leaves the Church and the reservation, blaming carnal weakness for his loss of vocation.

In a recent book review of James Welch's non-fiction work, *Killing Custer*, Alexie writes, "the war between Indians and whites has never ended" (Alexie 14). This history of unresolved warfare has seeped into the dreams of Coyote Springs and permeates their waking lives, and in the appearance of two specimens of the living dead, Phil and George (also known as the Indian-massacring U.S. Cavalry generals Philip Sheridan and George Wright), the past directly confronts Coyote Springs. In the nineteenth century, Wright and Sheridan led many a bloody, genocidal campaign against the Indians; in the twentieth, they are out to co-opt Indians and make them a commodity for the mass market. As they write to their boss:

Overall, this band looks and sounds Indian. They all have dark skin. Chess, Checkers, and Junior all have long hair. Thomas has a big nose, and Victor has many scars. We're looking at some genuine crossover appeal. We can really dress this group up, give them war paint, feathers, etc. and can really play up the Indian angle. I think this could prove very lucrative for Cavalry Records. (190)

This living connection between the past and the present as played out in Wright and Sheridan is extensively developed in the last half of *Reservation Blues*, and, intriguingly, these men seem aware of their reincarnated state.

However, while Sheridan continues to enact old patterns of genocidal racism, the reincarnated Wright evolves into a penitent seeking to make amends. At one crucial point, Wright breaks through a hotel door to rescue Checkers from Sheridan and when Junior asks Wright, "What are you doing here? . . . Why are you helping us?" Wright replies, "Because I owe you." When Wright looks at Coyote Springs and sees "their Indian faces" he sees "the faces of millions of Indians, beaten, scarred by smallpox and frostbite, split open by bayonets and bullets" and on his hands he sees the stains of Indian blood (244).

The motif of reincarnation in *Reservation Blues* could be viewed as reflecting the influence of New Age adopted Eastern philosophies, or as a slick, authorial method to resolve the unresolvable and to give an easy escape for the characters from their historically determined narratives (Benediktsson 126). However, it is more likely that Alexie is, instead, drawing on a narrative form closely tied to his ethnic, and perhaps political, roots: magical realism. Reincarnated entities are "the living dead," and in a listing of the magic realist elements in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the "living dead" are cited along with "flying carpets, . . . accurate portents, telekinesis, and so on"

(Simpkins 144). Critic Frederic Jameson has noted that magic realism is characterized by an engagement with History (303) and is a type of narrative “derived essentially from peasant society, drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village or even tribal myth” (302). Others deduce that magical realism is a form created, generally, by writers of the Latin American political left attempting to give voice to their specific American identities (King 81). Magical realists feel compelled to take the novel’s concerns and expectations out of the realistic novel’s world of cause and effect and transport it into a marvelous reality of skewed expectations and radical juxtapositions. Living in a world where the disjunction of colliding cultures is readily apparent in everyday life, where the technological “miracles” and material wonders of an “advanced capitalist technological age” are psychically and structurally imposed upon a pre-Columbian, or pre-capitalist society (Jameson 311), and where these things of the “first world” are superimposed upon, rather than organically integrated into, the “third world,” what better way for a writer to describe a reality of psychic dislocations and physical disruptions than by utilizing the realm of the fantastic?

In considering the background and content of magical realism, it seems unsurprising that Alexie finds it to be a congenial form, for the traditional novel is too static, exclusive, and reductive in its vision of reality (Simpkins 141-43) to adequately relate Alexie’s story of history-in-the-present, non-linear time, and cosmic cause-and-effect. It is not too far of a stretch to draw a parallel between the material and cultural disjunctions observed by writers in Latin America, such as a television beaming images of Disneyland into a Bolivian Indian tin miner’s shack creating psychic distress and unrest in the watching child (Barrios de Chungara 183), and the perpetually empty first-world refrigerator in Thomas-Builds-the-Fire’s third-world HUD kitchen that only a magic ceremony could ever fill.

Alexie also has models closer to home than Latin America for his magical realism. Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor have been termed magical realists (Fleck 4), and the work of James Welch could also serve as a model for this approach. Welch has been linked by Paula Gunn Allen, among others, to the surrealism that is related to magic realism. Allen, in an interview with Laura Coltelli, recalls that the Peruvian “half-breed” Cesar Vallejo was a surrealist who had “an important impact” on James Welch (28). Allen questions the accuracy of this “surrealistic” labeling of Vallejo, however, arguing that because Vallejo is an Indian, his surrealism originates in his tribal identity and is a manifestation of Indian cultural beliefs about the nature of existence, thus separating him

from European surrealists whose work derives from psychoanalytic theories on the nature of the mind (Allen 91). Allen does, however, find surrealism a useful term in her own literary criticism. In an essay discussing Welch's novel *Winter in the Blood* (1974), she describes "the 'surrealistic' streets of Havre" (92), declares that "'realism' and 'surrealism' are inverted, reversed, or ignored entirely" (94) in his and Momaday's novels, and notes that Welch relies "heavily on surrealistic methods of solving the problem posed by differing Indian and White understandings . . . of time and event" (152).

Magical realism also offers a way to inject the power of the mythic Indian trickster figure, Coyote, into the text. Coyote is the group's chosen namesake, but not without initial dissension. When Thomas first suggests Coyote instead of Victor's proffered "Bloodthirsty Savages," Junior complains: "That's too damn Indian, . . . It's always Coyote this, Coyote that. I'm sick of Coyote." As Victor wholeheartedly agrees, saying "Fuck Coyote,"

Lightning fell on the reservation right then, and a small fire started down near the Midnight Uranium Mine. Coyote stole Junior's water truck and hid it in the abandoned dance hall at the powwow grounds. The truck was too big for the doors so nobody was sure how that truck fit in there. Junior lost his job, but he had to take that truck apart piece by piece and reassemble it first. (45)

Coyote may be "too damn Indian," but he is still a power to be reckoned with on the reservation. It is also instructive to note that Coyote is, in Paula Gunn Allen's words, "a metaphor for all the foolishness and the anger that have characterized American Indian life since the invasion" (158). Foolishness and anger are present in at least half of Coyote Springs—Junior and Victor—and Coyote's penchant for survival manifests in Thomas-Builds-the-Fire and the Warm Water sisters.

Bonnie Winsbro, in *Supernatural Forces*, writes that the ethnic female writer often incorporates worlds inhabited by spirits and deities into her work as a means of "examining, preserving, and representing cultural traditions and including belief systems" (11). She asserts that ethnic male writers have other foci of concern—specifically, the clash of cultural confrontation—and so downplay, as a rule, these paranormal cultural aspects. Alexie, however, seems to be working along the lines of this postulated "female" narrative path. Rather than being absorbed by the problem of confronting the dominant culture or the struggle to maintain a tribally conscious identity, Alexie constructs in the portrayal of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire a character who psychologically integrates the

multiple facets of who he is—historically and tribally, as well as presently and individually—without manifesting paralyzing conflict. While Thomas is informed by the past in his self identification, he is not confined there. On the one hand, he can tell Chess:

We were both at Wounded Knee when the Ghost Dancers were slaughtered. We were slaughtered at Wounded Knee. I know there were whole different tribes there, no Spokanes or Flatheads, but we were still somehow there. There was a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow. (167)

On the other hand, he can be simply the man “Thomas,” one with an identity apart from that which is solely tribal. Part of his decision to leave the reservation is because

He just wanted his tears to be individual, not tribal. Those tribal tears collected and fermented in huge BIA barrels. Then the BIA poured those tears into beer and Pepsi cans and distributed them back onto the reservation. Thomas wanted his tears to be selfish and fresh. (100)

“Selfish” and “individual” call to mind “American” traits, and Thomas recognizes himself as a part of an intermingling of American identities. This identification is one based not on race or ethnicity, but rather on shared radical politics and sympathy for society’s underdogs, martyred innocents, good-hearted misfits, and the betrayed. Thomas’s understanding of the affirmative aspect of participating in this world helps him to leave the reservation which is, after all, littered with murdered dreams (6), and populated by people who have violently rejected him and Coyote Springs for having aspirations that reach beyond the reservation.

Rather than viewing the denouement in *Reservation Blues* as an exhibition of a “feel good” assimilationist position to appeal to a white audience, one recognizes a path similar to the one Silko marked out for Tayo in *Ceremony*, a path in which separation and seclusion are seen as regressive. Alexie also may be heeding Gerald Vizenor’s call to “liberate ‘Indianness’” from the “sign ‘Indian,’ with its predetermined and well worn path between signifier and signified” (Owens 144) and its erroneous belief in “terminal creeds” in proposing alternatives. Vizenor writes that these life-denying terminal creeds occur in Indians “because we’re invented and we’re invented from traditional static standards and we are stuck in coins and words like artifacts. So we take up a belief and settle with it, stuck, static. Some upsetting is necessary” (146).

Knowing that the part of his identity which is “Indian” he carries in his heart and soul, Thomas can leave the reservation with Chess, the woman he loves, in a world where that value is in short supply (82). They

determine to have “lots of brown babies” (284) and, the reader would suspect, Thomas and Chess will help these children to forge their own signifiers without getting hung up on “terminal creeds.” Terminal creeds would keep Thomas on the reservation to follow the “traditional” path of depression, poverty, and self-destruction and the cost of maintaining such a terminating tradition, he decides, is just too much to pay.

NOTES

¹Hawaiian for song. When Kamakawiwo'ole, “Brother Iz,” as he was affectionately known, died in June 1997 his body lay in state at Hawaii's State Capitol, the only non-politician to ever receive this honor.

²This parallel between the limited possibilities of American small towns for their young and the equally deprived environment of the reservation is drawn in Leslie Marmon Silko's review of *Reservation Blues*.

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Muting White Noise: The Subversion of Popular Culture Narratives of Conquest in Sherman Alexie's Fiction

James Cox

“Partisan writers have chronicled the story of conquest, and political stranglers see to it that the public is kept blinded to actual conditions.”—Cogewea in *Cogewea: The Half-Blood*, by Mourning Dove (Hum-Ishu-Ma)

Scholars from many academic disciplines have considered in detail the history of European and Euro-American (mis)representation of Native American peoples. In *Savagism and Civilization* (1953), American Literature professor Roy Harvey Pearce considered the misrepresentations the result of the culturally-sanctioned European belief in a binary of civilized and savage, of God-fearing and Godless. Historian Robert Berkhofer, Jr., entitles his study of misrepresentation *The White Man's Indian* (1978), and in *God is Red* (1994), lawyer, political activist, and Native American Studies professor Vine Deloria, Jr., calls the stereotypical images “The Indians of the American Imagination.” Native American novelists are also interested in this history of misrepresentation defined by written and visual ethnocentric narratives that tell a story of the European conquest of North America. These authors and their characters are involved in a narrative construction or reconstruction of a Native American-identified self that counters a racist historical context and the conquest narratives that are often sustained by the ubiquitous white man's Indian. Whether in brief critique, as in Louise Erdrich's, Louis Owens', and James Welch's novels, or in full-scale revision and subversion, as in Sherman Alexie's work, Native American authors write new narratives of self-representation that critically question and often radically revise and

subvert the dominant culture's conquest narratives and the mass-produced misrepresentations of Native Americans.¹

Many late-twentieth-century Native American authors are particularly concerned with misrepresentations in film and television. As the dominant culture's most consumed forms of media, film and television can mass produce the most destructive images of Native Americans. In "Lawrence of South Dakota: *Dances With Wolves* and the Maintenance of the American Empire," Ward Churchill (Creek/Cherokee/ Métis) explains how Kevin Costner's Academy Award-winning, commercially successful 1992 film perpetuates "the racist mythology so important to conventional justifications for America's 'winning of the West'" (244). In *Fantasies of the Master Race: Categories of Stereotyping of American Indians in Film*, Churchill illustrates how Hollywood decontextualizes Native American history and participates in the "symbolic demolition" of Native American cultural identity (239). He adds that the conventional Hollywood narrative about Native Americans is "nothing more than a denial of European/Euroamerican criminality on this continent over the past 350 years. Implicitly then, it is an unbridled justification and glorification of the conquest and subordination of Native America" (240). Native American authors respond to the threat to cultural identity Churchill describes with critiques of Hollywood that provide a consistent assessment of the film industry as a corrupt and destructive influence on Native America. Critiques such as Churchill's and Deloria's expose the political, social, economic, and ideological origins of the misrepresentations Euro-Americans construct of Native Americans and their cultures, whereas the fiction writer intervenes in and rewrites the narratives of conquest by inserting Native American voices into the storytelling.

The chapter entitled "The Plunge of the Brave" in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1993) includes Nector Kashpaw's story of his brief career in Hollywood: "'Clutch your chest. Fall off that horse,' they directed. That was it. Death was the extent of Indian acting in the movie theater" (123). The directors of the films in which Nector acted wanted him to recreate for a twentieth-century audience a visual version of the vanishing race myth, one of Euro-America's narratives of the conquest of the North American continent. Nector adds, "the greater world was only interested in my doom" (124). Nector's criticism of Hollywood's misrepresentation of Native Americans suggests that in the twentieth century the dominant culture attempts to enact the conquest narrative of the vanishing Native American race, but this time cinematically rather than politically, militarily, or rhetorically.

In Louis Owens' *Bone Game: A Novel* (1994), professor of literature

Cole McCurtain criticizes the commercialization of a romanticized Native America in conversation with his friend, the Navajo Alex Yazzie. McCurtain comments, "Now the founders of the American Indian Movement were running sweat ceremonies for crystal gazers in Santa Cruz, playing Chingachgook in a Hollywood movie, and singing with an Indian rap group" (31-32). McCurtain's reference is to Russell Means, a founding member of AIM and the actor who portrayed Chingachgook in Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992).² Chingachgook, whose story James Fenimore Cooper tells in the five installments of the Leatherstocking Tales, is perhaps the most famous literary "noble savage" of the nineteenth century. Cooper's novels do not have a narrative emphasis on the Mohicans, but on Natty Bumppo or Hawkeye, the white man who chooses to occupy a cultural borderland between white and Indian worlds. Mann's film does not alter the narrative emphasis of Cooper's novel. The script says little about the last of the "Mohicans" but has much to relate concerning Nathaniel (Natty Bumppo), literally portrayed by Daniel Day-Lewis' long hair and bare chest. McCurtain is aware that the formerly radical Indian activist Means allows himself to be visually romanticized and narratively marginalized in the film. To readers acquainted with the last thirty years of Native American activism, the implication of McCurtain's ostensibly off-hand remark is that Hollywood has an immeasurable potential to corrupt Native America.³

In a conversation with McCurtain late in the novel, Yazzie offers his critique of Hollywood. Yazzie, like McCurtain a faculty member at the University of California-Santa Cruz, explains a proposed "Hollywood research project":

"It occurred to me that L.A. is just one huge genetics experiment. For almost a century now all the physically perfect specimens of white America have been going there to be in the movies, right? And naturally they've been breeding . . . During the same period, they've been attracting and breeding Italians who look like Indians, so there's a whole subpopulation of them to study, too." (179)

Yazzie implies that Hollywood has been attempting to create a master race. In the process of breeding a population of perfect white Americans to play the celluloid cultural ideal, the Hollywood community also breeds an ideal Indian-looking subpopulation of Italians that eliminates the need for Native American actors. Whether the Indians in the film are Italian or fall from their horses dead, the result is the same: the cinematic erasure of Native Americans from a narrative about Native America. Owens and Erdrich, in brief but important episodes in their novels, critique Holly-

wood's penchant for reifying the vanishing race conquest narrative. The implication of the common focus of their criticism suggests narratives that counter the conventional cinematic erasure of Native Americans need to be told.

James Welch's criticism is less explicit than Erdrich's and Owens'. The unnamed protagonist of Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) lives an isolated, confused, and emotionally fractured life. Though his alienation from the rest of the world is not entirely a result of his viewing of Westerns, the films are a possible origin of his internalized self-loathing. Walking alone down the street of Havre, Montana, the narrator sees two film posters. He tells the reader, "On the billboard, Randolph Scott, dressed in a red double-breasted shirt, white hat and blazing guns, grinned cruelly at me" (103). The poster reminds him of a conversation he had with his dead brother, Mose, in which they discussed how quickly Scott could draw his gun. At the beginning of the next chapter, the narrator remembers the poster and thinks, "Randolph Scott has plugged me dead with a memory I had tried to keep away" (108). Scott does not literally shoot the narrator, but as a signifier of the "world of stalking white men" that makes him feel helpless (120), Scott's cruel image reconnects the narrator's memory to Mose's death. He even remembers Mose's death as a film: "the movie exploded whitely in my brain, and I saw the futile lurch of the car as the brake lights popped . . . the horse spinning so that its rear end smashed into the door, the smaller figure flying slowly over the top of the car to land with the hush of a stuffed doll" (142). The narrator remembers his brother's death as a film, as an act to be witnessed but not experienced, in an unsuccessful attempt to distance himself from the event. Analogously, he cannot escape from the glaring eyes of Randolph Scott, a famous Hollywood Indian killer.

In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Sherman Alexie's critical response to popular culture differs from Owens', Erdrich's, and Welch's; rather than exclusively offering critiques of the conquest narratives the dominant culture produces and consumes, he illustrates the damage these narratives engender in his Native American characters, then rewrites or revises and subverts them. The radio and television program *The Lone Ranger* is a conquest narrative in that the American Indian, Tonto, is present only to serve the white hero/master, the Lone Ranger.⁴ In Alexie's eight word revision, Tonto refuses to be the loyal companion, a twentieth-century incarnation of the noble savage, literally a white man's (the Lone Ranger's) Indian. Tonto engages the Lone Ranger in a fistfight, and thereby refuses to occupy the subordinate social space defined and assigned to him by the Lone Ranger, the iconographic

Western hero and the representative of the dominant culture. The subversive title is a guide to the short stories that follow. Alexie's characters are engaged in the same metaphorical fistfight as the titular Tonto: they struggle for self-definition and self-representation against the oppressive technological narratives that define Native Americans as a conquered people, as decontextualized, romanticized, subservient Tontos, and Native America as a conquered landscape.

A white noise infiltrates the fictionalized Spokane Reservation in several stories in Alexie's collection. White noise is the static on a television after a station plays "The Star-Spangled Banner," then ends its broadcasting day. Alexie uses the static to signify a broad historical context in which European and Euro-American culture has attempted to assimilate and destroy the Spokane. The white noise is, literally, the oppressive noise of white mass-produced culture, the loud demand to abandon all that is Indian and conform to the dictates of the invader's cultural belief system or be destroyed. As the source of the white noise, television is an instrument of late-twentieth century colonialism. In Alexie's fiction, conquest narratives disseminated by the technological tools of the dominant culture, such as television, have a pervasive, destructive influence on Native America. Cumulative references to television's destructive presence on Alexie's fictionalized reservation indicates this Euro-American technology is an iconographic evil against which the Spokane must struggle.⁵

Alexie composes "All I Wanted to Do Was Dance" of several narrative threads in the life of the primary character, Victor. In the episode that begins the story, Victor drinks at a bar and dances with Indian women as his "compensation, his confession, largest sin, and penance" for having fallen in love with a white woman who left him (83). After Victor shouts, "I started World War I . . . I shot Lincoln," Alexie writes, "He was underwater drunk, staring up at the faces of his past. He recognized Neil Armstrong and Christopher Columbus, his mother and father, James Dean, Sal Mineo, Natalie Wood" (84). Victor's desperate shout to be acknowledged is an attempt to inscribe himself into a history the dominant culture privileges, a history of great wars and great white men. In the catalog of the "faces of his past," Victor's image of his parents is trapped between a Euro-American and European cultural hero and the actors who play heroes of white middle-class rebellion in Nicholas Ray's 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause*. He searches for an identity in a past confused and distorted by historical and popular culture narratives from which he has been excluded.

Several of Alexie's characters, including Victor, attempt to avoid

technology's destructive influence by turning off the television's sound. Victor promises himself he will begin the day with exercise, but turns on the television without sound and watches the silent mouths of the television reporters (87). He chooses to be a passive viewer of other people's stories, like the dominant culture's Tonto, rather than a producer of his own narratives, like the Tonto of the title. After viewing a commercial for a new candy bar, Victor vomits in the bathroom (87); even without sound, television works on Victor as a poison, much like the medicine of the white doctors works on Tayo in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. After several short flashbacks fragment the narrative structure of the story as if Victor's memories are segments of a television drama, the story returns to the same day Victor watches the television without sound. Alexie writes of Victor, "He would be somebody's hero. Tomorrow," adding, "Victor wanted to drink so much his blood could make the entire tribe numb" (90). Victor's television viewing disrupts his precarious hold on sobriety, and the poison from the television that made him vomit earlier in the story later threatens the entire reservation community.

The same narrator speaks in "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven" and "Imagining the Reservation." In the title story, the narrator leaves his white girlfriend in Seattle and returns to the reservation where, he says, "Mostly I watched television. For weeks I flipped through channels, searched for answers in the game shows and soap operas" (187). Similarly, in "Imagining the Reservation" Alexie asks, "What do you believe in? Does every Indian depend on Hollywood for a twentieth-century vision?" (151). Looking for answers on television and relying on Hollywood for visions is to ignore the power of the imagination to revise old narratives or plot new ones and eliminate the possibility of self-definition and self-representation. Hollywood visions of Native America almost exclusively perpetuate the dominant culture's version of history that keeps Native America on a predetermined, externally-defined historical trajectory that ends with a "vanished race." In "Imagining the Reservation," Alexie begins:

Imagine Crazy Horse invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated it over Washington, D.C. Would the urban Indians still be sprawled around the one-room apartment in the cable television reservation? . . . Didn't you know Jesus Christ was a Spokane Indian? Imagine Columbus landed in 1492 and some tribe or other drowned him in the ocean. Would Lester Falls Apart still be shoplifting in the 7-11? (149)

He continues, "Survival = Anger x Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation" (150). Alexie implies television-viewing is a primary source of community contact for urban Indians, and "cable television reservation" suggests a reservation commercialized, commodified and therefore distorted by mass-produced culture. However, Alexie also suggests that imagining alternatives to the dominant culture's narratives of conquest (Columbus' voyage; the Manifest Destiny conferred by the Christian God on Europe's children) is a powerful weapon. Imagining alternative histories might not change the present (fragmented Native American urban communities; Lester Falls Apart's petty crimes), but conceiving of other possibilities, revisioning a history in which Native Americans write Native Americans back into the landscape, will influence the future. As Alexie explains, imagination is one part of the equation for survival.

In "Family Portrait," the narrator begins, "The television was always loud, too loud, until every conversation was distorted, fragmented" (191). He provides examples of how generic dialogue from police dramas ("Drop your weapons and come out with your hands above your head!") and science fiction programs ("The aliens are coming!") begins to inform his view of the world and other people, then adds, "I don't know where all the years went. I remember only the television in detail. All the other moments worth remembering became stories that changed with each telling, until nothing was aboriginal or recognizable" (191-92). Television contributes to the dissolution of the narrator's Native American identity by corrupting his memory and displacing him both from his community and a tribal worldview.

Though television alienates the narrator from his tribal community, he remembers clearly his father's story about "the first television he ever saw." According to his father, the television had "one channel and all it showed was a woman sitting on top of a television that showed the same woman sitting on top of the same television. . . . And she was always singing the same song. I think it was 'A Girl on Top of the World'" (197). His father's story serves as a foundation for the narrator's identity; in reference to the story, he explains, "This is how we find our history, how we sketch our family portrait" (197). The narrator uses the story to construct a new narrative that is "aboriginal and recognizable." He replaces the singing woman in his father's story with his sisters, his mother, and his brother. The girl in his revision of the television image is still on top of the world, but rather than displaying her objectified body to sell televisions, she is "owl-dancing with my father. . . . She is the fancydancer; she is forgiveness" (197-98). In an act dedicated to his

survival, the narrator intervenes in the static, repetitive television image and imaginatively produces a flexible, dynamic narrative as a source of reference for his identity as a Native American.

Confused, distracted, and literally colonized by the omnipresent white noise permeating the reservation, Alexie's characters ignore Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the Spokane's best storyteller. Alexie introduces Thomas in *The Business of Fancydancing* in "Special Delivery," in which Thomas explains his friend Simon's definition of truth: "If there's a tree in the distance and you run to get there, run across the grass with all your heart, and you make it and touch the tree, press your face against the bark, then it's all true. But if you stumble and fall, lose your way, move to the city and buy a VCR and watch cowboy movies all the time, then nothing is true" (47). While truth cannot emerge from Hollywood's Westerns, Thomas' imagination produces truths when his ideas manifest as powerful images to other characters. In "Special Delivery," he commits a crime for which he is on trial in "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. A BIA agent explains Thomas is dangerous because of "[a] storytelling fetish accompanied by an extreme need to tell the truth" (93), and Alexie adds, "Thomas was in the holding cell because he had once held the reservation postmaster hostage for eight hours with the *idea* of a gun and had also threatened to make significant changes in the tribal vision" (93; emphasis mine). Thomas' ideas are powerful enough to hold people captive, to make them listen, and with a receptive audience, he threatens a reservation power structure defined by a tribal vision that readers know has been distorted and corrupted by dominant media culture.

At his trial, Thomas decides "to represent himself," an act with a specific legal meaning, but one that also suggests Thomas will construct an image of himself and tell his own story as a defense (95). He refuses to have his narrative diffused through another medium; Thomas, like the Tonto of the title, will fight to speak for himself. As part of his self-representation, Thomas inserts himself as a character in Spokane tribal history. In the first story, he is a horse in a Spokane herd that Colonel Wright of the U.S. Army slaughtered in 1858.⁶ Thomas writes his own escape into the story: "They could not break me. Some may have wanted to kill me for my arrogance, but others respected my anger, my refusal to admit defeat. I lived that day, even escaped Colonel Wright, and galloped into other histories" (98). Thomas establishes himself as a trans-historical and mythological figure who creates victories for his tribe out of defeats. He writes a narrative of survival that subverts any narratives about a "vanishing race" and repopulates the landscape with Native Americans.

In his second story, Thomas speaks of himself as Qualchan, the son of an Upper Yakima chief who fought against the U.S. Army. Thomas does not revise this historical event because the “point” of the story, which the judge demands, is, “The City of Spokane is now building a golf course named after me, Qualchan, located in the valley where I was hanged” (99).⁷ Qualchan transcends time and his physical death to voice his grievances against the abuse of his name; Thomas invokes Spokane tribal history to protest how Euro-American culture commercializes and consumes Native America. In “The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore,” Victor says, “Indians need heroes to help them learn how to survive” (49). Thomas creates the hero that Victor says the Spokane need. After this story, “[t]he courtroom burst into motion and emotion” (99); Thomas’ story successfully elicits activity from people numbed by past and present defeat and popular culture narratives that assume the defeat was absolute.

The judge, who sentences Thomas to “two concurrent life terms in the Walla Walla State Penitentiary,” is the representative of the dominant culture, and his judicial decision implies his investment in the image of Native America as presented in the conventional Lone Ranger narrative (102). But the newspaper clipping that reports the end of the trial notes Thomas was “transported away from this story and into the next” (103). Thomas is the physical manifestation of a living Spokane history, and his trans-historical, mythological identity makes imprisonment impossible. Alexie suggests Thomas is present in the margins or between the lines of the other stories, though the characters do not see him. Thomas’ active storytelling benefits the tribe by offering an alternative to Euro-American popular culture’s definitions of what it means to be Native American. As a mythological figure, Thomas exists beyond the boundaries of the visual and written ethnocentric stories of European conquest; he cannot be commercialized and commodified. In addition, Thomas is a more powerful hero than the Lone Ranger, whose actions are restricted by the static generic constraints of his narrative.

In “The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore,” Victor explains the significance of Tonto’s uprising in the title of Alexie’s short story collection. He says, “It’s the small things that hurt the most. The white waitress who wouldn’t take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins” (49). The story of Tonto’s rebellion, briefly encapsulated in the title, is Alexie’s revision and subversion of the legend of the Lone Ranger and, concomitantly, an attempt at Indian self-representation and an effort to alleviate the hurt of characters like Victor.⁸ Thomas Builds-the-Fire, like Alexie, is a storyteller who subverts the

image of Tonto constructed by the dominant culture. Thomas revisits and enlivens Spokane history in his search for answers to what being Native American in the twentieth century means; he does not seek answers in the popular culture propaganda that, like an omnipresent white noise, silences all other narratives. In his essay "White Men Can't Drum," Alexie writes, "What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be Indian? What does it mean to be an Indian man? I press the mute button on the remote control so that everyone can hear the answer" (31). Thomas, who mutes the white noise that infects the reservation in order to speak his stories, is the source of this answer in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

Alexie extends his consideration of the dominant culture's hegemony over Native American representation in his novel *Reservation Blues*. Characters from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, including Thomas Builds-the-Fire, start a rock band named Coyote Springs that attracts the attention of agents of Cavalry Records in New York. After witnessing a Coyote Springs show, the agents send a fax back to their home office. They explain that the backup singers, Flathead sisters Chess and Checkers Warm Waters, have "that sort of exotic animalistic woman thing" and that the drummer, Junior Polatkin, is "[v]ery ethnically handsome," then summarize:

Overall, this band looks and sounds Indian. They all have dark skin. Chess, Checkers, and Junior all have long hair. Thomas has a big nose, and Victor has many scars . . . We can really dress this group up, give them war paint, feathers, etc., and really play up the Indian angle. I think this band could prove to be very lucrative for Cavalry Records. (190)

The agents exoticize the women, romanticize the men, and plan to market the band by turning the musicians into "real" Indians, into warriors with war paint and headdresses. The critique of the dominant culture's commodification of Native America, made possible in part by the consumed belief in the conquest of Native America, is explicit. The connection between twentieth-century popular culture's consistent misrepresentation of Native Americans and nineteenth-century U.S. government policies intended to destroy the Spokane is less accessible to a reader not acquainted with the historical context.

The fax carries the signatures of Phil Sheridan and George Wright, the Cavalry Record agents. General Phil Sheridan was the commander of the U.S. Army in the West after the Civil War and the source of the statement "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," which became a

rallying cry for “Indian haters.”⁹ Colonel George Wright was one of the officers who led the U.S. Army against the Spokane in the Inland Pacific Northwest in 1858. In events Alexie documents in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Wright presided over the destruction of several hundred of the Spokane’s horses. The event resonates in Alexie’s work as a signifier of the cruelty of the Army and the attempt by white culture in general to destroy the Spokane: like an open tribal wound, the ghosts of the horses scream throughout *Reservation Blues*. By effacing temporal boundaries and rewriting the stories of Sheridan and Wright, Alexie notes the persistence of cultural genocide into the present. Alexie conflates the military campaigns against the Spokane with the commodification of Native American culture; what Army officers did in the nineteenth century, agents of popular culture do in the twentieth.

Alexie also considers the influence of popular culture on white perceptions of Indians. Coyote Springs has two groupies, Betty and Veronica, whose names recall the young women in the “Archie’s” comic strip. Alexie’s Betty and Veronica “had long blonde hair and wore too much Indian jewelry. Turquoise rings, silver feather earrings, beaded necklaces. They always appeared in matching sundresses with birkenstocks” (41). The young women, owners of a bookstore in Seattle, also sing their own songs about Indians: “*Indian boy, don’t go away / Indian boy, what did you say? / Indian boy, I’ll turn on the light / Indian boy, come home tonight*” (42). For Betty and Veronica, commodifying Indians in dress and romanticizing them in song is a weekend hobby. Betty even tells the band, “White people want to be Indians. You all have things we don’t have. You live at peace with the earth. You are so wise” (168). Chess responds that Betty has never met Lester FallsApart, one of the Spokane Reservation’s self-destructive alcoholics. Betty and Veronica fail to understand that as members of the dominant culture, they have the power to appropriate the superficial elements of Native American culture they see as “authentic” and, then, to construct themselves as weekend Indians, to “play” Indian in their spare time.¹⁰ Betty confines the members of Coyote Springs within a romanticized paradigm of a peaceful, wise sachem-filled Native America. Alexie’s reader, who has access to more of the story than Betty, will recognize the absurdity of her perspective.

After Coyote Springs fails to satisfy Cavalry Records during a recording session, the company decides to sign Betty and Veronica instead. Sheridan says to Armstrong, the head of the company and at least a partial namesake of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer: “We can still sell that Indian idea. We don’t need any just-off-the-reservation

Indians. We can use these women . . . These women have got the Indian experience down. They really understand what it means to be Indian. They've been there." Sheridan's excitement about prospective profit increases: "Can't you see the possibilities? We dress them up a little. Get them into the tanning booth. Darken them up a bit. Maybe a little plastic surgery on those cheekbones. Get them a little higher, you know? Dye their hair black. Then we'd have Indians. People want to hear Indians" (269). Sheridan reduces Indian identity to skin color and cheekbones. With modern technology, he implies, 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 even need Indians.

Sheridan pitches his idea to Betty and Veronica by explaining "the upswing in the economic popularity of Indians." After minimal resistance, Sheridan says, "You play for this company as Indians. Or you don't play at all. I mean, who needs another white-girl folk group?" (272). The refrain of the new recording artist's first song is, "And my hair is blond / But I'm Indian in my bones / And my skin is white / But I'm Indian in my bones / And it don't matter who you are / You can be Indian in your bones" (295). Rather than an all-Indian rock band, Cavalry Records will promote a duo of white females who pose as Indians and sing about the universality of Indian identity. The romanticizing of Native America in their song contrasts with the difficult daily life the members of Coyote Springs have on the Spokane Reservation. There is violence, excessive alcohol consumption, commodity food, and inadequate HUD housing, and there are "all the graves of Indians killed by white people's cars, alcohol, uranium. All those Indians who had killed themselves" (282). But, as Sheridan explains, the blond and turquoise-fingered Betty and Veronica are "a more reliable kind of Indian" (272). Reliability, presumably, is not difficult for white, upper-middle class entrepreneurs who can assume ethnicity according to their whims.

Alexie's criticism of popular culture's influence on both white and Indian perceptions illustrates the intricacies of late twentieth-century Native American self-perception and identity. The narrator of *Reservation Blues* tells the reader, "Thomas dreamed about television and hunger. In his dream, he sat, all hungry and lonely . . . He turned on his little black-and-white television to watch white people live. White people owned everything: food, houses, clothes, children. Television constantly reminded Thomas of all he never owned" (70). As in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, television in *Reservation Blues* is a tool that distributes aggrandized and sanitized misrepresentations of the

dominant culture—that all white people are like the trust-fund child Veronica Lodge of the “Archie’s Comics” or the family on *Leave it to Beaver*, for example—and convinces Spokanes like Thomas they have nothing. Television also reinforces dominant culture stereotypes of Indians: Victor thinks, “But most Indians never drink. Nobody notices the sober Indians. On television, the drunk Indians emote. In books, the drunk Indians philosophize” (151). As Victor implies, emoting and philosophizing Indians are more marketable than sober ones.

Popular culture also influences the self-perception of Junior Polatkin, the drummer of Coyote Springs. He “always expected his visions to come true. Indians were *supposed* to have visions and receive messages from their dreams. All the Indians on television had visions that told them exactly what to do” (18). Junior’s longing for a vision attests to his need to identify himself with what he sees as definitively Native American and emphasizes the allure of a romanticized Native America; even he thinks a Native America in which all Indians have life-defining visions is desirable. That a vision is as foreign to him as it is to most Euro-Americans elucidates the falsity of popular culture’s representation of Native America.

Film images also make some of Alexie’s characters hyper-aware of their own tribal and individual identity crises. Victor thinks, “Indian men have started to believe their own publicity and run around acting like the Indians in the movies” (208). With film Indians still in mind several pages later, Victor asks Thomas, “You sound like we’re in some goddamn reservation coming-of-age movie. Who the fuck you think you are? Billy Jack? Who’s writing your dialogue?” (211).¹¹ Westerns in which the Indians were stereotypical bloodthirsty savages influence how a white New York waitress perceives Thomas and Chess: to the waitress, they are, “Indians like in the western movies. Like Geronimo” (239). The cook in the back of the restaurant decides they look like Puerto Ricans rather than Geronimo. His assessment is inadvertently accurate, because Thomas and Chess might look more like Puerto Ricans than cinematic Geronimos, who were usually played by actors such as the white, Brooklyn-born Chuck Connors in *Geronimo* (1962).¹²

In reference to Alexie’s frequent allusions to popular culture, writer Gloria Bird (Spokane) states, “In *Reservation Blues*, alluding to popular culture as a literary strategy does not serve as either a parody or as a serious interrogation of popular culture. It is a way of carrying the story from one subject to another” (47).¹³ However, Alexie does more than allude to popular culture productions: his narrative strategy is to revise and subvert the misrepresentations in popular culture narratives while

concomitantly emphasizing how the misrepresentations have a destructive influence on his characters' self-perceptions. Though he includes a broader condemnation of white pillaging of all marginalized cultures,¹⁴ Alexie focuses his revisions in reference to Euro-American/Native American conflict, as when he offers a lively version of a *Leave it to Beaver* storyline. Thomas, who tells his stories in *Reservation Blues* as the lead singer of Coyote Springs, presents the revised narrative of the Cleaver family:

A long time ago, two boys lived on a reservation. One was an Indian named Beaver, and the other was a white boy named Wally. Both loved to fancydance, but the white boy danced a step fancier. When the white boy won contests, all the Indian boys beat him up. But Beaver never beat up on the white boy. No matter how many times he got beat up, that white boy kept dancing. (82-83)

Even Thomas admits he does not know what his story means, though he offers "[m]aybe it means drums make everyone feel like an Indian" (83). By making Beaver Cleaver an Indian, Alexie alters the entire narrative structure of the television program. He uses a common Euro-American strategy of colonization, cultural appropriation, to satirize the dominant culture's constructions of its own Indians, like the Phil Sheridan-inspired Betty and Veronica. Under Alexie's authorship, Beaver Cleaver becomes an Indian, as does Hank Williams, who, the reader learns, is "*a god-damned Spokane Indian*" (91; author's emphasis). Alexie alerts the reader to the absurdity of white appropriation of Indian identity by reconstructing the dominant culture's ideal white people, the brunette upper-class Veronica, the blond working-class Betty, and the small-town, middle-class Beaver Cleaver, into Indians.

As indicated by his use of Sheridan and Wright as characters, Alexie has an interest in re-envisioning history. For example, Chess explains that her father, Old Luke Warm Water, killed Hitler; Thomas Builds-the-Fire indicates his father attained the same glory (120). Readers also learn that Big Mom, the Spokane matriarch, has taught the twentieth century's most well-known white musicians (200-01). However, the most significant historical revision Alexie makes involves Colonel George Wright. Wright refuses to participate in the charade of Betty and Veronica's band when he begins to feel guilty for the attempted destruction of Native America: Alexie explains, "Wright looked at Coyote Springs. He saw their Indian faces. He saw the faces of millions of Indians, beaten, scarred by smallpox and frostbite, split open by bayonets and bullets. He looked at his own white hands and saw the blood stains there" (244). Finally,

haunted by the screaming Spokane horses, Wright goes to his own grave to be with his wife, to whom he confesses his guilt and of whom he asks forgiveness. "Oh God," Wright says to his wife, sobbing, "I'm a killer" (271). Alexie refuses to give Wright a restful death. He gives the officer the conscience he should have had during his life; he makes Wright confess his crimes.

The difference between subverting popular culture narratives and revising Spokane tribal history is that a larger, non-Spokane audience has access to the source of his popular culture allusions. Alexie exploits this accessibility. With a superficial foundation constructed around a fanciful cultural ideal, mass-produced reductive narratives of white culture, such as the small-town middle-class story depicted in *Leave it to Beaver*, are vulnerable to mockery and subversion. In addition, the dominant culture distributes self-defining narratives in a large public arena with technology that disconnects the authors from the stories, thereby relinquishing control of audience interpretation. By intervening in a media the dominant culture privileges, Alexie claims an authoritative place from which to speak. Once he occupies an authoritative space, his narrative subversions enliven the voices the dominant culture's stories of conquest silence and exposes the absurd incongruities between the European and Euro-American narratives and what Cogewea in Mourning Dove's novel calls "actual conditions."

The cumulative effect of Alexie's attention to the practice of storytelling is to privilege the narrative power to create perception and, therefore, a culturally-sanctioned version of reality. European and Euro-American writers had presented their uncontested version of history for hundreds of years. As Louis Owens states in *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, "Native cultures—their voices systematically silenced—had no part in the ongoing discourse that evolved over several centuries to define the utterance 'Indian' in the language of the invaders" (*Other* 7). Alexie revises the narratives from the perspective of the invaded, and the cultural conflict becomes a battle of stories, or, more precisely, a battle between storytellers. By telling the same stories over and over again, Euro-Americans make the stories one-dimensional, static, and vulnerable to parodic revision.¹⁵ Alexie exploits this weakness by intervening in the narratives, exposing their destructive cultural biases and ideologies, and re-visioning them to tell new tales of Native American resistance.

NOTES

¹The following are the authors' tribal self-identifications: Erdrich, Chippewa; Owens, Choctaw-Cherokee; Welch, Blackfoot-Gros Ventre; and Alexie, Spokane-Coeur d'Alene. Mourning Dove was Okanogan.

²"Mohicans" is Cooper's misspelling of "Mohegans."

³In the 1996-97 season of NBC's FBI-drama "The Profiler," Means appeared in an episode entitled "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." NBC's publicity information on the episode reads, "Means portrays Uncle Joe, a wise elder whose appreciation of supernatural and tribal myths helps Sam Waters and the Violent Crime Task Force team in their investigation of the ritualistic slayings of chiefs on the reservation" ("Native"). The episode involves the adoption by a Euro-American family of a child from a fictional tribe. The white adoptive parents abusively force the child to learn about his tribal traditions. Rather than perpetuating violence on his adoptive parents, the psychologically damaged child returns to the reservation to take revenge on the tribal elders. In spite of Uncle Joe's ostensible spiritual strength in the face of this strange depiction of Native American pathology, Euro-American FBI agent Sam Waters must save wise old Uncle Joe from the serial killer after she connects with her spirit animal. In this narrative, powerful Euro-Americans save the weak, victimized Native Americans, and the white female protagonist appears "as" or "more" Native American than the Native American characters.

⁴See Terrace, *The Complete Encyclopedia of Television Programs: 1947-1979*, 575-576. *The Lone Ranger* ran for two-hundred twenty-one episodes between September 15, 1949, and September 4, 1965. An additional twenty-six episodes of an animated version ran between September 10, 1966 and September 6, 1969. A radio program of *The Lone Ranger* preceded the television and subsequent cinematic incarnations.

⁵In her article "Reservation Home Movies: Sherman Alexie's Poetry," Jennifer Gillan discusses how Alexie, in his poetry and several short stories from *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, confronts and attempts to resist the dominant culture's technology and the ubiquitous, destructive images disseminated by that technology.

⁶Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown have written two histories of the Spokane, *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun* and *Half-Sun on the Columbia: A Biography of Chief Moses*. For their account of the massacre of the Spokane's horses, see *The Spokane Indians*, 136-37. Alexie includes *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun* on the "Acknowledgments" page of *Reservation Blues*.

⁷For an account of Qualchan's hanging, see Ruby and Brown, *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun*, 139-40.

⁸Rather than engaging Tonto in a fistfight with the Lone Ranger, Thomas King (Cherokee) chooses to revise the identity of the masked hero. In his essay "Shooting the Lone Ranger," King explains he is annoyed that the Lone Ranger,

unlike other heroes such as Batman and Zorro, never removed his mask to assume a civilian identity. After concluding that the Lone Ranger remains masked because he is an Indian and, quite possibly, a woman, King presents his revision of the pilot episode of *The Lone Ranger* television series (4).

⁹ In *Sheridan: The Life and Wars of General Phil Sheridan*, Roy Morris, Jr., writes of Sheridan, "He did not say, as is commonly believed, 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian,' however much he may have believed it in his heart of hearts. What he did say, 'The only good Indians I ever saw were dead,' is less aphoristic but also less ruthless, more a joke than a philosophy" (4). Morris explains the context of Sheridan's "joke" and offers an analysis from a "strictly grammatical perspective" of the difference between what Sheridan actually said and what history attributes to him (328). The distinction Morris offers has little relevance in reference to Alexie's use of the character Sheridan as a twentieth-century exploiter of Native America.

¹⁰ The publishers of the "Archie's" comic strip construct their own Native American Veronica in "Archie's Girl's: Betty and Veronica," No. 305. Veronica appears in "Fringe Fashions"; fringe refers to the style of leather she wears as well as to the marginalized but exoticized status her clothes signify. In his compelling study *Playing Indian: American Identities from the Boston Tea Party to the New Age* (tentatively scheduled for publication in 1998 by Yale U P), Phil Deloria examines the history of Europeans and Euro-Americans "playing" Indian. His work provides a broad historical context for a reading of the sections of Alexie's novel that include Betty and Veronica.

¹¹ Director and star Tom Laughlin filmed *Billy Jack*, which was a huge box office success, in 1971. Billy Jack was a mixed-blood Vietnam veteran. Coincidentally, Laughlin filmed *The Legend of the Lone Ranger* in 1981.

¹² Wes Studi, a full-blood Cherokee, played Geronimo in Walter Hill's 1994 film *Geronimo: An American Legend*. Much of the dialogue in the film is in Apache and subtitled in English (Studi learned Apache for the role). Superficially, at least, the film attempts to revise Hollywood's historical misrepresentation of Native America. However, the narrative is twice-removed from Geronimo's perspective: a white soldier tells the story of another white soldier's relationship with Geronimo.

¹³ In her essay "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*" Bird adds that many reviewers have dangerously misconstrued Alexie's fictional landscape as an accurate representation of Spokane life. In addition, she notes that Alexie "preys upon a variety of native cultures," and notes that *Reservation Blues* lacks both "emotional investment" and "a sense of responsibility" in reference to his depiction of Spokane culture (see 48; 50; 52).

¹⁴ For example, Elvis Presley makes an appearance as a cavalry scout (73). By appropriating and profiting from a genre of music that originated in the African-American community, without acknowledging or crediting sources, Elvis is an apt signifier for white colonization. In addition, Presley starred in director

Don Siegel's *Flaming Star* (1960), in which the singer plays a "half-breed" Kiowa who circumstances force to choose between his white and Indian selves.

¹⁵Thomas King, in his novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, revises and subverts several European and Euro-American narratives of conquest. In particular, four characters conspire to revise a Western starring John Wayne and Richard Widmark as the plot reaches the anticipated generic climax. In the revised and subverted version, the Native Americans triumph over the U.S. Army, and the U.S. Cavalry does not appear to save the day. I address the intricacies of King's revisions and subversions of Western religion, canonized literature, national myths, and popular culture narratives in a different essay.

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Rock and Roll, Redskins, and Blues in Sherman Alexie's Work

P. Jane Hafen

As a Native woman responding to the writings of Sherman Alexie, my mind and heart, much like my heritage, go in diverse directions. Also, I am aware of Alexie's scorn for academic dissection of his work, so I will follow a little bit of both paths. First I will present a cultural analysis that originally had a colonized title appropriate to this venue. I will conclude with some of my other thoughts on how I as a Native woman personally respond to Alexie's writings.

The writings of Sherman Alexie present a fusion of historical sensibilities and grim realisms of contemporary Indian life on the Spokane Reservation. Amid the imagery of Crazy Horse, cavalry charges, rez rods, basketball, addictions to alcohol and Pepsi, and send-ups of Indian lovers, he does a major turn with a repertoire of rock and roll and blues references. Each musical style, even when blended, represents what Houston Baker calls a "vernacular voice" that plays against the domination of the mainstream culture (649). Neither the blues nor rock and roll are Spokane culture specific, or particularly American Indian, for that matter. If anything, rock and roll started as American counter-culture that has since become institutionalized. Baker places blues at the center of the Afro-American cultural matrix. Alexie has taken these tropes and reinscribed them for his own purposes of presenting an American Indian cultural and political view of subversion and resistance. On one hand he is demonstrating a realism of reservation life. Young Indian people in his writings and those who really inhabit the "rez" embrace a variety of musics from powwow tapes to rock, rap, and blues. On the other hand, Alexie may be using these musics as mediators, as claimed and reclaimed

expressions that in the context of the cosmology presented in his writings compel the reader to reconsider the popular imagery.

Alexie addresses rock and roll in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* with the chapter titled "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock." The title is a narrative itself by creating a sense of character, place, time, and artistic allusion. In that celebrated performance Jimi bends, twists, and screeches the National Anthem, playing notes not on the staff and rhythms outside the meter. He is a rock and roll subversive icon colliding with national icon at a legendary gathering of mostly indistinguishable nonconformists in the chaos of the late 1960s. Hendrix has since been mythologized and institutionalized in an ironic turn of the establishment culture he was playing against.

In the first sentence of the short story, the narrator, Victor, identifies the unique role of Indians at the time: "During the sixties, my father was the perfect hippie, since all the hippies were trying to be Indians" (24). In a multi-layered inversion, hippies represent a mainstream culture that appropriates images, not realities, of Indians. Rather than a subversive gesture, hippie Indian imitations are merely another extension of colonialism. By joining the hippie community at Woodstock, the father both plays into and reinterprets the image. He feels a deep affinity with the anti-image of Jimi, a fellow native from Washington state. Not only does the father capture this Woodstock moment but he ritually relives it by playing and replaying Jimi's audiocassette tape. As the narrator describes:

Jim Hendrix and my father became drinking buddies. Jimi Hendrix waited for my father to come home after a long night of drinking. Here's how the ceremony worked:

1. I would lie awake all night and listen for the sounds of my father's pickup.
2. When I heard my father's pickup, I would run upstairs and throw Jimi's tape into the stereo.
3. Jimi would bend his guitar into the first note of "The Star-Spangled Banner" just as my father walked inside.
4. My father would weep, attempt to hum along with Jimi, and then pass out with his head on the kitchen table.
5. I would fall asleep under the table with my head near my father's feet.
6. We'd dream together until the sun came up.

The days after, my father would feel so guilty that he would tell me stories as a means of apology. (26)

The ritual inspires stories of reconciliation. Although it is procedural, numerically linear, and orderly, it initiates the randomness of connecting lives through narrative and storytelling. This ritualized storytelling and music enable the child, Victor, to unite, however tenuously, with his alcoholic father.

Victor and his father make a pilgrimage to Seattle to visit Jimi's grave where Victor observes that Jimi died at a younger age than Jesus Christ. Indeed, rather than Christ, Jimi has become the figure of atonement and mediation. Through Victor and his father, we hear Jimi in a way we have never heard him before, and we see, through these Spokane Indians, a new dimension of subversion and resistance culture.

In Alexie's novel, *Reservation Blues*, Victor is the character who inherits the guitar of blues legend and actual historic figure, Robert Johnson. Johnson is the blues guitarist who, according to folklore, sold his soul to the devil in exchange for prodigious musical skills. Alexie includes Robert Johnson as a character in the novel. However, his first explorations of blues music and Johnson appear in "Red Blues," a series of short vignettes in *Old Shirts & New Skins*. In that work the narrative voice repeats the question: "Can you hear the music, Indian boy?" The music can be familiar and popular: resounding images of 7-11s, pay phones, cars, or little league.

The music also resonates through myth and history in the vignette numbered thirteen. Alexie plays on the legend of a song that Johnson recorded but has never been found, and suggests that the music can be both specific and general, past and present:

Robert Johnson, Robert Johnson, where is that missing song? Someone told me it was hidden at Sand Creek.
Someone told me it was buried near Wounded Knee.
Someone told me Crazy Horse never died; he just picked up a slide guitar. . . . (87)

He continues: "If you listen close, if you listen tight, you can hear drums 24 hours a day. Someone told me once that a drum means *I love you*; someone told me later it means *Tradition is repetition*" (87). Repetition of characters and images and circular narrative reinscribe Spokane traditions through Alexie's voice and his Spokane characters. The blues become the means for the narrator to tell his collective history. His people were not at Sand Creek or Wounded Knee; neither are the Spokane related to Crazy Horse. Yet these are events and figures that have impact upon all Native peoples. Contemporary knowledge of Robert Johnson, a major musical influence on Jimi Hendrix, allows mediation of the historical past with the present.

Blues, along with basketball, are tropes in the novel, *Reservation Blues*. Each chapter of the novel is prefaced with a blues lyric. In a thwarted heroic quest, Victor, Junior Polatkin and Thomas Builds-the-fire form a rock band called Coyote Springs. Along the way they pick up and discard two white girls, Betty and Veronica, who ultimately succeed as musicians by passing themselves off as Indians. The band picks up and keeps two Flathead girls, Chess and Checkers Warm Water. The composition of the band figuratively represents an ideal tribal community where the parts are greater than the whole, where the harmonizing of singular voices with instruments, melodies, and rhythms assemble together. In addition to the specific instrumentations, the individuals in the band represent a wholeness by balancing points of view and gender.

The inspiration for the band comes from Robert Johnson and his emblematic guitar. Johnson has been led to Big Mom, the mythic Spokane woman who cooks the best fry bread in the world and instructs various musicians. The narrative that introduces Johnson to Big Mom also refers to the historical killing of one thousand Spokane ponies:

In 1992, Big Mom still watched for the return of those slaughtered horses and listened to their songs. With each successive generation, the horses arrived in different forms and with different songs, called themselves Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye and so many other names. Those horses rose from everywhere and turned to Big Mom for rescue, but they all fell back into the earth again.

For seven generations, Big Mom had received those horses and held them in her arms. Now on a bright summer day, she watched a black man walk onto the Spokane Indian Reservation. (10)

The Native American historical and numbered regenerative references are obvious. Less clear is Alexie's use of self-destructive rock musicians or the murdered Robert Johnson. The tragedy of these real-life figures might tempt critics into analyzing the tragedy of the Vanishing American or terminal creed politics. Indeed, Coyote Springs fails as a band and Junior Polatkin blows his life away with a gun. Nevertheless, the resolution of the novel is positive, with Big Mom instigating tribal and communal support of Thomas, Chess, and Checkers as they embark on a journey of survival.

Alexie focuses not on the tragedy but on the survival and the means to survival which are tribal and specific. Part of the success comes from the process, the journey itself.

Coyote Springs created a tribal music that scared and

excited white people in the audience . . . The audience reached for Coyote Springs with brown and white hands that begged for more music, hope and joy. (79-80)

Yet, the band succumbs to hubris and seals its inevitable fate: "Coyote Springs felt powerful, fell in love with the power and courted it." Victor and Junior are seduced not only by power but by Betty and Veronica. They transgress Alexie's fundamental stance against interracial unions that lead to tribal dissolution. True survival comes through Thomas, the teller of traditional stories, who overcomes those temptations and remains with the Flathead Indian women.

However, with this mixture of tragedy and survival humor, Alexie recreates a universe where the blues hurt so good. Big Mom teaches the band a lost chord that resonates through the reservation, history and its audience:

Big Mom played the loneliest chord that the band had ever heard. . . . [She] walked out of the bedroom carrying a guitar made of a 1965 Malibu and the blood of a child killed at Wounded Knee in 1890 . . . Big Mom hit that chord over and over, until Coyote Springs had memorized its effects on the bodies. Junior had regained consciousness long enough to remember his failures, before the force of the music knocked him out again. . . . "All Indians can play that chord," Big Mom said. "It's the chord created especially for us." (206-07)

Big Mom's chord is the genetic memory that unites diverse Indian peoples. It is the narrative chord that escapes specific musicality, yet is heard through regenerative storytelling. The chord has the particular contemporary overtones that reverberate through mythic time and Spokane sensibilities.

When I read Sherman Alexie, I know his work; I hear that musical chord. I recognize the circumstances and the characters. The reservation where I grew up was, like most, tribally ethnocentric. I and a handful of other Indians and mixed bloods were outsiders to both the tribe and the white community. We had to forge our own identities. I chose the academic route and became the token showpiece in the public school system. James Dickson made a name for himself by playing basketball and running off with a white girl named Cherie. The Neskahis were also athletes and attracted to white girls. We were band geeks, too. Arlie Neskahi and I sat together and played baritone. He went on to form his own music group and company. He markets his music through a web site. We Indians were an odd collection that the white teachers and community

recognized as Indian Others but did not distinguish from the major tribe. Those Indians, Ute Mountain Utes, did not generally include us. They were the hard drinking, fast driving, traditionalists. White boys I knew used to get their weekend entertainment by rolling drunk Utes in the dark alleys of town. These Indians of my youth were much like the characters on the Spokane reservation of Sherman Alexie. After high school I heard stories of how one by one young men followed the path of Junior Polatkin and took their own lives. Or, like Victor, many drifted in and out of alcoholic rehabilitation. My own sister lost her life in that struggle. While gritty realities of Alexie's reservation life may serve as an outlet for white liberal guilt, they are all too familiar and personal to me.

I identify with Alexie's personal revelations as they point to statistical trends in Native populations. He and I are part of this genetic inheritance he discusses in a poem from *The Summer of Black Widows*:

Diabetes
Having learned sugar kills me
piece by piece, I have to eat
with more sense
than taste
so I travel alone in this
limited feast, choosing
the right place
and plate . . . (44)

The high incidence of diabetes among Native populations is well documented, yet does not correspond with romantic notions of Indian peoples. The introductions of milk sugars and other dietary changes into the lives of Native peoples have led to major health crises not unlike initial epidemic encounters. This historic factor is a daily awareness and disease I must live with.

Recently, I took my two oldest sons, aged twenty-one and nineteen, to our reservation. We drove our '96 sport utility vehicle and mingled with the tourists. We played nickel slots at the tribal casino where my younger son could legally gamble. The journey to place and family is one of regeneration. In *Reservation Blues*, though, Alexie offers little compassion for mixed bloods like my children and grotesquely simplifies their interactions with their heritage. Checkers Warm Water observes:

Those quarter-blood and eighth-blood grandchildren will
find out they're Indian and torment the rest of us real
Indians. They'll come out to the reservation, come to our
powwows, in their nice clothes and nice cars, and remind the
real Indians how much we don't have. Those quarter-bloods

and eighth-bloods will get all the Indian jobs, all the Indian chances, because they look white. Because they're safer.
(283)

Every time I return to the "rez" I am aware of my economic and educational privileges. I rarely forget the life or the people I knew from my childhood. When we went to the TCBY in town (where I could indulge in a sugar-free dessert) we encountered two young Indian men who were very drunk and trying to panhandle. I did not and do not know what I can do to help those young men. Their suffering has not produced my life, nor have my lucky turns of fortune led to their condition.

In the world of Indian identity politics, Alexie is uncomfortably essentialist. He raises significant questions, but his answers are uncompromising and not always consistent. My children, as privileged as they are, do not benefit from Indian preference or educational subsidies. We have tried to give them a traditional sense of who they are and where they come from. We have told them the stories of our peoples. However, as mixed bloods they suffer indignities from the ignorance and prejudices of others. For example, my second son who does not "look Indian" once wore his bead choker to school where his high school English teacher ridiculed him for "playing Indian Joe." At college, my older son who does "look Indian" has suffered violent and personal attacks of racism.

Nevertheless, Alexie's sharp edge of essentialism and tribal awareness unmasks institutional and historical racism. As American Indians we have the collective historical and genetic memory of Phillip Sheridan, Mr. Armstrong, and George Wright from *Reservations Blues*. We play with popular cultural images like those found in *Lone Ranger*. Like the characters in *Indian Killer*, we live with the exploitative novelist wanabees like Jack Wilson, professors like Dr. Clarence Mather who fill our children and students with misdirected Noble Savage romanticisms, and those well meaning individuals who like Olivia and Daniel Smith want to possess us in the name of rescuing us.

As a scholar, I hope Alexie's writings will challenge critics to recognize that Native American Literature is not simply an exercise in literary theory. He represents real life, and I believe his intended audience consists of real Indians, whoever they may be. It seems facile to apply techniques of post-structuralism, cultural studies, post-colonialisms or the amorphous postmodernism to his works, even as I have done in the first part of this paper. These approaches often work to illuminate the text and are often most publishable. Nevertheless, I think it is a greater challenge for mainstream critics to assess his work in terms of tribal and intellectual sovereignty as called for by Robert Allen Warrior in *Tribal Secrets*. The

greater critical challenge is to acknowledge that Alexie's work depicts real contemporary peoples who are not historical artifacts, anthropological phenomena, objects of literary theories, or simply earth's children.

Finally, I like the writings of Sherman Alexie because they make me laugh. In the face of dismal reservation life, urban crisis of self, community and identity, he can make me laugh, often by inverting imagery and turning inside jokes. He helps make the pain bearable. I conclude with two short quotes from poems in *First Indian On the Moon*. The first is from "Seven Love Songs Which Include the Collected History of the United States of America" and depicts the paradoxical realism of his writings. The second from "Song" recalls the musicality and timelessness of Alexie's voice.

And we both laughed at the impossibility of all of it at the
impossibility of us. Who would ever believe this story? If
we translated our lives into every language could we find an
audience that understood the irony? (65)

Believe me, the warriors are coming back
to take their place beside you
rising
beyond the "just surviving"
singing
those new songs
that sound
exactly
like the old ones.
(109)

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FORUM

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REVIEWS

From the Glittering World: A Navajo Story. Irvin Morris. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1997. \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8061-2895-X. 269 pages.

Irvin Morris's first book, *From the Glittering World: A Navajo Story*, tells about a people's capacity to survive beyond unimaginably real and continuing evil. The book begins at the beginning, with Morris's retelling of the Navajo emergence story. "Alk'idáá'jiní. It happened a long time ago, they say. In the beginning there was only darkness . . ." (3). Then new worlds and beings came into existence, including the world in which we now live, the Glittering Fifth World. And it is from this world that Morris tells us his story, a story that is varyingly raw and brutal, sacred and hopeful. We read about external and internal threats to people's lives and dreams, but perhaps most importantly, we read about their continuance and survival through time and today.

In the emergence story, the Holy People and Wind or Spirit People gave *Diné bikéyah* (the homeland of the Navajo) to the Navajo people and placed a beautiful rainbow around the land "for protection and as a blessing and a reminder of the sacredness of this land" (15). But that land and the people are threatened, on the one hand by the relentless colonization, oppression, and genocide against Native peoples by the *bilagáanaa* (white people), and on the other hand by the seductive allure of the fool's gold of our material culture. Morris makes poignantly clear throughout his volume that this glittering world of ours is a world in which all that glitters is not gold. Accordingly, we see Morris and the other individuals

in his stories varyingly captivated and repulsed by the seductions of this glittering world.

While Morris, his people, and their homeland survive into today, there is no easy resolution anywhere in this volume. In "The Hyatt, the Maori, and the Yanamamo," a family struggles with the decision to put an elderly grandmother in a nursing home. "In the old days, old folks stayed with the family to the end" (240). In "*T'áá shábik'ehgo* (Sunwise)," Morris describes the beauty of the land where he grew up, but even in the beauty of his descriptions, the compromises put upon the region are omnipresent: "Ancient *Anaa'sázi* settlements, oil refineries, abandoned uranium mines, natural gas wells, recreation areas, and *bilagáanaa* homesteads share the land with hundreds of *Diné* families. At night, orange gas flares lapping the air over refineries light up the valley and the mountainsides" (37). The nighttime lights produced by refineries that desecrate the land mask the reality of a place where, Morris tells us, "The school is dying, the HUD houses are deteriorating, and the scattered trees, shrubs, hedges, and rose bushes have assumed curious postures in their fight to survive" (45). So, too, do the people who populate these stories.

The emergence story begins with darkness, and Morris's volume, his Navajo story, and the worlds into which he invites his readers are worlds that straddle the lines between light and darkness, good and evil, joy and despair. And even though Morris begins his volume with a prayer for beauty and goodness (from the Beauty Way), the stories within the volume starkly present the darker side of life for many Navajo people (Morris, others he's known in person and through story, and his fictional characters). He tells us, "In the beginning there was only darkness" (3). And in this book, Morris returns us to that point of beginning as the light and beauty of the Fifth World is dimmed and lessened back to the point of darkness.

Morris situates the destructive turn in the events of the Long Walk when the Navajo were forcibly removed from their homeland. Due to several centuries of European and Euroamerican colonization, that homeland has been fractured and the people's lives (both on and off the reservation) have been ruptured leaving a reality that is bleak, confused, hopeless, and dark. Morris presents a largely existential view of the world, much like James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, and also like Welch's book, he punctuates the dark worlds of his story with small pleasures and humor, but these punctuations merely provide a brief respite from those realities to which he inevitably returns us. Morris and his fellow characters survive as best they can, but more often than not, this is a terribly compromised survival.

The book is divided into four sections: "Into the Glittering World" (emergence, internment at *Hwééldi*, and return), "Child of the Glittering World" (autobiographical stories from Morris's childhood and early adult years), "Travels in the Glittering World" (contemporary autobiographical stories), and the final and title section "From the Glittering World" (fictional stories). While the sections and individual stories and vignettes can be roughly divided between the factual and the fictional, the historical and the mythical, and the lived and the literary, in fact, each of the pieces that make up Morris's volume straddles and intertwines each of these categories in varying ways. The categorization that is a part of our discursive legacy from Plato and Aristotle on is an objectively distancing orientation that approaches the world and persons in the world as objects of study, as texts. But when we respond to the world, its stories, and ourselves in relationally conversive ways, then what would otherwise be objects become fellow subjects, fellow persons in the world with us. In such manner, we become closer to the complexities of the world rather than simplistically reducing them to the limiting categories of our preconceived theories and criticisms.

For example, Morris's story about the Long Walk and the internment of the Navajo in Ft. Sumner, "*Hwééldi* (Fort Sumner)," not only tells us about the historical events of the 1860s, but perhaps even more importantly, his story tells us about the realization of the myth of manifest destiny and the effects in the world when decisions are based upon illusions and a discursive distance that defines people (and all of creation) as objects to act upon and against. Analogously, Morris's emergence story communicates the mythic origins of the Navajo people, and yet it also offers us real world teachings about human frailty in the past and mythic times and, also, the value of fidelity and marriage, human diversity and intermarriage, and honesty and trustworthiness. Which of these stories is the more mythical and which the more historical? I'd say, both.

As is evident in Morris's emergence story, the oral storytelling tradition which he grew up within is a relational and conversive (conservative and transformative) framework in which tellers and listeners co-create their stories and, in turn, their own lives, too. Morris brings many elements of the oral tradition into his written stories/tellings, and he invites his readers to become *listener-readers* who hear and become part of his stories. Through his initial sharing of his people's history, he gives us the needed background knowledge with which to understand and, thereby, enter the subsequent stories. Like the oral storyteller who crafts the telling in ways to enable the listeners to enter the story, Morris invites his reader-listeners into his own world, at times, doing so warmly and

hopefully, albeit usually in a guarded manner, and at other times, doing so very directly and harshly with the raw anger of centuries of horrific colonization.

It is significant that Morris begins his book with his own retelling of the Navajo emergence story. In the tradition of Navajo oral storytelling, Morris begins his story at the very beginning because our understanding of an event or story must be informed by the events and stories that preceded it. Morris tells this section in one voice and as one uninterrupted telling without paragraph or section breaks. In so doing, Morris maintains a strict and protective control over this narrative. Other sections of the volume are more open ended, with a range of conversive literary strategies from the oral tradition such as voice shifts to the second person and line, paragraph, and page breaks that open up the writing to the reader's (listener's) responses.

The first section of the book moves from the emergence story to the story of the Navajo internment in *Hwééldi* (Ft. Sumner). The juxtaposition of the two stories is poignant. Morris ends the emergence telling, "So long as we remain within these boundaries we will be living in the manner that the Holy People prescribed for us" (15). Here, Morris stresses the significance of *Diné'tah* to him and his fellow Navajos. For the Navajo, the sacred is largely spatially defined in relation to *Diné'tah*, the Navajo homeland within their four sacred mountains. The consequences of the forced removal of the Navajo from *Diné'tah* include the divided world and divided selves that confront Navajo people on a daily basis today. In contrast to the traditional teachings in which the sacred is at the center of the people's lives, removal from their homeland upsets the centering balance and decenters the people in relation to their senses of place and self. The extreme implications of such decentering are seen in the genocidal policies of the United States' government and the despair of individual persons who live increasingly self-destructive lives.

Morris punctuates the horrific historicity of the clash and destruction of worlds and lives with a passage from the military instructions given to Kit Carson: "The Indian men . . . are to be killed whenever, wherever you can find them: the women and children will not be harmed, but you will take them prisoners . . ." (17). This passage, placed between the emergence and *Hwééldi* stories, highlights the intertwined stories/histories that inform the entire volume. The genocidal policies of the United States government directed against the Navajo (and other Indian) people and the Navajo emergence story provide the background (mythical and historical) against which we must approach and read Morris's succeeding autobiographical and fictional stories.

The second section begins with Morris's own introduction. We get to know him through his homeland, his family, and his clan affiliations. Throughout Morris's volume, there is a continual emphasis on the sense of place and the importance of land, the land, *bikéyah* (his homeland). Morris vividly describes the place where he is from, the place that orients him even when he is away from *Dinétaah*. He explains its significance, "I have seen these landmarks every morning of my life, whether or not I am actually home. These mountains and formations are as real and as alive for me as are the stories that animate them. Better than anything else, they tell me who I am" (41). Here again, we see the interwoven threads of history and story, place and identity—each part and person defined and understood in relation to the greater whole.

Morris, a Navajo, belongs to the *Tóbaahí* (Edgewater) clan, and he is born for the *Tótsohnii* (Big Water) clan. He writes, "*Tóbaahí nishli, doo Tótsohnii éi báshishchíín*" (47). In his use of the Navajo language here and throughout the volume, Morris brings his readers even more closely into his world. The linguistic shifts to Navajo do not distance his reader-listeners from his story, but, rather, they offer an even more intimate welcome to his world. Throughout Morris's writing, he insures that those unfamiliar with the Navajo language are not left out of the stories. Salient points of the passages in Navajo are usually restated in English. And where not, those passages, nevertheless, serve to bring the reader-listener more closely into a Navajo world in which one would hear both English and Navajo spoken. This world and these stories are defined in relational terms, and that includes the storytelling connective links that welcome the reader-listener into that world and into the stories.

In Morris's identification through his clan affiliations, he asserts that to know him is to know him relationally as part of the larger web of his clans and his tribe. As Morris explains, "The most important thing is that we are never alone" (47). In this one statement, Morris introduces his readers into a world and a world view that contrasts dramatically with the individualism of the dominant American culture. And this contrast provides the stark juxtaposition that pervades Morris's stories and his own life. The story that immediately succeeds Morris's own introduction is "*Ma'ii jool dlooshi* (Peripatetic Coyote)" in which Coyote's egocentrism leads to the violent death of his children. This very disturbing story serves as a reminder to fathers of their responsibilities as protectors and guardians of their children. And more broadly, the story underscores the potentially disastrous consequences when one forgets that the importance of self is not as a separate individual but as a person in relation to other persons (human and nonhuman) in the world.

Throughout the second section, Morris relates stories that continually demonstrate the extent to which his own storied world (lived and imagined) has been fractured by a seemingly endless series of loss and abuse: his parents' divorce and the apparent absence of the father in his children's lives (a fact that personalizes and makes the coyote story all the more poignant), precocious and disturbing sexual behaviors among children, physical and psychological abuse in boarding school, and physical abuse at the hands of his older brothers—behaviors that he largely attributes to the effects of colonization. "Not until many years later did I understand what BIA boarding schools were and what they had done to generations of Indian children, including my brothers" (81).

After his stories about his early years, Morris takes us into the lower and unbelievably twisted worlds he experienced in California: alcoholism, male prostitution, and a poultry and egg farm in which the physical (and even sexual) abuse of the chickens is mirrored in the lost lives of the workers. As he becomes a part of these worlds, his own orientation to the world shifts, and he begins to find humor in what would have otherwise struck him as horrific. In these stories, he leaves California, returning to the Navajo reservation to go to Navajo Community College. In each return to the reservation, to *Diné'tah*, to his family and his people and their ceremonies, Morris remembers and recenters himself back into that world. It appears that it is only when Morris and his Navajo characters are safe within the environs of *Diné'tah* that they have the consistent clarity of sight to discriminate between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, the sacred and the sacrilegious, for the seductions of evil in the world are powerful and illusorily appealing.

The final section of the volume includes seven fictional stories that demonstrate Morris's craft as a writer of short stories. These stories are the most literary and self-enclosed and the least oral in the volume. In contrast to the earlier and more orally conversive sections in which the reader is expected to co-create and complete the spare stories and vignettes with Morris as storyteller, the final stories are more developed with Morris stepping more firmly into the role of the writer. Of course, degrees of textuality and orality range along a continuum, and all of Morris's pieces in this volume straddle both the written and the oral in different ways and to different extents. Analogously, all of the pieces straddle, as well, the continuum between the fictional and the factual, the imagined and the historical, and this is true for the final stories, too.

One of these, "The Snake of Light," tells the story of an old woman who has outlived her husband and only child, and who has protectively raised her one grandchild even as she watches the encroachment of the

bilagáanaa (white) world. Her grandson is forcibly taken from her and placed in boarding schools and then sent overseas to fight the *bilagáanaa*'s war for those who, Morris explains in an earlier piece, "are guilty of genocide and oppression too, as well as the illegal occupation of this hemisphere" (184). It is this irony that continues to tear apart Morris and his characters and, in fact, ourselves and the entire world in which we all live.

The old grandmother in "The Snake of Light" watches a road crew divide up her valley, "exact[ing] a heavy toll on the life of the valley. The shells of innumerable insects and carcasses of animals soon littered the sides of the pavement" (205). She also watches her grandson withdraw from her and their world. "He had seen their bustling cities and tasted of their food and their women . . . But he had learned, too, of his inferior place in that world. And it was with that experience that he looked at her now, as a *bilagáanaa* might look at an old Indian woman, through a barrier of words and things (206). We, too, watch his change as he descends into the abyss of alcoholism and a violent death on a highway near a border tavern. Up to this point, I had read this story as an outsider watching the events in a fairly detached, although I would like to think a thoughtful and caring, manner. But Morris punctuates the young man's death by a spacing break before the final section of the story, and it was in that space that I became a part of this story. It was several minutes before I could continue and read to the end.

You see, I used to live in Gallup, New Mexico, and there we all knew of the fairly regular highway injuries and deaths on 666—the highway that runs north from Gallup. I use the term "regular" to convey both the frequency of those accidents and also the fact that in irregular places and times, the horrific can begin to seem ordinary, everyday, regular. One friend of mine (an Indian guy) who was a state trooper took it upon himself to tell me his recent stories, "Another DWI on 666. You should have seen this guy, Susan! His arms and legs . . ." There is a rawness to Gallup that instills a certain detachment from the everyday realities of that place, a detachment that serves as one of the various and dysfunctional survival strategies that one develops in unnatural places and times. Unlike much of the rest of the United States in which white middle America still struggles to insulate itself from the realities of a world in distress, in places like Gallup, reality is far too present for anyone to ever really successfully escape it, although many try.

In any case, Morris related the death of the young man in his story, a young man that I had come to know and care about in the ways that stories bring together persons (real and imagined, writers, readers, and

characters) and also worlds (also real and imagined, lived and read). And as I read/listened to that story, I realized that I had just gotten to know the person behind all those DWI fatality stories I had been told. I've been gone from Gallup for twelve years now. Perhaps it has taken that long for me to be able to really listen to Morris's stories as all stories deserve to be listened to—in the ways that enable us to become part of those stories and in the only ways in which real learning is ever achieved.

The remaining stories in the volume include "Squatters" about a Navajo couple who live in a cardboard hut behind a store in Gallup, "August" about a nightlong (possibly Native American church?) ceremony (written in the same protective and controlled manner as the earlier emergence story), and "The Blood Stone" about the history of a red stone taken from *Hwééldi* and kept within one family and finally given to a grandson to return to the *bilagáanaa* world from whence it came. Interestingly, the stone's return ends up being unexpectedly violent—a fitting return in light of the stone's origin. These stories, like the rest of the volume, are very serious stories that bespeak the difficulties of this world. The bleakness of these stories is depressing. And there is little hope presented in a happy interweaving of worlds and cultures. Such an intermingling is depicted as a necessary and inevitable evil. The non-Indian characters in the volume are variously drawn as inane, foolish, insistent, and/or dangerous predators, buffoons, and otherwise lost souls. As Morris judges beyond *Diné'tah*, "I was initiated by my traditional grandfather into many of the ways of my people. . . . I learned many stories, and through them I learned of things that have no existence in the limited world of the *bilagáanaa*" (79). Of course, the world Morris criticizes is the material culture of the West, now exported globally—a world that previously held a seductive allure for him, "I was drawn by the myth" (86).

There is less humor in Morris's volume than I would have expected, and much of the humor has a dark edge to it. This is a survival humor. If not the sort of humor that heals, it is the sort of humor that helps the battered get through each day. Morris does point out the importance of humor among the *Yéi'ii* (the Holy People), noting how *Tóneinilii* the Water Sprinkler, teases "the *Yéi'ii* as well as the spectators . . . to invoke the healing power of laughter" (65). But there is little of this sort of humor in the volume, appearing most prevalently in the family vignettes in the last two stories, "The Hyatt, the Maori, and the Yanamamo" and "Meat and the Man." Perhaps this is because Morris lives away from his homeland and his family. Humor that is present in the book generally centers around families and the everyday interactions between people who

care about each other.

One passage that took me completely by surprise came in Morris's otherwise serious description of his early school years and the missionary efforts of the reservation churches. As a child, Morris had joined a number of his classmates with a Navajo man who represented one of the churches. Morris writes, "The praise belongs to *Him*, he said, pointing solemnly at the ceiling. He had many lessons like that" (79). Morris's joke about the man's piety towards the ceiling was one of the few places in the volume in which I laughed out loud. And yet, even though Morris directs his joke at this man's behavior, there is no sense that he is harshly ridiculing him. It is a humor that teaches us about human frailty but in a way that is not hurtful. You see, in the very next sentence, Morris praises the man's singing voice leaving us with an appreciative and understanding love for him. This contrasts significantly with the much harsher humor directed at the expense of a rude and secretive white man in the final story "Meat and the Man." But even here, in the final story of the volume, Morris softens the anger of generations and centuries, choosing to end that story with old Grandma's response to the strange middle-aged white man, "'I thought he was nice—and rather good-looking, if you ask me,' said Grandma. 'What did you say his name was again?'" (257). Whether or not Grandma really means this or is just joking around, I imagine everyone listening to her and laughing and enjoying each other and the entire story. I, too, laughed with them at the end. As Morris reminds us, laughter is healing, and it is certainly a delightful and merciful way to end the book, especially a book filled with so much suffering and loss.

From the Glittering World: A Navajo Story is not a pretty story, but it is real. Morris tells us much about the reality and consequences of the glittering world today. This is Morris's true story, a story that he remembers, lives, and imagines, a story that is his people's and his own, too. No Rousseauian romanticization of contemporary Native America here. There is much to be learned in these pages, and they serve as an important complement to the growing ranks of contemporary Navajo writers, including Luci Tapahonso, Rex Lee Jim, Nia Francisco, Della Frank, and Esther Belin, among others. Does Morris tell us "the" Navajo story? No, as he makes very clear in his title, this is "a" Navajo story. This is his story of his people, his land, and his life, and as such, it is a quite remarkable story. One that will not easily be forgotten. Morris's craft is steady, and he powerfully interweaves strategies from both oral and literary traditions. This is a vitally important book, for even in light of the unbelievable suffering depicted in these pages, the very presence of *From the Glittering World* profoundly demonstrates the survival and

continuance of the Navajo people today and into the future. As Morris comments about a gathering at the Salt River Indian community center, "*We are still here!*" (146, his emphasis).

Susan B. Brill

The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year. Louise Erdrich.
New York: HarperCollins, 1995. \$21 paper,
ISBN 0-06-018726-3. 224 pages.

How is it possible to write one's autobiography in a world so fast-changing as this? — Malcolm X

In recent decades, critical theory of autobiography as a literary genre has undergone many exciting developments. Gone are the days when the autobiographical text was seen as a transparent window on the truth of a human life. Gone, as well, are the days when the typical writer of autobiography was an elderly man, looking back at the end of his life at the construction of self as a teleological, evolutive process of increasing individuation. Theorists such as Roland Barthes have demonstrated the fragility of the concept of a hermetic, unchanging self, arguing that autobiography is a narrative construction, and that like any other narrative is the verbal result of a process of editing, selection and omission; clearly, the writer of autobiography does not include every single event in his or her life, but rather chooses those which he/she feels are particularly relevant in conveying a sense of what his/her life has meant and who he or she is. In addition, some twentieth-century autobiographical writing deals with brief, sometimes consecutive segments of a person's life; an example of this would be the autobiography of African-American writer Maya Angelou.

As well, contemporary research on autobiography has shown us that individuals belonging to non-European groups often conceptualize the

relation between self and society in ways which differ radically from those encountered in texts emerging from the Western tradition. These issues become even more complex in today's America in the case of autobiographers who belong to diverse ethnic backgrounds, as is the case with Louise Erdrich, who is of German-American and French as well as Chippewa ancestry. It is precisely this weaving together of narrative strands, of diverse backgrounds and selves which makes Louise Erdrich's *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* an innovative and provocative instance of autobiographical narrative. Arnold Krupat, in his essay "Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self," has remarked that the dilemma facing the scholar of autobiography today is precisely the nature of autobiography itself. Clearly, the autobiographical text is about persons who have actually lived and events which have actually occurred in the real world. To Krupat, however, to seek in such texts literary "evidence" providing access to psychological or anthropological "truths" is in the end reductive, as though "autobiography were no more than a museum of the self where one could peer through language as through the transparent glass of a case" (175). The opposite approach (as espoused by theorists like Paul de Man), to view the autobiographical text as merely the endless interplay of verbal signifiers, a specular verbal structure reflecting the death of the self as such, is equally reductive and considerably more ominous; such an approach (as de Man presumably would be in a position to know quite well) would view the personal narratives of Holocaust survivors as merely the play of linguistic signification, a perspective which would inevitably de-emphasize the historical events which actually occurred to real people in a real world.

Clearly, then, both a purely referential, literal reading of the autobiographical text on the one hand and an exclusively linguistic/figural reading on the other are equally unsatisfactory. Krupat, in order to satisfy the need to examine the subject of autobiography as a biologically existing being with historical and cultural agency while taking into account the fact that any access we may have to personal experience is mediated by language, proposes the following approach in order to mediate between the two positions: to view the traditional tropes of rhetoric—namely metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—as symbolic of the ways in which the relationship between self and society is conceptualized in the autobiographical text. Going into further detail, Krupat suggests that societies in which people view themselves as interchangeable with their ancestors and their descendants would in their storytelling conceptualize the self in terms of metaphor. Synecdoche, which describes a relation of part to whole, would be the rhetorical trope

which characterizes personal narratives in which the individual's sense of self is defined by his/her relation to collective social units or groupings. An example of the synecdochal autobiography would be Leslie Silko's *Storyteller*. The modernist autobiography—as Krupat puts it, “I-am-I, but so what”—would be an instance of the ironic mode. Finally, an autobiographical narrative in which the sense of personhood is constructed by the narrator's relation to other individuals would be an example of the metonymic narrative of self. Krupat suggests the personal narratives of Scott Momaday as an example of the last category, but I would argue that certain aspects of *The Blue Jay's Dance* would fit as well into this category, perhaps due to the fact that both writers come from ethnic backgrounds characterized by diversity. In the case of Louise Erdrich, I would go a step further and argue that in *The Blue Jay's Dance* Erdrich constructs a mixed-mode representation of self in relation not only to other individuals (her family, i.e. her husband, daughters, parents and grandparents) but also to the activity of writing itself, and to domestic rituals such as gardening and cooking. I would argue further that *The Blue Jay's Dance* is a synecdochic representation of self in its representation of Erdrich's relationship to the landscapes of North Dakota and New Hampshire and to the larger community of women writers. Finally, Erdrich conveys a sense of personal identity through her description of her dreams, a tactic of self-representation which is difficult to slot conveniently into any rhetorical category, though one could argue that the figure of metaphor might fit most accurately.

First and foremost in *The Blue Jay's Dance*, Erdrich presents herself as a writer who is also mother and wife. Juggling these roles, which are an integral part of her sense of self, is often difficult. Describing her sleepless nights at the end of a pregnancy, she remarks:

I write poems during the late nights up until the week of birth, and fiction by day. I suppose one could say, pulling in the obvious metaphors, that my work is hormone driven, inscribed in mother's milk, pregnant with itself. I do begin to think that I am in touch with something larger than me, one of the few things. I feel that I am transcribing verbatim from a flow of language running through the room, an ink current into which I dip the pen. It is a dark stream, swift running, a twisting flow that never doubles back. The amazement is that I need only to enter the room at those strange hours to be drawn back into the language. The frustration is that I cannot be there all the time.

In another passage, she describes her great-grandmother Virginia

Grandbois, who “when she had aged past the reach of her own mind” (70), wanted to walk home. In order to prevent her from walking away into the fields, Erdrich’s grandmother ties her to a chair. Erdrich goes on to link the images of bondage, writing and mothering:

I, too, tied myself into my chair to get home the only way I could, through writing. A long scarf, knotted at the waist, allowed me to finish the first pieces of prose I’d ever done. Rewriting took a double knot. Patience never did come naturally, though, and now to care for our baby requires a skill I do not automatically possess. . . . To be the mother of an infant, I have to return to the deep ground of the physical, to tie the scarf invisibly around the two of us in dazzling knots. (70)

Here, Erdrich calls on the memory which links her to her female forebears in order to make sense of her role as writer and mother. Clearly, the metonymic depiction of lateral bondage, both literal (to the chair where she writes), and figurative (to the emotional links which bind her to women in her own family) conveys a powerful image of these ties as a source of strength and inspiration.

Erdrich also recurs to a metonymic representation of her own life by describing domestic rituals such as cooking and gardening. Critics such as Ann Romines have observed that in much literature written by men, domestic ritual is presented as a paradigm of triviality and limitation, the oppressively “sivilized” alternative to the wide expanses of the territory. Other studies, however, emphasize the liberating capacities of domestic ritual to generate play and invention. It is also clear that domestic rituals such as the preparation of food occupy a considerable portion of all our lives; in *The Blue Jay’s Dance*, it is clear that cooking (often, it should be added, by Erdrich’s husband Michael Dorris and not by Erdrich herself) are very much part of the fabric of her life. In a style reminiscent of Mexican writer Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate*, she includes recipes for Ojibwa delicacies such as anise duck and wild rice casserole, or Polish-American specialties such as pierogies. Another domestic ritual which gives Erdrich considerable pleasure is gardening, which links her to the memory of her Ojibwa grandfather Patrick Gourneau, her Minnesota Polish grandmother Mary Korll (probably the inspiration for the indomitable Mary Adare of *The Beet Queen*), and her mother and father, all avid though erratic gardeners. It is not only the actual planting of gardens, but the activity of planning them in the dead of winter, of leafing through seed catalogues and creating gardens of the mind, that provides Erdrich with a sense of self, of rootedness. In her own words,

Drowsy with possibilities, I fill the snow-sheeted yard with crab-apple trees, pink and white blossoms studded with bees. . . . These pictures vanquish the frozen monotony and calm me, but of course they also exceed the reality of what will, in truth, turn out to be my garden. . . . Full of the usual blights, mistakes, ruinous beetles and parasites, glorious one week, bedraggled the next, my actual garden is always a mixed bag. . . . The ground I tend sustains me in easy summer, but the garden of the spirit is the place I go when the wind howls. This lush and fragrant expectation has a longer growing season than the plot of earth I'll hoe for the rest of the year. It is finally the wintergarden that produces the true flowering, the saving vision. (32-33)

Certain aspects of *The Blue Jay's Dance* are, however, synecdochic in character, in that they portray the writer in relation to a larger group or entity of which she is a part. Significantly, it is not only individual female members of Erdrich's family who provide her with a sense of self. In one chapter of *The Blue Jay's Dance*, she mentions other female writers whose example has been decisive in her own work: "Every female writer starts out with another list of female writers in her head. Mine includes, quite pointedly, a mother list. I collect these women in my heart and often shuffle through the little I know of their experiences to find the toughness of spirit to deal with mine" (144).

Erdrich's list begins with Jane Austen and ends with Jane Smiley. After each name, she mentions whether or not the writer in question was married and had children of her own; up to a certain point, few were. When it reaches women writers who came of age in the 1960s, however, the list undergoes a marked change, in that women with children begin to appear on it in meaningful numbers. Erdrich thus draws the conclusion (and indeed, the list speaks for itself) that only in recent times have mothers in significant numbers written literature, due to the existence of reliable and widely available systems of birth control. She feels that this will have long-lasting implications for the nature of literature itself, in that mothers are able to identify with powerlessness and with the instinct to protect. In her own words, "The ability to look at social reality with an unflinching mother's eye, while at the same time guarding a helpless life, gives the best of women's work a savage coherence" (144-45).

Landscape also figures prominently in Erdrich's autobiographical construction of selfhood. I would argue that her relation to it is synecdochic in nature, in that she views herself as part of the wholeness of the natural world. She describes in poignant terms her nostalgia for the vastness of the North Dakota plains, which she calls "horizon sickness":

I want to see. Where I grew up, our house looked to the west. I could see horizon when I played. I could see it when I walked to school. It was always there, a line beyond everything, a simple line of changing shades and colors that ringed the town, a vast place. That was it. Down at the end of every grid of streets: vastness. Out of the windows of the high school: vastness. From the drive-in theater where I went parking in a purple Duster: vast distance. That is why, on lovely New England days when everything should be all right—a spring day, for instance, when the earth has risen through the air in patches and the sky lowers, dim and warm—I fall sick with longing for the horizon . . . I want the clean line, the simple line, the clouds marching over it in feathered masses. I suffer from horizon sickness. (91)

She attempts to overcome this feeling of nostalgia by learning to love the wooded New Hampshire landscape (where she was living with her family at the time the book was written) and by taming wild creatures such as woodchucks and feral cats. Nonetheless, the longing for the prairies and endless skylscapes of North Dakota is tangible and painfully vivid in Erdrich's memoir. A life is indeed defined and shaped, not only by the elements which are present in it, but by its gaps, its absences.

The landscape also figures prominently in Erdrich's dreams. It could be argued quite convincingly that we are what we dream, and in *The Blue Jay's Dance* Erdrich portrays her dreams in some detail. This is very much in accord with Native American epistemological systems, of deriving knowledge about oneself from the nature of one's dreams and visions. Dreams are as well a dimension in which the boundaries of time and space take on fluid contours. Erdrich remarks that her best dreams have come to her in cheap motels, such as the ones in which she stayed during her stint as poet-in-the-schools in North Dakota. Curiously, on one such occasion, she dreams of a forest landscape divided by a chain-link fence, with mournful elk gazing at her from the other side—which, years later, she actually encounters in reality, when she comes up against the fence of a private game reserve in New Hampshire. One might be tempted to conjecture as to whether the game reserve might not be the oniric representation of the enclosed space of the Turtle Mountain reservation, so often present in Erdrich's fiction, though not always in obvious fashion.

In another memorable passage, Erdrich describes her decision to sleep alone under the stars on a North Dakota football field at the age of

fourteen, when she ends up sharing her sleeping bag with a skunk. Readers of her recent fiction will have recognized elements of the episode in *The Bingo Palace* in which Lipsha, the shaman/Trickster/clown encounters a skunk on his vision quest. In her autobiographical text, Erdrich watches the skunk's legs jerk as it sleeps, and conjectures about the nature of its dreams:

If dreams are an actual dimension, as some suggest, then the usual rules of life by which we abide do not apply. In that place, skunks may certainly dream themselves into the vest of stockbrokers. Perhaps that night the skunk and I dreamed each other's thoughts or are still dreaming them. To paraphrase the problem of the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu, I may be a woman who has dreamed herself a skunk, or a skunk still dreaming that she is a woman. (169)

To use one's dreams to construct a sense of self is clearly not a commonly used tactic in conventional Western autobiography. It seems to me that Erdrich's descriptions of dreams are deeply Native American and metaphorical in nature, in that the persons, creatures and spaces that inhabit these realms of the writer's unconscious are representations of other persons, creatures and spaces that exist in her conscious everyday world.

To sum up my conclusions, I would argue that *The Blue Jay's Dance* is an innovative, mixed-mode autobiography in which Louise Erdrich portrays the mutable realities of her own life in metonymic, synecdochic and metaphoric terms. It is as well a text which provides Erdrich's readers with a fascinating view of the ways in which she manages successfully to juggle contrasting and sometimes conflicting ethnic, family and professional roles. In her own words, "I am not a scientist, not a naturalist, not a chef, not an expert, not the best nor worst mother, but a writer only, a woman constantly surprised." (x)

POSTSCRIPT, IN MEMORIAM: This article was originally presented as a paper at the American Indian Workshop in Frankfurt, in March 1997. Only one month later, the tragic death of Michael Dorris and the whirlwind of rumor and speculation related to his suicide lends special poignancy to Erdrich's description of the birth of one of their children, which I cannot resist quoting here:

A woman is alone in labor, for it is an unfortunate fact that there is nobody else who can have the baby for you. However, this account would be inadequate if I did not speak of the scent of my husband's hair. Besides the cut

flowers he sacrifices his lunches to afford, the purchase of bags of licorice, the plumping of pillows, steaming of fish, searching out of chic maternity dresses, taking over of work, listening to complaints and simply worrying, there was my husband's hair. . . . His hair has always amazed stylists in beauty salons. . . . He owns glossy and springy hair, of an animal vitality and resistance that seems to me so like his personality. . . . When pushing each baby I throw my arm over Michael and lean my full weight. When the desperate part is over, the effort, I turn my face into the hair above his ear. . . . Leaves on a tree all winter that now, in your hand, crushed, give off a dry, true odor. The brass underside of a door knocker in your fingers and its faint metallic polish. Fresh potter's clay hardening on the wrist of a child. The slow blackening of Lent, timeless and lighted with hunger. All of these things enter into my mind when drawing into my entire face the scent of my husband's hair. When I am most alone and drowning and think I cannot go on, it is breathing into his hair that draws me to the surface and restores my courage. (47-49)

I am sure that those of us whose lives have been enriched by Dorris's and Erdrich's books will wish for Erdrich and the couple's children strength and courage in the coming months.

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Susan Castillo

Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition.**Kimberly M. Blaeser. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1996.****\$27.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8061-2874-7. 246 pages.**

A major assessment of Gerald Vizenor's work, which is important, varied, and prolific, has been long overdue. His resistance to tragic definitions of Indians and his insistence on the primacy of tribal humor are major contributions to an area of inquiry which has historically excluded the opinions of those being inquired about, and still does. It seems to me that a critique of that work has also been long in coming, especially in relation to difficult critical questions. Though many have presented papers at conferences and given deserved attention to him in print, discussions of Vizenor have rarely engaged the thorny issues that surround his writings.

Significantly, this full-length study comes to us from a writer who is also a White Earth Anishinabe herself and an accomplished teacher, scholar, and author. Further, this reader deeply appreciates the way in which Blaeser's prose advances meaning rather than obfuscating it, engages in substantive analysis rather than flippant word play. One of the striking features of Blaeser's analysis is its broad applicability, her ability to not only thoroughly cover Vizenor but to touch on larger concerns in regards to key areas of Native Studies. These include the interpretation of history, strategies to subvert history, the problems inherent in autobiographical statements, the limitations of writing in recording oral performance, the difficulty of translating communal experience onto the page, the possibility of writing for the continuation of cultures given the aforementioned problems, the role of contemporary discourse in creating Indians, the potential of resisting restrictive definitions of Native people, and the participatory role of readers as they encounter Native cultures through texts. Blaeser's skills equal or exceed the best of critics—she integrates brief telling quotes into passages of skillful analysis, avoiding

a strung-together collage of other people's ideas.

Also helpful is Blaeser's contrastive/comparative style, which she uses to establish Vizenor's work in the context of other Native writers. She might have extended such an approach to a discussion of Vizenor among the postmodernists, but more about that momentarily. Blaeser's organizational structure is itself an acute critical statement in that she arranges her chapters as a kind of process analysis of Vizenor's *modus operandi*, explaining what the author's prose accomplishes beyond the written page. This is to say that by using interviews, which she conducted with the author herself, and analyzing his effect on readers, she challenges both the intentional and affectional taboos of the formalists; i.e., both author's intentions and readers's responses remain important.

Both Vizenor and Blaeser locate Native philosophies on the highest intellectual planes, and these efforts are to be lauded. Yet some difficult questions remain. To name one such question, is the language of Vizenor's discussion, in regards to postmodernism in the more theoretical works, an effective means of analyzing tribal worldviews given postmodernism's skepticism about language and literature and tendency to place them in the realm of non-representation? In some ways, might these values be antithetical to Native philosophies, as well as struggles for recognition of national and intellectual sovereignty? What changes occur in "the power of the word" concept when it is examined under a system that devalues any sense of word essence? What happens to spiritual possibilities? If we are going to liberate words from fixed meanings and celebrate their amorphous shapeshifting qualities, might we need recognize that not only do tricksters shapeshift but that witches shapeshift also? Is there a balance called for here, an acknowledgment that sometimes fixed meanings are necessary, other times free play, as well as an honest recognition that both can be abused? Are some creeds, especially ones that relate to tribal traditions and political strategies such as sovereignty, worth staking oneself down and defending? What happens to political struggles when a concept like identity is deconstructed?

It is interesting to note, in passing, a trend in a separate discipline that deals with a marginalized group, the hugely expanding field of Queer Theory. Many gay and lesbian theorists have by necessity had to come to the conclusion that certain essentialist strategies, especially in relation to identity, are necessary if the theorists are to maintain any connection whatsoever to the real world. It is difficult to argue that a group faces oppression if you no longer believe the group exists due to the fact that you have deconstructed its identity to death. This might serve as a

potential warning for those of us trying to find critical centers consistent with our own cultures.

Further, to return directly to the questions that surround Vizenor's work, by couching some of his discussion in the hyper-theoretical jargon of theory, does he, at times, limit his audience to a handful of academics, effectively cutting himself off from Native people, except for those few who teach Native literature in English Departments? If so, this seems a shame to me, given the importance and originality of his ideas.

Surely the problem of accessibility extends beyond readers simply not being up to snuff enough to understand a challenging author; yet the book sometimes simplifies things by taking the "those who have ears to hear" line of reasoning. Open-ended texts may encourage participation, but the author has to touch enough of a spark to the tender for the blaze to eventually take over, and when impenetrable abstraction predominates along with undeveloped arguments, there simply may not be enough heat to start the fire. In Vizenor's canon such unbalances, I think, are the exception rather than the rule, but some attention to a couple of the more vociferous objections to his work might have also been addressed.

Some puzzling statements perhaps call for clarification. Blaeser says, in regards to Vizenor's displaced characters who rely on imaginative connections to home, that his "emphasis on the interior connection serves his attempt to universalize his stories, to deliberately extend their significance beyond the mere tribal" (201). In what sense are tribal traditions "mere," and why does literature rooted in tribal culture become less universal than any other genre of fiction, e.g., Faulkner's rootedness in Southern culture or Isaac Bashevis Singer's rootedness in Jewish culture? Their commitment to their respective "little postage stamp[s] of native soil" seems to have served them rather well. As modernist works they are certainly different than Vizenor's texts, but I doubt anyone would argue that their particular cultural centers make them less universal. I am really concerned about what we are buying into when we start to believe that naming oneself as an Indian writer amounts to some sort of literary limitation.

At another point, Blaeser says that Vizenor is "willing to engage the intellectual elite on their own turf, as he not only enacts a literature of rebellion but theorizes it as well in the language of the academy" (73). This reviewer, however, is waiting for the day when Native people will be addressed on *their* own turf, even by, especially by, the critics and theorists. This may call for a more radical disruption than what has occurred thus far, a disruption that goes beyond clever narrative techniques, though such a strategy is certainly *part* of the rebellion.

Some sort of assessment of Vizenor's grab-bag style in relation to postmodernism may eventually be necessary, if for no other reason than to defend such a style as the attempt of the author to mediate all this theory with tribal worldviews, a strategy that makes sense. At least we would have some idea then of the driving force behind all the contradictions. Given that the author has entrenched himself in all of this stuff in the later works, a chapter on these theoretical underpinnings might have been useful. In short, the book goes a helluva long way toward analyzing Vizenor; it does not go nearly as far toward problematizing him.

I would have liked to have seen more statements, like this one Blaeser makes, which is helpful in clarifying these matters: ". . . the trickster of Vizenor's work is not merely absence or the lack of signification, it is the lack of a single presence or single signification" (143). This helps toward explaining a Vizenorian philosophy in regards to postmodernism, and a fuller development of this might lead to something akin to what the author does—rather beautifully—when she explicates Vizenor's work in relation to Haiku and his aim to move literature toward experience.

Perhaps, at this point, I should simply confess my own uncertainty about such matters and ask readers to note that I have stated my concerns as questions rather than assertions in order to invite dialogue rather than give some final word. There is, after all, a wide range to Vizenor's work and the possibility exists that there is something for everyone given the complexity of his corpus. One can choose from a large menu which includes not only (for me anyway) the cumbersome postindian hodgepodge, but the hilarious world of *Almost Browne* and *Ice Tricksters*, keenly insightful cutting edge journalism in the case of Thomas White Hawke, one of the most unusual Indian novels ever written, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, and an amazingly moving account of the Sand Creek massacre that demonstrates the ongoing effects of genocide in the life of one very young man. Blaeser's book explores these seminal works, and others, in their fullest contexts to date and is must reading for anyone in Native Studies given the way her own thoughtful analysis contributes to the field and the fact that Vizenor's novels, poetry, journalism, essays, and autobiography have presented us with new ways of imagining ourselves.

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