

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

53



# Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works  
of the Most Significant and Widely  
Studied Poets of World Literature*

## Volume 53

*Timothy J. Sisler*  
Project Editor

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**P**oetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

## Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

## Organization of the Book

Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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# Sherman Alexie

1966-

Native American poet, short-story writer, novelist, and screenwriter.

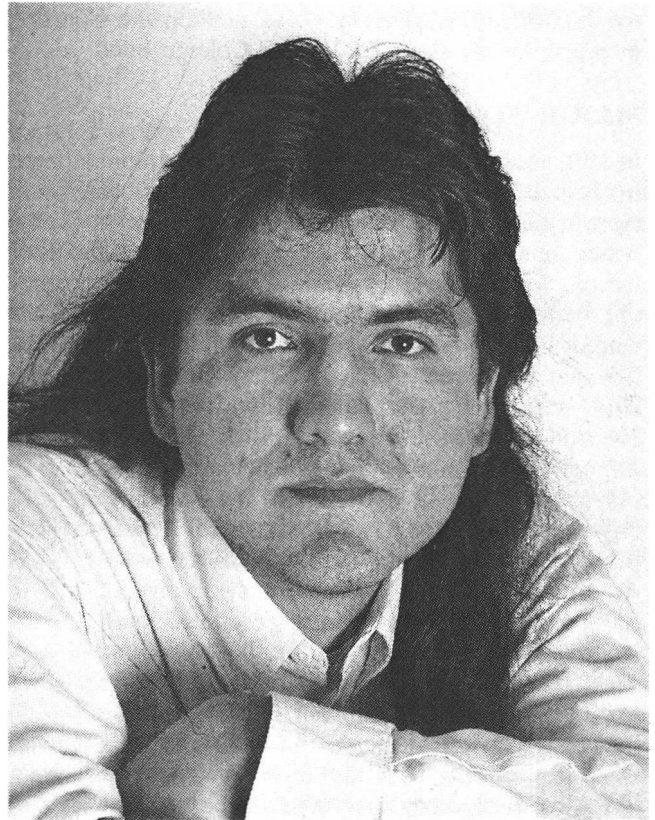
The following entry provides criticism on Alexie's works from 1993 through 2001.

## INTRODUCTION

Alexie, a Spokane and Coeur d'Alene Indian, is one of the most prominent Native American writers of his generation. His works reflect the debilitating influence of alcoholism and poverty that pervade life on the reservation. With dark humor and ironic wit, Alexie boldly portrays the harsh realities of reservation life and gives voice to the anger that results from media distortion of Native American culture.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Alexie was born October 7, 1966, and raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Diagnosed at birth with hydrocephalus, Alexie was not expected to survive infancy. He defied early pessimistic assessments, however, not only surviving cranial surgery at the age of six months, but also displaying unusually keen cognitive abilities that led him to learn to read by the age of two. Alexie subsequently endured a challenging childhood. With his advanced intellect and enlarged skull, he became the target of snubs and teasing by other children. His home life offered little comfort or shelter. His father was an absentee alcoholic; his mother worked as both a trading-post clerk and a quilt maker to support a family of eight. Finding solace in books and education, Alexie became a dedicated student. When it became clear that the school in Wellpinit could not provide the credits he needed to attend college, Alexie transferred to a predominantly white high school thirty miles from the reservation. There, he found acceptance among classmates and became class president, captain of the basketball team, and a member of the debate team. When he graduated with honors in 1985, he received a scholarship to Gonzaga University, where he planned to pursue a pre-med program. During his transition to this new environment, Alexie began to drink heavily to address his growing feelings of racial alienation and the gradual recognition that he didn't seem cut out for a career in medicine. This period of



alcohol abuse greatly influenced the themes of Alexie's early writing. Eventually, he addressed his alcohol addiction and began attending Washington State University, where a poetry class taught by Alex Kuo led him to new career aspirations as a writer. He graduated in 1991 and during the following year published the poetry collection *I Would Steal Horses* and the poetry and short story collection *The Business of Fancydancing*, which was named the 1992 Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times Book Review*. Two additional volumes of poetry followed in 1993, as did his collection of short fiction, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, which was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. In 1995 Alexie published his first novel, *Reservation Blues*. Several years later, having published yet another novel and a fifth collection of poetry, Alexie turned to film as a genre, writing the screenplay for the widely acclaimed *Smoke Signals*. The film, which was adapted from portions of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, won the 1998 Sundance Film Festival's audience award. Alexie has

won numerous awards, including a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts, and was named one of the twenty best young American novelists by *Granta* and *The New Yorker*. While continuing to write and pursuing a private life in Seattle with his Native American wife, Diane, and their son, Joseph, Alexie has also remained active in the Native American community, with service on the Presidential Panel for the National Dialogue on Race and on the board of directors for the American Indian College Fund.

### MAJOR WORKS

In all genres in which he writes, Alexie explores themes of despair, poverty, alcoholism, and racial anger—all circumstances that pervade the daily lives of Native Americans. In his early collection of poetry and short fiction, *The Business of Fancydancing*, Alexie portrays the banal realities of modern reservation life. He employs a type of magic realism in which historical and fictional characters—such as Crazy Horse and Buffalo Bill—are awkwardly placed in modern-day situations. His contemporary Native American characters appear throughout the stories and poetic narratives, drinking, playing basketball, and sometimes committing petty crimes. Throughout his poetry and fiction, Alexie juxtaposes traditional media stereotypes of Native Americans with the contemporary reality of life on economically disadvantaged reservations. Such a theme recurs in his poetry collections *I Would Steal Horses*, *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993), and *The Summer of Black Widows* (1997). In writing unflinchingly of hardships experienced on the reservation, and the loss of Native American ethnicity, Alexie captures the sense of powerlessness that results from a daily struggle for physical and emotional survival and the fight to recover a cultural identity robbed by generations of discrimination and misrepresentation.

Alexie's novels and short story collections address similar themes with the same dark humor that permeates his poetry. In the novel *Reservation Blues*, Alexie explores the successes and failures of a Native American rock band with lofty dreams. He experiments with the mystery genre in *Indian Killer* (1996), a novel that features an American Indian character, adopted by white parents, who is suspected of having participated in a series of murders. While continuing to produce poetry and short fiction, Alexie has also determined to add more filmmaking to his credits. In 2002 he wrote and directed the film, *The Business of Fancydancing*, based on his publication of the same name.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Alexie has received the praise of critics and reviewers from the beginning of his career, and his work is almost universally characterized as revolutionary, bold, and

realistically reflective for its portrayal of the Native American experience in resistance to contemporary media conceptualizations of the American Indian. Critics laud his use of dark satire and his ability to juxtapose humor with tragedy, historical figures with modern settings, and real people with fictitious characters. Some reviewers have termed Alexie's realism harsh or racist, citing its apparent anger against Anglo-American culture. Even those who have offered praise for his work, such as critic Louis Owens, occasionally suggest that Alexie's fiction "too often simply reinforces all of the stereotypes desired by white readers." Others admire his refusal to submit to the idealistic stereotypes forced upon Native Americans and note that he embraces many aspects of mainstream American culture in his writing. In terms of structure, Alexie's innovative poetic and narrative forms have sometimes been called truncated or underdeveloped, but his proponents hold that his unique style complements his themes and augments his subtle satiric undertones. Writing in *The Bloomsbury Review*, critic Carl L. Bankston III calls Alexie's poems "simultaneously documentaries of tribal existence and revelations of the spirit and inner significance of that existence." In his review of *The Business of Fancydancing*, Bankston writes, "The most impressive quality of Alexie's writing is his ability to let poetry appear unexpectedly from . . . themes of everyday life in an unadorned, conversational idiom."

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

#### Poetry

- The Business of Fancydancing* (poetry and short stories) 1992
- I Would Steal Horses* 1992
- First Indian on the Moon* 1993
- Old Shirts & New Skins* 1993
- The Summer of Black Widows* 1997
- One Stick Song* (poetry and short stories) 2000

#### Other Major Works

- The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (short stories) 1993
- Reservation Blues* (novel) 1995
- Indian Killer* (novel) 1996
- Smoke Signals* (screenplay) 1998
- The Toughest Indian in the World* (short stories) 2000
- The Business of Fancydancing* (screenplay) 2002
- Ten Little Indians: Stories* (short stories) 2003

## CRITICISM

Marion K. Stocking (review date spring 1993)

SOURCE: Stocking, Marion K. "Books in Brief." *The Beloit Poetry Journal* 43, no. 3 (spring 1993): 45-6.

[In the following review, Stocking offers a brief review of *I Would Steal Horses and Old Shirts & New Skins*.]

Sherman Alexie has two new volumes: *I Would Steal Horses* (Slipstream) *Old Shirts & New Skins*, with illustrations by Elizabeth Woody (American Indian Studies Center, UCLA). The title poem of the UCLA book is in the Slipstream chapbook and exemplifies the almost surreal imaginative energy that distinguishes this enrolled Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian's work:

Love, listen  
before I wear the shirt  
that will separate us into flame and oxygen.

The first audience for Alexie's work has to be Indian people, especially young people, who will find here someone who tells the truth about what it means to be Indian. The poet bears a heavy responsibility for lighting a path between an ancient and powerful cultural tradition, in danger of extinction, and a place to survive in or beside a social order more often than not corrupt and corrupting. It sounds corny to say it, but these poems (and Alexie's equally eloquent stories) should be an inspiration to a new generation. A second audience should be non-Indians who want and need to correct any illusions they may have about Indian life today. These readers need a strong stomach, because Alexie, like Louis, does not spare his reader the wrenching details. The third audience, overlapping the first two, is the community of tough-minded readers who are thirsty for the strong poetry of the future. Though still in his twenties, Alexie already draws from a deep well. "**Poetry = Anger × Imagination**" is an epigraph to a section ironically titled "**Indian Education**." Not +, but ×. The anger comes out of the well of history: Columbus and Crazy Horse and the Seventh Cavalry and Sand Creek—even the bones the anthropologists covet. Add to it the testimony of daily life: the HUD houses, the bars, the government commodities, the Thunderbird Wine and the dumpster. Then multiply by an imagination that, first, provides an inner life that *comprehends* the bloody past and inebriated present and translates them into testimonial song. Second, it transmutes the cancerous ironies and the mind-numbing deprivations into mirrors and windows for insight and vision. With this vision, the people should survive. Third, imagination transmutes its sociological and journalistic and anthropological and mathematical and historical raw

material into a new music. It is a music of quick drumbeats in one poem, slow long-line chants in another. Pounding repetitions with delicate variations. And most movingly, as in "**Horses**," long riffs of syncopation. Without the imagination that marries the historical and contemporary misery to an inner and ultimately hopeful vision, without the lyric inventiveness and control, these would still be good poems. With them, they have the power to dance their readers into a new world.

Benet Tvedten (review date summer 1993)

SOURCE: Tvedten, Benet. Review of *Old Shirts & New Skins*. *North Dakota Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (summer 1993): 200-201.

[In the following review, Tvedten evaluates Alexie's *Old Shirts & New Skins*.]

First of all, this book of poems is another entry in the Native American Literature Series published by the University of California, Los Angeles. Like the previous eight, it is an attractive work. The cover drawing and illustrations throughout the book are by Elizabeth Woody, an accomplished Native American artist and poet.

The tribal people of this country have often been compared with those of another land because of the literary consequences of having learned the language of their conquerors and exploiters. The English must surely have been shamed when the Irish began writing in the language imposed upon them. When I read Adrian C. Louis's excellent foreword in *Old Shirts and New Skins*, the Irish came to mind. "It is so important for us when a poet like Sherman Alexie emerges to detail our dreams, our hopes, and our embattled states of being. He fulfills the traditional decrees of poetry: He speaks to people in hopes of bringing about change; he speaks as a functioning ear and eye of the people; he speaks as a seer." Sherman Alexie speaks of the harsh realities of colonization. Like Irish writers and poets, he does so with emotion and wit.

It is unfair, however, to draw too many analogies with the Irish. We must not lose sight of what has happened to Alexie's people in this land, of what he himself has experienced. This book of poetry is indigenous. It could only have happened here. When white boys surround him and demand a "how," Alexie says, "I'll give them exact directions." Directness is the language of his poems.

Sherman Alexie lives in Spokane and has a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene tribal affiliation. His poems in this book refer to reservation life and to the urbanization of his



people. Readers need not look in this book for information regarding Indian crafts or Indian lore. They must go to other sources for that. Alexie does not separate himself from tradition, but emphasizes the hazards and complications within the culture of modern Native Americans. He asks for a change of attitude among those of us who live outside that culture. In **"Letter: A Definition of Love,"** Alexie describes the reality of a modern Indian artist:

"Look," it sez. "I never danced  
for no damn rain beside the Grand Canyon  
while some family from Ohio took  
my picture and called me strong  
in the sun. I just painted  
and if my work was sold  
for less than what it was worth  
it was because I needed money  
for food or rent. I didn't use my own blood  
or spit to paint the stuff.  
I bought it for two bucks a tube  
downtown . . ."

A Hollywood scout, looking for extras, shows up at the Yakima Nation Basketball Tournament:

She surrounded us  
in the visitors' locker room  
asked Piapot  
What kind of cars do Indians drive?  
He told her to walk outside  
and look in the parking lot.  
Sweetheart, history  
doesn't always look like horses.

But Alexie does look at history in **"Custer Speaks"** and several other poems. He looks at more recent history in a delightfully satirical poem called **"The Marlon Brando Memorial Swimming Pool."**

Alexie concludes his poem **"Drought"** by remembering:

Once I wrote of dreaming of a country  
where three inches of rain fell in an entire year.  
Then, I believed it was a way  
of measuring loss. Now I believe  
it was a way of measuring how much  
we need to gain.

Families from Ohio and all the rest of us will gain a good deal from *Old Shirts and New Skins*. For more than twenty years, this reviewer edited a Native American poetry journal (*The Blue Cloud Quarterly*). Since its demise, I have lost touch with the younger generation of poets. I am happy to discover it is alive and well and exceptionally productive.

Jennifer Gillan (essay date March 1996)

SOURCE: Gillan, Jennifer. "Reservation Home Movies: Sherman Alexie's Poetry." *American Literature*: A

*Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 68, no. 1 (March 1996): 91-110.

[In the following essay, Gillan traces the influences of popular video culture on the content and structure of Sherman's storytelling in poetry and prose.]

When David Bell, the protagonist in Don DeLillo's *Americana*, leaves New York, he heads north on a long journey into the "gut of America." He arrives in a small Maine town resembling a sound stage and stays overnight in an old house, "the place where everyone's grandmother lives in television commercials." He is told a story about a Sioux holy man, Black Knife, who prophesies that only a trip into what Bell earlier calls the swamp of our being would cure America and allow it to become, finally, "the America that fulfills all of its possibilities" (128-29). The story reassures David that he needs to travel to the "great golden West" filled with Indians to find the "big outdoor soul of America" (123, 25). Although, like many before him, he sets off on a road trip west hoping to find America in the heart of Indian country, he never makes it to his destination. Instead, he finds himself in a small Midwestern town, unable to piece together the "fragments of the exploded dream" (137) of his life and of America.

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian from Washington State, is even more distraught than David Bell that the authentic American landscape eludes him. He reiterates David's concern, "What simple splendors had I missed to have been born so late" (*Americana*, 220), but with a difference. From a tribe neither Plains nor Pueblo, which few would associate with the Hollywood version of American Indians, Alexie wonders whether his people ever had access to the authenticity all America seems to associate with Indians. Alienated from their American Indian culture as well as from America, the characters in Alexie's poetry and prose collections want to believe in the wisdom of old Indian prophets, want to return to the "old ways," but know that doing so will just trap them inside another clichéd Hollywood narrative.

Alexie's poems and stories often careen toward these clichés, as the reader waits in stupefied patience for the inevitable impact of the meeting between the Lone Ranger and Tonto, the warring factions that have often marked the poles of his life. A self-described *Brady Bunch* Indian, Alexie was born in 1966 on the Spokane reservation and grew up in the 1970s in the glare of the kaleidoscopic colors of a "mod" TV sitcom. His first poems appeared in *Hanging Loose* in 1989, and the press of the same name published his first full-length manuscript, *The Business of Fancydancing*, in 1992 when Alexie was just twenty-five.<sup>2</sup> Between 1993 and 1995 Alexie published another poetry collection, *Old Shirts and New Skins* (1993); a poetry and prose

compilation, *First Indian on the Moon* (1993); a book of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993); and a novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995).<sup>3</sup>

Critical reception of his books has been positive, if limited. Some reviewers have been perplexed by Alexie's youth and productivity. Reynolds Price wondered in a review of the *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* if Alexie might be too prolific, publishing "too fast for his present strength."<sup>4</sup> Complaining that Alexie "has plumbed a number of obsessive themes and relationships as deeply as they permit," Price suggested that Alexie should slow down and "discover a new and merciful rhythm that [would] help him find new eyes, new sights and patterns in a wider world, and a battery of keener voices for launching his urgent knowledge toward us."<sup>5</sup> It is this urgency that fuels Alexie's writing. Always aware that the average Indian male dies at fifty, Alexie seems determined to fashion poetry out of his experiences while he can. Given the poverty level on most reservations and the fact that American Indians have the highest suicide and alcoholism rates in the country, perhaps this urgency is justified.<sup>6</sup> Often, it is his manic pace that makes Alexie's work so wondrous, even if it is marked, as Price observed, by "moments of unrevealing monotony."

Perhaps these moments of monotony can be attributed to Alexie's flat poetic style, which relies heavily on ordinary prose to illuminate its vision. In fact, the prose-like quality of Alexie's writing often makes it difficult to differentiate between his stories and poems. The stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* are crafted in this same flat style as his poems. Adopting a minimalist approach to character and setting, Alexie writes in vignettes which often begin with a fragmentary characterization and end with a flash of revelation. One of these stories, "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation," is organized into a series of short sketches, each about a paragraph in length. Because these vignettes are so fractured and the events they detail almost surreal, it is impossible to describe them in terms of plot. They seem instead to be organized around a series of epiphanies through which each narrator comes to accept his own past. In one sketch in which the narrator saves a baby from a fire and decides to adopt him, the vignette format is especially powerful: "I pick James up from the cold and the grass that waits for spring and the sun to change its world but I can only walk home through the cold with another future on my back and James's future tucked in my pocket like an empty wallet or a newspaper that feeds the fire and never gets read. Sometimes all of this is home" (*LR*, 114). And home, as we learn in Alexie's poetry, is a HUD house and commodity cheese, a Seven-Eleven and a twelve-inch T.V., a powwow and an All-Indian basketball tournament. These mundane aspects of

reservation life are pieced together in Alexie's poetry into a pattern of twentieth-century survival.

Donald Hall might have had these eclectic poetic recombinations in mind when he said, "poems embody the coexistence of opposites that together form an identity" and quoted the Roman poet Catullus to demonstrate his point: "*odi et amo*: I hate and I love."<sup>7</sup> That Alexie both loves and hates his bicultural inheritance is evidenced in the *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* by an epigraph from musician-poets Lou Reed and Joy Harjo. From Reed Alexie takes the poignancy of the blues: "There's a little bit of magic in everything / and then some loss to even things out." And from Harjo he summons the wondrous survival of Indians who, as Harjo says elsewhere, were not meant to survive: "I listen to the gunfire we cannot hear, and begin / this journey with the light of knowing / the root of my own furious love."<sup>8</sup> Alexie complements these voices with his own ambivalent song:

"Vision (2)"

No money for lunch so I rode an elevator to the top of the ONB Building, highest elevation in Spokane, where I stood at a window and witnessed 500 years of America: *Over 1 Billion Illusions Served.*

There is so much of this country I love, its supermarkets and bad television, the insane demands of a dollar bill in my pocket, fireworks celebrating the smallest occasions.

I am happy I can find a cup of hot coffee 24 hours a day.

But, America, in my country, there are no supermarkets and television is a way of never opening the front door. The fields here are green and there are no monuments celebrating the invasion of Christopher Columbus.

Here, I imagine 1492 and 1992 are two snakes entwined, climbing up the pole some call good medicine, while others name it progress or Manifest Destiny. Maybe it's economics or an extra-inning baseball game. Maybe it's Cotton Mather and Andrew Jackson looking for rescue. Maybe it's a small-pox blanket wrapped around our shoulders in the coldest winter.

Then again, who am I to talk? In the local newspaper I read this morning that my tribe escaped many of the hardships other Native Americans suffered. By the time the 20th century reached this far west, the war was over. Crazy Horse was gone and the Ghost Dancers were only ghosts. Christopher Columbus was 500 years and 3,000 miles away, fresh from a starring role in the *Great American Movie*.

I've seen that film at the reservation drive-in. If you look closely, you can see an Indian leaning against the back wall. You won't find his name among the end credits; you can't hear his voice or his song.

Extras, we're all extras.

(OSNS, 27)

Like "Vision (2)," most of Alexie's poems are concerned with the entwined experiences and identities that position him within cultures with different demands. Not willing simply to retreat into nostalgia for a pre-contact world, he wonders how to characterize the marks that the European arrival in the New World has left on his life: "I imagine 1492 and 1992 are two snakes entwined, climbing up the pole some call good medicine, while others name it progress or Manifest Destiny." Early in the poem, Alexie declares his "furious love" for American culture. But his tone changes with the lines, "But, America, in *my* country, there are no supermarkets and television is a way of never opening the front door." He still claims America as his own, but he recognizes the disparity between his reality and that represented on the screen. This discrepancy resurfaces in his later poem, "A Reservation Table of Elements":

When the pipes froze  
last winter

on the reservation  
I crawled beneath

the HUD house  
with a blowtorch

and discovered  
America.

(FI, 40)

By locating America in the foundation of his reservation house, Alexie demonstrates that it has always been the Indian who is at the heart of America's definition of itself. When he declares, "Maybe it's Cotton Mather and Andrew Jackson looking for rescue," he pinpoints the ironic reversal in American history that transformed these leaders into saviors. History demonstrates that Indians actually saved them, by showing them planting techniques to survive in the New World and by having land and resources which could be exploited. Still later, Indians became a mythological safety valve, a life preserver for an American culture slowly sinking under the weight of its own industrial and technological present.

Indeed, it is consumer culture and its mediated forms of communication that DeLillo's David Bell heads west to avoid. Assuming that there is a more authentic America buried beneath all of these television images, buried perhaps somewhere on reservation land, he hopes that somehow American Indians can cure his "soul sickness" (*Americana*, 123). Writing about Bell's contemporary heirs, the white gurus who preside over the men's movement, Alexie wonders about this search for lost authenticity: "Much of the men's movement focuses on finding things that are lost. I fail to understand how Native American traditions can help in that search,

especially considering how much we have lost ourselves." Because his culture always has been outside the frame of the movie version of American history, Alexie has to cure his own "soul sickness" by recreating a relationship to his complex inheritance. Rejecting both nostalgia for Indian life as it was and a claim for his own authenticity as one who knows Indian experience, Alexie struggles against the tendency to romanticize the past that he sees in much Native American writing. This nostalgia is dangerous, he suggests, because it allows Native Americans "to admire the predictable spiritual strength of Native Americans while conveniently omitting the incredible pain and suffering endured by those very same people."<sup>10</sup> Thus, although he needs to create a vision of this past, he wants it to be an imaginative space not populated solely by shamans, warriors, and doe-eyed Indian maidens.

Applying his imaginative powers to an understanding of his history, Alexie approaches poetry as a modern day vision quest. As "Vision (2)" suggests, Alexie has left the tribe and ventured into the city in search of an enhanced understanding of his life and culture. This experience is a disconcerting one that changes him irrevocably; like the narrator in his story "Somebody Kept Saying Powwow," he is left stranded in a bad dream: "Sometimes I still feel like half of me is lost in the city, with its foot wedged into a steam grate or something. Stuck in one of those revolving doors, going round and round while the white people are laughing. . . . Stuck in an elevator that will not move with a woman who keeps wanting to touch my hair" (LR, 207). Before he can return to the tribe he must do battle with what Gerald Vizenor has characterized as the "tragic simulations" of Indian identity, which in Alexie's life usually take the form of images of Indians from Hollywood westerns.<sup>11</sup> The line with which "Vision (2)" ends—"Extras, we're all extras"—is repeated several times throughout Alexie's other collections, as if this peripheral position in American culture is the one against which he is constantly struggling. He realizes, however, that it may be this marginality that allows him to negotiate a tenuous survival in both worlds. Whether or not this is the case, Alexie is concerned with how to extricate himself from the scalp-lock American culture has placed him in: "How can we imagine a new language when the language of the enemy keeps our dismembered tongues tied to his belt? How can we imagine a new alphabet when the old jumps off billboards down into our stomachs?" (LR, 152). The image of the "dismembered tongues" reminds us that despite all those savage war parties depicted in westerns, Indians were more often the hunted than the hunters in the Indian Wars. And when the government required American Indian children to attend federal boarding schools, white culture tightened its hold even

further, depriving Indians of their right even to speak their own language. Tongue-tied by this history, Alexie struggles to find the words to articulate his pain.

This articulation is no easy feat for the twenty-seven-year-old narrator of **"My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys."** Surrounded by the dazzling transmissions that bounce off the walls of his poorly constructed HUD house and enthralled by the promises of consumer happiness he hears on TV, he has no idea how to displace the Euro-American codes and gain access to his Spokane heritage: "Twenty years ago, television was our way of finding heroes and spirit animals. Twenty years ago, we never knew we'd spend the rest of our lives in the reservation of our minds, never knew we'd stand outside the gates of the Spokane Indian Reservation without a key to let ourselves back inside" (*FI*, 104). Trapped in the "reservation of his mind," he always experiences himself and his culture mediated through these television images. Through this mediation he has learned to see himself as an actor in an elaborately scripted drama, "the same old story whispered on the television in every HUD house on the reservation" (*FI*, 103).

**"My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys"** juxtaposes the representations of American history, particularly the "winning of the West," with the American Indian interpretation of that history: "In the reservation textbooks, we learned Indians were invented in 1492 by a crazy mixed-blood named Columbus. Immediately after class dismissal, the Indian children traded in those American stories and songs for a pair of tribal shoes" (*FI*, 102). When the children walk out on this version of America, the reader is reminded of the powerful alternative history that tribal culture represents. In "A Good Story" Alexie employs a similar image of children who, through their continued contact with the alternate stories available to them on the reservation, still have the power to dream: "these were the children who carried dreams in the back pockets of their blue jeans, pulled them out easily, traded back and forth" (*LR*, 142). Continuing these reversals of standard formulations of American culture, the narrator of **"My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys"** describes the way "cowboys and Indians" is played on the reservation: "all of us little Skins fought on the same side against the cowboys in our minds" (*FI*, 102). Yet, the strength they gain from this unified front cannot change the fact that in the West that exists on the wall of televisions in the Sears Entertainment Department, the cowboys always win. While this West with its cowboys who can fire fifty bullets and never have to reload is obviously fake, it has come to be accepted as "real" by American culture:

Outside it's cold and a confused snow falls in May.  
I'm watching some western on TBS, colorized, but the  
story remains the same. Three cowboys string telegraph

wire across the plains until they are confronted by the entire Sioux nation. The cowboys, 19th century geniuses, talk the Indians into touching the wire, holding it in their hands and mouths. After a dozen or so have hold of the wire, the cowboys crank the portable generator and electrocute some of the Indians with a European flame and chase the rest of them away, bareback and burned. All these years later, the message tapped across my skin remains the same.

(*FI*, 103)

Because the reservation is saturated with these debilitating images, the poem ends on a despairing note, reiterating the final lines of **"Vision (2)"**: "I have no words which can save our lives, no words approaching forgiveness, no words flashed across the screen at the reservation drive-in, no words promising either of us top billing. Extras, Arthur, we're all extras" (*FI*, 104).

Even on the reservation, it always is John Wayne or some other Anglo-American cowboy who receives top billing. Describing Wayne's omnipresence in American fantasies, Joan Didion attributes a similar experience to all American children: "when John Wayne rode through my childhood, and perhaps through yours, he determined forever the shape of certain of our dreams." In her fantasy world, Wayne represents "a place where a man could move free, could make his own code, and live by it."<sup>12</sup> But, for Alexie's characters, Wayne cannot be this heroic figure because the establishment of his code often means the destruction of an Indian culture. A larger-than-life figure, Wayne—and the white American paternal ideology he comes to represent—dominates the waking dreams of Alexie's characters, their relationship to his mythic status, unlike Didion's, conflicted because of their Spokane heritage. Wayne's power over their lives is so strong that in **"My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys"** he even becomes God the judge, God the paternal overseer who measures human significance: "I asked my brother what he thought God looked like and he said, 'God probably looks like John Wayne'" (*FI*, 103).

Although most of Alexie's characters are too young to have watched first-run John Wayne movies, endless looping reels of Anglo cowboys defeating Indian villains are replayed at drive-ins and on TV. As these heroes subdue dark Indians hour after hour, they convey the message of Indian inferiority, which gains strength and legitimacy with time, repetition, and syndication. By encapsulating American history into two hours of cowboy-heroes defeating Indian-villains, these movies represent the American past as an ahistorical encounter between character types acting in one continuous narrative—what Alexie calls the Great American Movie starring Christopher Columbus, Cotton Mather, and Andrew Jackson—in which those who represent colonial interests become symbolically Americanized, even if, like Columbus, they lived long before the existence of



the United States as a nation. Moreover, the replication of nineteenth-century battle scenes in twentieth-century western films, the refiguring of those film scripts in TV dramas, and the reruns of both that air continuously on cable television justify American Indian dispossession and imply that Indians are unworthy and incapable of correctly using the land or of representing themselves. Other films that play at the drive-in confirm their insignificance. Overtly present in westerns, American Indian characters are absent in melodramas or TV sitcoms, erased from the site of American normalcy—the single-family suburban home. Because Anglo America is perceived as the American national norm, the Indian does not even appear absent—except, of course, to American Indian spectators.

The ambivalence of the American Indian spectators at the *Star Wars* film in “**Reservation Drive-In**” indicates how difficult it is for the Indian members of the audience to position themselves in terms of these texts. While they often do desire the version of America that is marketed on television, they realize that to accept it would be like entering into a treaty and surrendering their right to self-determination: “Every frame of the black and white western is a treaty; every scene in this elaborate serial is a promise. But what about the reservation home movies? What about the reservation heroes?” (*FI*, 104). A similar concern about the lack of “reservation home movies” is expressed by the speaker in “**Introduction to Native American Literature**”:

Somewhere in America a Television explodes

& here you are again (again)  
asking me to explain broken glass.

You scour the reservation landfill  
through the debris of so many lives:  
old guitar, basketball on fire, pair of shoes.  
All you bring me is an empty bottle.

(*OSNS*, 3)

While Alexie certainly does not deny the rich variety of American Indian literature, as evidenced by his inclusion of epigraphs from Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, and Adrian Louis, he doubts the impact of this literature on the daily lives of reservation Indians. He describes a reservation saturated with Hollywood, Motown, and Nashville icons, not with characters from Erdrich, Silko, or Vizenor. When the TV detonates and only silence remains, the speaker asks if there is indeed an authentic Native American system of representation to replace the distorted TV sounds and figures.

Although Alexie recognizes the emptiness of these images, he still wants to believe in the world that cinema offers Americans. While surrounded by these movie images, he wants to pretend that the land of opportunity is his country. He reminds the reader, “There are so many

illusions I still need to believe” (*OSNS*, 74). In order to maintain these illusions, he has to deny the historical relations between American Indians and white Americans. By doing so he accepts the message of Indian insignificance and the representations of Indians that have been ingrained in his consciousness, recalling these lines from “**My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys**”:

“All these years later, the message tapped across my skin remains the same.” Like Morse code, cinema does not portray actual Indian people but only a series of codes associated with “red-skin.” Thus, the message broadcast across his skin is one readable in cinematic terms of Indianness. In the American popular lexicon, the Indian has been reduced to a simple caricature of the bare-chested savage who greets the mysterious white man with the monosyllabic “How.”

But not all of Alexie’s characters are simply passive audience members; often they reject their implied positioning in these representations and are not completely consumed by the images on the screen. They learn to negotiate between their desire to be the image on the screen and the recognition of their implied exclusion from that image. Their ambivalent position is related to a complex process of identification. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explains the way natives living in a colonized state react to the colonizer’s culture. He describes a group of men from the Antilles at two showings of a Tarzan movie, one at home and one in Europe. Their reaction to the representation of black characters is mediated by how they are defined in the culture and situation in which they are viewing the film, as well as by the composition of the theater’s audience. Fanon challenges the idea that a spectator’s identification is singular, that one will simply identify with the character closest to one’s own background. Thus, when the Antilleans watch a documentary about Africa at home, they laugh at the actions of the tribesmen and try to distance themselves from the representations; Fanon implies, however, that the intensity of their laughter may betray a “hint of recognition.” Yet, when they watch the same documentary in France, they cannot separate themselves from the characters in the film because those seated around them equate the figures on the screen with any black person in the audience, regardless of cultural affiliation and background. According to Fanon, these spectators become “at once Antillean, Bushman, and Zulu” because they are associated with the codes of blackness as established by the film.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, for white spectators at the North Cedar drive-in the American Indian audience members become at once Spokane, Sioux, and Pueblo, expected to conform to the codes of generic Indianness as established by the cinema, even if these codes are inaccurate or far removed from the particular experience of Spokane or Coeur d’Alene Indians. While Alexie and his characters are American Indians who live in the western part of the United States, they are not associ-