



Introduction to Native American Literatures



Background, Context, and Rationale

Montana, the state in which we teach, leads the way in recognizing the need to incorporate Indian education for all Montana students. Montana appreciates that Native Americans and cultures form an important piece of our past, present, and future. With twelve distinct Indian nations, seven reservations, an over 8 percent Native population, and an article in the Montana Constitution recognizing “the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians,” it would seem that the Native presence in our state would be hard to ignore. Yet, for many years, American Indian contributions have been largely overlooked in our state’s schools, including those located on, next to, or near reservations. This has had unfortunate repercussions for both Indian and non-Indian students. Because their cultural backgrounds receive little consideration—in either classroom content or pedagogical approaches—Indian students often feel alien, unwelcome, and powerless in the classroom. Almost half opt to leave high school before they graduate. Non-Indian students have small chance to learn about important aspects of Montana’s identity. Continued ignorance of Indian issues and influences means the perpetuation of harmful prejudices (Montana State Office of Public Instruction).



Unfortunately, lack of instructional regard for Native American curricula is not exceptional to our state alone. Although NCTE passed a resolution on Native American literature in 1978 stating “that programs in teacher preparation be encouraged to include resources, materials, and methods of presenting Native American literature and culture,” not much attention nationally has been paid to teaching Native American literatures, both oral and written, or cultures until very recently. In Montana a number of processes have coalesced to create new momentum for Indian education. The 1999 legislature passed statutes that direct schools to comply with the state’s constitutional mandate, to integrate education about American Indian histories, cultures, and lives into local curricula, pre-K through grade 20, and to offer important opportunities to recognize Montana’s Indian populations and their contributions. We have found that reading Native American literatures with our students, most particularly the work of Sherman Alexie, helps us to address some of the intended goals of both Indian Education for All and the NCTE resolution on teaching Native American literature.

Teaching Native American Literatures

While it would be impossible in the space available here to cover adequately the historical and cultural contexts of the relatively new and expanding field of literary-cultural studies covering literatures written and narrated in English by American Indians, we provide here a brief overview in which to situate teaching the work of Sherman Alexie within the field of Native American literatures overall. Readers teaching the work of Sherman Alexie should not rely solely on this brief overview but also acquaint themselves with one of many available introductions to Native American literatures, which more comprehensively address how



sonal[;] . . . no one poem or song or novel speaks for all American Indians. (Saucerman 193–94)

It is unwise, therefore, to suggest that works written by Native Americans describe a universal American Indian experience. Each American Indian voice speaks from its own world and from the unique location of being native to the land, being part of communal tribal experience, even while sometimes separated from both by dominant, white contemporary society (Saucerman).

Much Native literature remained inaccessible until relatively recently. Some was kept under wraps in academic archives by anthropologists, folklorists, and historians. Other published works were not widely circulated. Not until the 1970s did American Indian literatures break free from these controlling influences (Lincoln, *Native American*; Roemer, *Cambridge*; Saucerman). Breakaway has been attributed simultaneously to the 1969 publication of Vine Deloria Jr.'s (Yankton-Standing Rock Sioux) *Custer Died for Your Sins* and the awarding in 1969 of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction to an at-the-time unknown Kiowa author, N. Scott Momaday, for his first novel, *House Made of Dawn* (Roemer, *Cambridge*).

During the 1970s and into the 1980s, an explosion in production of literary work by Indian authors was coined “the Native American Renaissance” and explored by critic Kenneth Lincoln in his 1983 book of the same title. Lincoln credits growth in indigenous authorship in part to the fact that during this period a generation of Native Americans was coming of age who were first in their tribes to receive substantial education in English outside Indian boarding schools and in universities. Roemer notes as general contributing factors the broad social and academic movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as civil rights and ethnic studies, feminism and women’s studies (Introduction xviii; *Cam-*



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bridge 2). Roemer also discusses influential literary particulars such as the reprinting of a popular paperback edition of the collaborative life narrative *Black Elk Speaks* in 1972; formation of Harper and Row's Native American Publishing Program in 1971, which published poetry and fiction by writers such as Simon Ortiz (Acoma), *Going for the Rain*, and James Welch (Blackfeet/Gros Ventre), *Winter in the Blood*; publication of Gerald Vizenor's (Anishinaabe) *Bearheart* in 1978; and the acclaim given to Leslie Marmon Silko's (Laguna) *Ceremony* published in 1977 (*Cambridge 2*). Both Lincoln and Roemer also mention the impact of the scholarly journals *SAIL* (*Studies in American Indian Literature*) and *Wicazo Sa Review* that helped lead to the foundation of Native American studies departments and programs at universities.

Other writers considered part of this "Renaissance" period include Joy Harjo (Muskogee Creek/Cherokee), Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna/Métis), Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), and Michael Dorris (Modoc). The term *Native American Renaissance* has been roundly criticized for unjustly separating post-1968 writers from their forebears and for privileging written over oral literatures, or for implying that literature selected by white publishers is more important than Native "published" work. Still, the term remains in wide circulation among literary critics. The significant point here is that the critical and authorial successes of these first-generation "Indian Renaissance" writers paved the way for an up-and-coming generation of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century writers, of which Alexie is a part.

Thematic commonalities have surfaced in the work of Native American writers, including:

attitudes about a shared history—attitudes reflecting complex





mixtures of post-apocalyptic worldviews, an awareness of the miracle of survival, and a hope that goes beyond survival and endurance to senses of tribal and pan-tribal sovereignty and identity. (Roemer, *Cambridge* 6)

Other points of interconnection include explorations of complex mixed-blood identity; multidimensional concepts of communal identity; word power and sense of place/place lost, time/timelessness that have grown out of communal oral traditions, traditional spiritualities, and historical experiences; powerful acts of resistance, adaptation, and survival; uses of irony and paradox; and pushing genre boundaries and creating mixed genre forms (Roemer, *Cambridge* 6–18). Louis Owens's critical focus on identity, especially mixed-blood identity crises, in Native American literature particularly emphasizes the struggle for individual identity as a key influence in Native literature. Jace Weaver conversely emphasizes as key the struggle for Indian community survival. Weaver points out that these concerns are not mutually exclusive, because "Native peoples find their individual identities in the collectivity of community" (161).

Sherman Alexie's work grows out of and builds on these traditions as well as works against them in some instances. Critic Susan Brill notes that Alexie has been especially influenced by Ortiz, Silko, Adrian C. Louis, and Luci Tapahonso (5). Alexie cites Joy Harjo as an influence as well (Thiel par. 16). Many strategies used by these writers are also found in Alexie's writing. Brill explains, for example, the routine shifts between a second- and a third-person voice in the work of these writers. Second-person construction allows the writer-narrator to speak directly to the listener-reader—in some cases providing information non-Indians need in order to understand the story (5); third person is



that reflects Alexie's own transformation of the oral tradition. The image of waiting—a metaphor for promises, treaties, and dreams deferred, if not altogether broken—pervades Alexie's writing. (7–8)

Alexie's powerful voice exemplifies how imagination and the power of words can be the most powerful weapon of all.

Perhaps the most important influence on Alexie has been Montana's own James Welch. Moore comments that the late Welch and Alexie both set themselves apart from the theme of struggle for community survival found in much Native writing. Welch's understated language “marks Indian community more as a painful absence than as a promising presence. Welch's novels focus on the identity struggles of individuals sometimes quite apart from community” (Moore 303). Alexie is the protégé of Welch in the ways in which his personae cycle through a celebration of individual agency more than the collectivity of community. In fact, Moore reports, Alexie himself said at a reading he gave in Missoula, where Welch resided at the time, that he thought of Jim Welch as his literary grandfather. To which Welch jokingly replied that he wished Alexie had used the term *father* instead.

Alexie struggles with being connected with other commonly characterized features of Native writing. “For instance,” Alexie reports, “Gerald Vizenor and I have nothing in common in terms of what we write about, how we write, and how we look at the world. There'd be no reason to link us other than our ethnicity” (qtd. in Nygren par. 15). Alexie is especially critical of what he has called the “corn pollen, four directions, eagle feather, Mother Earth, Father Sky-shit” school of Native American literature (qtd. variously in Highway; Mabrey; Nygren; Torrez). Nygren asks him about this by characterizing Alexie's refusal—through his uses of



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irony—of the sentimentality invoked by such representations of Indian beliefs and spirituality, to which Alexie responds:

I'm not sure if sentimentality is the right word. But I would agree that there is a lot of nostalgia. Like any colonized people, Indians look to the pre-colonial times as being better just because we weren't colonized. . . . Because our identity has been so fractured, and because we've been subject to so much oppression and relocation—our tribes dissipated, many destroyed—the concept of pure Indian identity is really strong in Indian literature . . . and there is great writing coming out of that nostalgia. I would say that bad Native writing is sentimental, and there is plenty of it. But writers like Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Simon Ortiz are not sentimental. (qtd. in Nygren par. 21–24)

What Alexie criticizes is stereotypes of Indians as nature-loving noble savages. He thoroughly rejects the misguided sentimentality that arises when “you throw in a couple of birds and the four directions and corn pollen and call it Native literature” when it has nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of contemporary Indians (qtd. in Fraser par. 53). While Alexie certainly does not question the “rich variety of American Indian literature,” as evidenced by his inclusion of epigraphs from other Native writers, he questions the influence 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” (Gillan 100).

Studying Native American literature requires that readers come clean about the violent legacy of American malfeasance toward its indigenous peoples. Sherman Alexie pushes his readers to understand and to counteract Indian oppression not by erasing it



but by taking responsibility as a nation for the genocide and ongoing disenfranchisement of Indian peoples. Alexie suggests that the most important step toward reconciliation of wrongs done to American Indians is for other Americans, especially those of the ethnic majority, to understand and to ally themselves against further travesties (see, for current examples of ongoing injustice, *Cobell v. Kempthorne* and objections to the use of Indian mascots in high school, college, and professional sports²).

Reading Alexie with Students

Because so little attention has been paid to the significant contributions of Indian people, vast gaps in personal, historical, cultural, curricular, and pedagogical knowledge generate interpretive complexities for non-Indian and Indian teachers and students alike when reading literature written by Native Americans. As Bruce Goebel points out in his rich resource *Reading Native American Literature: A Teacher's Guide*, the popularity of reader-response approaches that privilege personal connections between the text and readers' own experiences can be inadequate in the study of Native American literature. Using only reader-response approaches may lead readers to misinterpret or dismiss that which they do not have an experiential knowledge base to understand (xi–xii). We know that reader-response can help students with the hermeneutics of a text—discovering what it means. But we take pains to move beyond basic comprehension grounded in individual experience because of our agreement with Goebel's presuppositions. We have found most useful strategies and questions from deconstruction, cultural studies, postcolonial and critical race theories, as well as Appleman's *Critical Encounters in High School English*, Carey-Webb's *Literature and Lives*, and John Moore's *Interpreting Young Adult Literature*. We like to begin our study of



You will forget
more than you remember:
that is why we all dream slowly.

Often, you need change of scenery.
It will give you one black & white photograph.

Sometimes, it whispers
into anonymous corner bars
& talks too much about the color
of its eyes & skin & hair.

It believes a piece of coal
shoved up its own ass
will emerge years later
as a perfectly imperfect diamond.

Sometimes, it screams
the English language near freeways
until trucks jackknife & stop all traffic
while the city runs over itself.

Often, you ask forgiveness.
It will give you a 10% discount.

*

Because you have seen the color of my bare skin
does not mean you have memorized the shape of my ribcage.

Because you have seen the spine of the mountain
does not mean you have made the climb.

Because you stood waist-deep in the changing river
does not mean you were equal to MC^2 .
Because you gave something a name
does not mean your name is important.



ond, third responses. During discussion, we talk more about the frustrations students experience in answering these questions and their resentful realizations that much of what they have been told is “a lie” (for the rest of the story in U.S. history see Bigelow and Peterson; Loewen; Zinn) than about the actual answers they come up with. We know this is tough territory for them, but we don’t want to elide the problems and tensions that our students generally encounter when studying Native Americans.

Before we read this poem, we must negotiate among the stereotypical perceptions that many non-Indians have of Indian people while attempting to give voice to the ire and level of pain experienced by Indian and non-Indian students. Sometimes our Indian students sorely realize, as Alexie points out in numerous interviews, that they too have absorbed from television and media the same stereotypical ideas about Indian identities as have non-Indians. We take pains to travel this difficult terrain with our students.

We find this exercise a useful context in which to critically consider Alexie’s poem and to help students attend consciously to the preconceived, stereotypical beliefs about Indians and the ongoing legacies of historical and contemporary injustices that Alexie tries to deconstruct, resist, and avenge in this and other poems and stories. These activities help students to interrogate questions of identity, community, and knowledge production raised by Alexie’s writing and to examine the sites of struggle he illustrates between the colonizers and the colonized, between oppressors and oppressed.

First we have to contend with stereotypes. These generally consist of images and perceptions derived from televisual experiences and history book tidbits that echo those of literary theorist Jane Tompkins, who reports anecdotally about the relationship



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most non-Indians have to the people who first populated the Americas:

When I was growing up in New York City, my parents used to take me to an event in Inwood Park at which Indians—real American Indians dressed in feathers and blankets—could be seen and touched by children like me. This event was always a disappointment. . . . My Indians . . . were creatures totally of the imagination, and I did not care to have any real exemplars interfering with what I already knew. . . . I already knew about Indians from having read about them in school. Over and over we were told the story of how Peter Minuit had bought Manhattan Island from the Indians for twenty-four dollars' worth of glass beads. [I]t was a story . . . [that] gave us the rare pleasure of having someone to feel superior to, since the poor Indians had not known (as we eight-year-olds did) how valuable a piece of property Manhattan Island would become. (101–2)

We need to deconstruct with our students the persistence of stereotypical perceptions about mythic “Indian warriors, shamans, drunks” because no one, as Alexie points out, can measure up or down to such extremes (qtd. in Nygren par. 42). Everyone is searching for identity, but for Indians, that search has been complicated by stereotypes we need to help dismantle. Alexie seeks to enlist us in this project: “We have no power to change the stereotypes. We have no allies. No other group is joining with us to fight those things. The romantic idea is that if people are feeling a lot of pain you’d wish that people would empathize more. I wish that was true” (qtd. in Nygren par. 48). We want to join Alexie in doing that work.

Following the brainstorming activity and discussion, we read the poem. We begin by providing only the barest contextual information before reading “Introduction to Native American Lit-



erature”: (1) Alexie imagines his first audience to be reservation Indian adolescents but knows that non-Indians constitute the most numerous readers of his work; think about Alexie’s second-person address in the poem. (2) “It” in the poem refers to Native American literature. (3) Explain that Alexie has written the following two equations: (a) $\text{Survival} = \text{Anger} \times \text{Imagination}$ and (b) $\text{Poetry} = \text{Anger} \times \text{Imagination}$. Before reading the poem, predict what he might mean by these calculations.

Following this prereading discussion, we find that the most productive way to read the poem draws on Sheridan Blau’s literature workshop approach (60–68). Blau suggests that teachers direct students to read a poem a couple of times to make sure they have read it fairly well, and then do three things with it: (1) “Identify any lines you are still having trouble understanding and write out your question or questions about them.” (2) “Pick the line you regard as the most important line in the poem.” Finally, (3) “Copy out that line in your [reading response] log and write a paragraph on why you think it’s the most important line” (61).

We then direct students to move into groups of four that are as diverse as possible “on the . . . chance that sociocultural perspectives will play a role in what sorts of readings emerge in discussion of this poem” (Blau 62). Disagreements rather than agreements about the poem are a desired outcome because we want to discuss our differences and the sources of those variations. Following Blau we tell our students:

[M]ove into groups of four, making sure your groups are as diverse as possible—in gender, ethnicity, region of origin, age, and whatever else you can think of. In your groups your task will be simply, first, to share any problems you had with specific words or lines and clear them up as quickly as possible.



Writing from Models

We suggest a few possible ways to use this poem as a model for writing. Students might be prompted, following Alexie's lead, to write "Introduction to . . ." poems about something they know intimately but that they think is misrepresented or misunderstood by most others (e.g., illegal skateboarding in downtown locations; listening to "explicit" music such as gangsta rap; playing "controversial" video games such as *Grand Theft Auto*; or reading "questionable" literature such as horror, romance, graphic novels, etc.) as a way of getting closer to understanding Alexie's perspective and anger. Alternatives to these prompts might focus on writing about issues of concern in social justice, such as poems of introduction to racism, to sexism, to standing in line at the food bank, to relocating following a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina, etc. Students who have not experienced such injustices may be hard-pressed to write authentically about topics such as these; nonetheless, the point is for students to write from the particularities of experience regardless of the seeming social significance of the stance they take. Of course, be sure not to trivialize Alexie's message—illegal skateboarding cannot possibly equate with more than five hundred years of Indian oppression and misrepresentation; however, writing about such topics can help students relate more closely to Alexie's (and by way of extension, to many Indian peoples') point(s) of view and sense of outrage. Follow-up discussions might examine such significant issues of concern and the ways in which writing might help the writer and his readers transform anger into something productive.

Notes

1. Concepts of identity, authorship, words, place, and survival defined by Indian writers grow out of a rich and tragic historical context, which

