

# MELUS



---

Word as Weapon: Visual Culture and Contemporary American Indian Poetry

Author(s): Dean Rader

Source: *MELUS*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Native American Literature (Autumn, 2002), pp. 147-167

Published by: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3250660>

Accessed: 27/01/2009 16:10

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=melus>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *MELUS*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Word as Weapon: Visual Culture and Contemporary American Indian Poetry

Dean Rader

The University of San Francisco

*Poetry is revolutionary. It must be to survive.*

—Lance Henson (Cheyenne)

## I

In Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer*, Marie Polotkin, a Spokane college student, explains to her Wannabe-Indian professor, for whom the Ghost Dance stands as a "beautiful, and ultimately desperate act," that Wovoka's vision was more than mere "symbolism" and "metaphorical beauty": "Don't you see? If the Ghost Dance had worked, you wouldn't be here. You'd be dust" (313). Indeed, though the Ghost Dance was not created as an act of violence, it was clear to its followers that this combination dance, chant, and religion would likely result in "white people and their culture be[ing] destroyed by a natural cataclysm" (Mooney viii). From the Ghost Dance to the Mayan power song "They Came from the East" to the Iroquois's anti-Anglo spell "Magic Formula" to the Yana's "Curse on People that Wish One Ill," Native communities have invested in language the ability to control identity and destiny. As scholar and linguist John Bierhorst argues, the "belief that words in themselves have the power to make things happen. . . is one of the distinguishing features of native American thought" (3). When Wovoka and his followers performed the Ghost Dance, they trusted that their singing would "make things happen." If words, performative language, could reach their full potential, then, like a great spell, the unified chorus of Indians

would be able to act as an inverted Yahweh: they would speak all white people out of being.

The ghost dance is a provocative vision of resistance, and it stands as a complex example of how Native Americans see language as a viable weapon to protect cultural identity and sovereignty. When physical resistance is implausible, linguistic resistance becomes necessary; stories can be told about the white devil, power songs sung, spells invented, and myths constructed. Not surprisingly, Native American communities have emerged with a relationship to language most contemporary Anglos do not and cannot understand. That so many Chippewa, Choctaw, Laguna, Navajo, Cherokee, Modoc, Creek, and countless other clans and communities produce important poets is not a fluke. It is life.

To sustain the transformative power of charged oral expression, writers from these clans, communities, tribes, and nations have, in the latter part of this century, turned to the lyric poem as a mode of both connection and resistance. Like its oral ancestor, the lyric has always sought the dual catalyzation of author and reader but has not really cultivated a reputation as a welcome space for protest or resistance, especially in the United States. While lyric poetry in English has not been without its private contrivances or tropes of conquest, for the most part its ontology has been one of engagement. In its essence, the lyric project seeks relation and transformation, as Edward Hirsch rightly notes: “[r]eading poetry is an act of reciprocity, and one of the great tasks of the lyric is to bring us into right relationship with each other” (4). For Native writers, poetry not only functions as a relationship but also as something sacred and powerful that transforms reality for author, reader, and the communities of both. In fact, in her recent book on contemporary American Indian poetry, Robin Riley Fast echoes Hirsch, arguing that Native writers engage in a dialogic poetry that modifies the world for both speaker and listener, writer and reader. According to Fast, this “dialogic exchange” enacts a “concept integral to Native oral cultures—that of language’s efficacy, its power to change the world” (214). Through the unusual and provocative conflation of public and private significations, performative powers, and subtexts of relation and confrontation, the contemporary American Indian poem has become a truly unique and effective form of simultaneous engagement and resistance.

In the following pages, I look at poems by three contemporary Native writers—Louise Erdrich (Chippewa), Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), and Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwoc)—in an attempt to understand how recent American Indian writers use the lyric poem as a mode of resistance that also participates in the cultural history of Native oral discourse. Like the Ghost Dance and other power songs, the American Indian lyric poem functions as a weapon of contention, revolution, and continuation. However, the world has changed and so has the battleground. There are not so many Trails of Tears or Sand Creeks in late twentieth-century America. The site of cultural colonialism and erasure has shifted from the empty expanse of the West to the empty expanses of television and movie screens. Where place names and laws and raids robbed Indians of cultural identity a hundred years ago, so too have Westerns, team mascots, comics, Tonto, and other caricatures stolen Native cultural identity and sovereignty. Contemporary visual culture, movies and television in particular, have erected identities for them. So effective has the modern media been in altering how Indians see themselves that many Native writers talk about growing up sympathizing with cowboys and ridiculing the Cheyenne and Arapaho. According to Ward Churchill (Creek/Cherokee Métis), “North American indigenous peoples have been reduced in terms of cultural identity within the popular consciousness—through a combination of movie treatments, television programming and distortive literature—to a point where the general public perceives them as extinct for all practical purposes” (239). If Indians appear laughable and inferior to themselves and invisible to Anglos, then the impending threat of cultural absence may require a remedy consonant with the prescience of the Ghost Dance.

In response to these assaults, Erdrich, Alexie, and Rose turn the lyric into what I see as sites of engaged resistance: their poems resist the imperial colonizing thrust of contemporary culture through participation in it. Their inventive use of the lyric transforms both public and private discourses and allows them not only to counter prevailing establishments of identity but also to tell who they are in their own words. They resist cultural erasure by attacking those armaments designed to annihilate their ability to speak themselves into being; yet, through the lyric poem they recoup the performa-

tive energies of the oral tradition and engage both Anglo and Native discourse.

In the remainder of this essay, I examine how these Native writers turn to the lyric as a means of engaged resistance. I begin with Erdrich's "Dear John Wayne," in which she takes on the metanarrative of Wayne and the Western by directly challenging his metonymic image. For her, Wayne's ubiquitous presence mirrors the totalizing gestures of Manifest Destiny. Wayne and his smile are also happy fodder for Alexie in "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys," as is Fred Astaire and Anglo entitlement in his hilarious poem "Owl Dancing with Fred Astaire." In these texts, Alexie defies Hollywood typecasting by contextualizing Indian reality and Hollywood fantasy. Wendy Rose's means of engaged resistance not only takes a much different tone than those of Erdrich and Alexie, but it also takes place in an entirely different space: Star Trek's holodeck. Here, Rose inverts media machinery, transforming it into a space that enables performative language. My goal is to demonstrate that while each poet enters into his or her own form of resistance, they are united through their desires to inhabit both popular culture and Native culture. Thus, these moments of engaged resistance are not only actions but re-enactings of language's ability to transform the writer, the reader, and the mediated spaces that determine identity and cultural capital.

## II

Resistance comes in many forms, including poetry. In works like Simon Ortiz's (Acoma) *From Sand Creek*, the text of the poem is inexorably connected with the all-too-clearly-written text of history and violence. Ortiz organizes his book of poems around the massacre of Sand Creek. Each poem is accompanied by an explanation that explores the variant traumas of the Sand Creek massacre; thus, each poem in the collection is tethered to a particular moment in history and to a specific geographical place. In her poem to John Wayne, Erdrich picks up where Ortiz leaves off. Where the site of cultural imperialism and eradication in the nineteenth century was Sand Creek, in the twentieth century that space is the movie screen.

“Dear John Wayne,” is perhaps the most famous poem from Erdrich’s first book, *Jacklight* (1984) and arguably the most well-known poem by any Native writer. Erdrich positions herself as one of us; she becomes a member of the audience, approaching a John Wayne movie from the outside, just as we approach her poem: “August and the drive-in picture is packed. / We lounge on the hood of the Pontiac” (12). Like Erdrich, we find ourselves waiting for the text before us to unfold, wondering what it might have in store for us. Not surprisingly, the text Erdrich confronts is quite different than the one before us since Erdrich and her Chippewa friends are about to watch a John Wayne western at the local drive-in. The poem, in the form of a letter, weaves dialogue from Wayne’s character (always in italics) into the text of the letter itself, so that not even Erdrich’s text escapes Wayne’s influence.

Wayne’s imposition onto Erdrich’s text mirrors the ways in which Erdrich and her friends are unable to escape the culture and technology that Wayne’s image embodies, just as her ancestors could not elude the drive for cultural domination that brought the white settlers, and, by extension, Wayne and the cinema to Chippewa territory in the first place:

The drum breaks. There will be no parlance.  
 Only the arrows whining, a death-cloud of nerves  
 swarming down on the settlers  
 who die beautifully, tumbling like dust weeds  
 into the history that brought us all here  
 together: this wide screen beneath the sign of the bear.  
 (9)

Troubled by the merciless arrival of both physical violence carried by the settlers and cultural violence carried by the drive-in screen that stretches across both earth and sky, Erdrich links the ontology of the Western to its roots in Anglo domination and Native subordination.

The sky fills, acres of blue squint and eye  
 that the crowd cheers. His face moves over us,  
 a thick cloud of vengeance, pitted  
 like the land that was once flesh. Each rut,  
 each scar makes a promise: *It is*

*not over, this fight, not as long as you resist.  
Everything we see belongs to us. (9)*

Sneakier, lovelier, the film only causes the spillage of beer, not blood; still, it remains clear that the past is the present. The fight is never over.

Like Rose in her poem about the Holodeck and Alexie in his poem about Fred Astaire and the Owl Dance, Erdrich confronts some troubling issues regarding the enigmatic relationship between mass communication, culture, and art. The words that Wayne speaks are words of eradication, removal. Of course, Erdrich's description of the wrath of the white settlers on the pagan Indians not only finds resonance in many Biblical narratives but was seemingly justified by scripture. Laurence Goldstein makes a similar observation: "The phrase, 'His face moves over us,' adapted from the opening of Genesis, suggests a godlike figure of vengeance and wrath, punishing the infidels by firepower and by denial of the blessing needed for redemption in his new Zion" (204). Indeed, the elevated language in the poem and the finality of Wayne's phrases creates a sense of holiness and supremacy.

Not surprisingly, Wayne's cultural apotheosis in America is not lost on Alexie either. In stanza eight of "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys," Alexie's brother seems to equate Wayne's cultural omnipotence with the cosmic equivalent: "Looking up into the night sky, I asked my brother what he thought God looked like and he said, 'He probably looks like John Wayne'" (*First Indian* 102). Similarly, Victor and Thomas, the two main characters in Alexie's film, *Smoke Signals*, are also captivated by Wayne's aura. They even make up a song about him. Ironically, Victor's and Thomas' song focuses on the fact that he never smiles; whereas Erdrich is struck by his "horizon of teeth."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the physical characteristics of Wayne's face remain all too indelible. The dark gaze of Wayne, a virtual panopticon of judgement and retribution, remains a force from which there is no escape, not even in the margins. For Erdrich, even humor is a placebo. The raucous behavior of Erdrich and her friends as they drive away, drunk, noisy, irreverent, is contrasted against Wayne's authoritative voice and demeanor, and his words, ringing in her ears, seem to justify further punishment. To resist is to resist redemption.

Though Erdrich and her friends laugh at the screen, in the final stanza, she acknowledges the difficulty in erasing Wayne's face from her eyes and his voice from her head:

How can we help but keep hearing his voice,  
 the flip side of the sound track, still playing:  
*Come on boys, we got them*  
*where we want them, drunk, running.*  
*They'll give us what we want, what we need.*  
 Even his disease was the idea of taking everything.  
 Those cells, burning, doubling, splitting out of their  
 skins. (10)

The inability to unmake the image of Indians that Hollywood has made becomes a problem Alexie also addresses in "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys," a poem for which "Dear John Wayne" is a likely source. In stanza six of this piece, a bodiless and seemingly omnipresent voice, also in italics, speaks to the audience in metaphors of conquest: "*Win their hearts and minds and we win the war.* Can you hear that song echo across history?" (*First Indian* 102). The voice resonating in Alexie's head is the same as that echoing in the ears of Erdrich and her friends, and it keeps inscribing an ethos of domination and submission, arrival and removal, imperialism and colonialism. There is literally no deliverance from history, or, for that matter, from destiny. Both Alexie and Erdrich seem to understand that, like the past, the future has also been written.

The italicized passages throughout underscore the dialogic trajectory in the poem, but the "we" in the final stanza makes us wonder who, exactly, Erdrich is addressing and with whom she is speaking. Even though the poem is a letter written to John Wayne, the curious pronoun usage in the next-to-the-last line, ("his" as opposed to "your") suggests that the speaker is now addressing someone else, perhaps her friends, her community on the reservation, perhaps herself. The dual signification is underscored when we reread Wayne's comments in the same stanza. They, too, seem particularly personal, as though they are simultaneously spoken by hundreds of white men from the past and future and are aimed directly at the group of Indians on the hood of the Pontiac. That Wayne is an icon for a certain type of American goes unsaid; thus,

what he says on the large, white screen that expands into the sky and into the wilderness is certainly more significant than mere movie dialogue. His large pale face speaks for America, and Erdrich is profoundly disturbed by what she hears.

This is not to say that the poem is anti-Anglo or even anti-technology; however, it is clear that for Erdrich and her friends, the pervasive presence Wayne commands on the screen embodies the equally pervasive entitlement his culture and the technology that deifies him commanded both geographically and spiritually. No Chippewa carries Wayne's cultural currency because no Chippewa occupies the space of Wayne in contemporary visual culture. Even when the drive-in screen is blank, Erdrich and her friends know that it is very unlikely a movie about Chippewas will inhabit that space. Thus, like Ortiz's *Sand Creek*, the screen becomes a negative site, a site where Indians return again and again to see Apaches, Comanches, and Kiowas, killed, vilified, demonized, and oppressed.

Erdrich understands McLuhan's other key message about the technological age: the medium is the message. On a very basic level, the fact that the projector and screen exist at all is a silent reminder of the power of the sleeping giant. The power that John Wayne (and the entire Manifest Destiny sweep of the West) represents and wields is dizzying. As Goldstein notes, "[Wayne] has taken from them not only their land but their self-respect, their humanity" (204). Janice Gould (Maidu) agrees: "John Wayne, a stand-in for American society, himself a 'great white father. . . not only has cancer, a disease whose moral equivalent is greed, but all that he stands for becomes a cancer in this poem as well" (804). Erdrich's act of engaged resistance displaces the voraciousness of Wayne's and the West's appetite for domination with a different kind of cultural representation. It is the Anglo that is the savage, and it is Erdrich's dialogue, not Wayne's, that creates identity in the poem.

Of course, one cannot help but realize, as Erdrich must, the discrepancy between the power and universality of Wayne's image—his putative audience—and the audience of Erdrich's poem. Which carries the greater cultural significance? The greater mass appeal? The small audience that will read Erdrich's poem is probably already aware of the cultural imperialism propagated and nostalgized

by Wayne's hundreds of films. Still, the political impulse of the poem effectively deconstructs the public persona of Wayne and the Western for, after reading the poem, it is not Wayne's voice we hear in our heads, but Erdrich's. It is her words, her language that alters contested spaces.

### III

Audience, mass appeal, and cultural imperialism are favorite topoi of Sherman Alexie, an enrolled Spokane/Coeur d'Alene. From his characters' jabs at Westerns and Wayne in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* to a poem like "Reservation Drive-In" (*Summer*), in which he situates *Star Wars* and *Rocky* within the milieu of the reservation, Alexie has launched a literary interrogation of the modern media machinery. His humorous and captivating poem "Owl Dancing with Fred Astaire," in which Alexie imagines Astaire dancing at a powwow, is not his most politically charged poem, but it remains one of his most inventive. The poem begins with the absurd juxtaposition of traditional Native dancing and Hollywood 40s dancing: "I met the Indian woman who asked Fred Astaire to dance. / He had politely refused her offer. // 'He was so charming,' she said, 'even when he rejected me. / But I kept wishing it was an owl dance'" (*Summer* 78). The purpose of an owl dance is for a woman to ask a man to dance, an offer which he is not supposed to refuse; however, if he does refuse, he must pay the woman any price she asks *and* explain to the crowd why he has refused. Clearly, had Astaire been attending an owl dance when Alexie's speaker approached him, the power dynamic would have been slightly more complicated, but as it stands, that scenario, like many others in Alexie's world, is merely hypothetical.

In section two of the poem, Alexie writes "There are Indian men who have never been asked to owl dance / Alone in the powwow crowd, these men tap their feet lightly // along with the drums. They sing softly under their breath. / Perhaps they secretly wish they were Fred Astaire" (79). At first, the image of Astaire trying to acclimate to the unusual steps of Indian dance is humorous. Would he step forward and backward along with the Indians? Or would he leap, glide, and pirouette, exhibiting a dexterity and

balance not required for the owl dance? Is his motivation to show up the Indians or to blend in with the community? Would he become part of the community of the dance, or would he showcase his talents, as he does in his films? Perhaps his refusal of the Indian woman's offer reveals an insecurity about Owl Dancing but more likely it suggests a lack of interest in blending Anglo and Native rituals. But as Alexie muses in section four, perhaps not. Indeed, he is as puzzled by what Astaire might be thinking while dancing amidst a powwow as non-Indians are by the falsetto singing during the owl dance.

However, Alexie's darker subtext reveals yet another troubling instance of cultural colonization. For the Indian men never asked to dance, the object of desire becomes the other, the Hollywood icon. Alexie transforms Astaire into a symbol of what the Indian men think that they lack, or, more precisely, what Hollywood and television suggest they lack. Suddenly, the beloved and comfortable image of Fred Astaire gamboling across the screen becomes fundamentally inappropriate. We don't like thinking of him at an owl dance. He belongs amidst other white people in suits and dresses and tuxedos, not in the middle of a powwow. In fact, the mere image seems an offense.

Like several of Alexie's other poems (in *Summer*) about the media and media figures, such as "Going to the Movies with Geronimo's Wife," "Reading Harvey Shapiro's Poetry While Standing in Line to See Tom Hanks in *Apollo 13*," and "Tourists" (in which he places James Dean, Janis Joplin, and Marilyn Monroe on the reservation), Alexie's text is a poem of contextualization, as is Erdrich's poem about John Wayne. On the screen, Wayne and Astaire are at home. On the Chippewa reservation or at a Coeur d'Alene powwow, their centrality becomes suspect. Drawing its power from the ability of the reader to picture and comprehend the juxtapositions of class, privilege, and agency, Alexie's poem riffs on that image through intriguing twists of language and metaphor:

In my dream, Fred Astaire stumbles (yes, stumbles)  
into the powwow and is shocked by the number of Indians

who have survived  
the smallpox blankets, U.S. Cavalry, relocation, etc.

He smiles because, well, he is a good man prone to smiling.  
 (I must emphasize, however, that there are also bad men

who are prone to smiling.) Fred Astaire loves the drums.  
 He is pleasantly surprised by the quality of the singing.

Such pitch! and timbre! and range! and projection!  
 Fred Astaire taps his foot. He is wearing a tuxedo.

He is the skinniest white man in the history of the world.  
 Can you see him? He is not all that handsome

but he looks like a dancer. A great dancer.  
 In all cultures, women will choose a homely great dancer

over a handsome non-dancer. Fred Astaire is confident.  
 He waits for the next owl dance to begin. (*Summer* 79-80)

When Alexie asks if we can see Astaire, he wants to know if we can picture him dancing among the Indians. We can. And he really *does* look like the skinniest white man in the world. Telling is the fact that Alexie dreams of a “stumbling” and “shocked” Fred Astaire. There is no question that the dancer is out of his element at the powwow, but note how quickly Astaire’s confidence builds. He is happy, confident, sure.

The juxtapositions are striking. Alexie contrasts the affluence and spectacle of the Hollywood films against the baseball-cap-wearing Indians at the powwow, and while the Indians are thinking about the smallpox blankets and relocation, Fred Astaire is smiling. While the Indians remember the cavalry and the westerns, Astaire forgets about the cavalry and revels in the drums. Further differentiating him from his fellow dancers is the confidence with which Alexie endows him. Why is it that a white man like Fred Astaire, an outsider, can be so confident at an owl dance, when in stanza two, there are Indian men, insecure, singing under their breath at their own ritual? Indeed, so powerful is Astaire’s celebrity for Alexie, and so magical is his on and off-screen image, that even within a traditional Native American dance, he would displace many Natives.

Where Erdrich’s poem plays on the kinds of roles that John Wayne’s character perpetually represented and the negative stereo-

types his films engendered about Native Americans, Alexie seems to bear no grudge against Astaire. However, it is this very distinction that makes Alexie's poem more complex and more troubling than Erdrich's because it deftly illustrates how a benign media figure can supplant Native cultures simply as a result of his currency in the dominant culture and in the dominant media. By all accounts, Fred Astaire has a lot more to smile about than the Indians at the dance, and, as Alexie suggests, a lot more reason to skip lightly across the floor than Indians in general. Eagerly awaiting the next owl dance to begin, he knows that when that dance and every dance after that one comes around, he will not be "alone in the powwow crowd." Even more important, Alexie implies, is the fact that, because of the power his on-screen persona affords him, unlike his Native American counterparts, Fred Astaire can refuse a woman's invitation to dance and still be charming. Of course, the larger implication is that the stark juxtaposition between Astaire and the Indians serves as a kind of metonym for the larger cultural and economic gap between whites and Indians in the US. If Astaire represents affluence, cultural capital, and entitlement, then the Indians in the poem represent all the American Indians unable to gain access to these things. Every Indian is the woman denied access to Astaire at her own ritual, and every white person is Fred Astaire in the owl dance that is America.

Fred Astaire is no John Wayne, so it is interesting that Alexie picks him as a figure for engaged resistance. While he does not seem directly critical of Astaire, I believe he uses Astaire's refusal to dance with the Native woman as a metaphor for America's benign neglect of Native issues and concerns. Not very many Americans advocate removal or eradication of Indians, a view embodied by Wayne, but many simply refuse to acknowledge Native issues. For Alexie, the visual translates into the political: the image of Astaire turning down the woman, the image of him at the dance, the image of him on the screen, white, rich, and oblivious, the image of Indians watching him.

According to Jennifer Gillan, Alexie remains frustrated at his inability to displace the images he has seen flickering across various screens throughout his life, despite the fact that these very images have displaced his notions of his own culture: "Trapped in the 'reservation of his mind,' [Alexie] 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” (97). Gillan is on the mark here, for Alexie sees the dissemination of 400 years of American history as a selective cinematic adaptation, a television movie of actual events. In “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys,” Alexie claims that “in 1492, every Indian instantly became an extra in the Great American Western” (*First Indian* 102), an observation that says as much about Indians as it does about anglos.

It comes as no surprise, then, that even at the owl dance, an anglo gets top billing, a pattern that seems to be in constant rerun in the network of Alexie’s mind. Wayne, Astaire, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe: these figures were forced upon him and Erdrich as role models, as icons, symbols of otherness. Still, because they were ubiquitous and larger than life, and because there were few other options, one had no choice but to insert them into the landscape of one’s imagined country. It is in that country of reality and imagination that Alexie and his characters experience the anxiety of simultaneously desiring the dream American movies and television offer and rejecting its scripted version of what American life and culture must be and do. Gillan goes on to argue that the “Spokane characters in Alexie’s poems must struggle to articulate the complexities of their circumstances as they confront legal, educational, and cinematic systems that attempt to define their experience for them” (103). If that is the case, which I think it is, then the project of Alexie’s characters is the same as his, despite its apparent futility as expressed in the final lines of “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys”: “Arthur, I have no words that 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” (*First Indian* 104).

#### IV

Perhaps because she is dealing with television and not films, or perhaps because she focuses on a theory or a more obvious fiction than “the West,” Wendy Rose, whose tribal affiliations are Hopi and Miwok, departs from Erdrich and Alexie in terms of her reac-

tion to a popular media invention. In "Holodeck," Rose transforms the holodeck of TV's *Star Trek: The Next Generation* into a metaphor for the ideal poetic space. On the holodeck, dream and desire become manifest. The person who enters or programs the holodeck functions as a sort of god in that he or she orders the world and one's reality in it; however, Rose's desire is not to make others (whites, for instance) do as she pleases. Her program for the holodeck is essentially poetic; she simply wants people "to sit and listen. / The miracle is that they do" (*Bone Game* 101). For Rose, the futuristic *Star Trek* offers a source of community because she can create a space in the holodeck entirely of her own making. At first glance, this poem seems an affirmation of language and of the power of the imagination (à la Wallace Stevens); however, a closer reading suggests something more disturbing: that desire for a culturally cohesive audience (to invoke Bierhorst) can only find its manifestation in the 22nd century on a big white spaceship. It would appear that her yearning for self-fulfillment and self-positioning necessitate turning to science fiction as opposed to reality—but then again, isn't this what television tells us to do all the time?

Rose's poem remains the most indeterminate of the poems under study here because she eagerly locates a site of community, exchange, healing, and holism within a futuristic technological space, as opposed to a more tribal, pre-Columbian, pre-Anglo space, as one might expect. Not only does she refrain from criticizing television, she actually *apologizes* for appropriating the concept of the holodeck from *Star Trek*. In what remains the most thorough reading of Rose's poetics to date, Karen Tongson-McCall argues that because Rose refuses the binary discourse of Same vs. Other, she perpetually navigates within the world of the liminal. Though she does not offer a reading of "Holodeck" in her article, her mapping of Rose's topoi helps distinguish her work from Erdrich's and Alexie's:

[Rose] achieves what the poststructuralist Emmanuel Levinas expressed the utmost desire for: "a sociality of linguistic exchange [which] allows the self to open up to the other without assimilating the other. . . ." In other words, it is a dialogue that frees the self from the entrapment of the "double bind," one that defies a tendency to define the self in relation to something else. (7)

Through the gesture of hybridization, Rose is able to graft her vision of a Native ethos onto an invention so advanced that it only exists through highly imagined media. Where Alexie perpetually defines himself against the backdrop of the pervasive media screens, Rose carves out a niche for herself, her poetry, and her increasingly hybridized culture among the same screens.

Furthermore, "Holodeck," which is indicative of many of her poems, turns on the locus of difference without marginalization. Interestingly, Rose merely literalizes what both Erdrich and Alexie desire for their poems: an idealized space in which an audience of Anglos will listen and change and Natives will listen and respond. Just as Erdrich and Alexie use the confluence of visual and Native culture as a public holodeck to enact change, so does Rose turn to the holodeck to create a space of exchange and interaction. The result is a provocative cyborg of a lyric that serves as a metaphor for larger notions of personal and cultural connections.

Additionally, Tongson-McCall's claim that Rose's poetry defies "a tendency to define the self in relation to something else" calls much of Alexie's work into question. Gillan's primary assertion is that Alexie cannot, for even a moment, conceive of the self without television or movies interceding, forcing him to engender his own type of hybridized discourse in which he both incorporates and manipulates popular culture. In "Holodeck," Rose opens up to technology to invention, even to the contingency of technology without assimilating it, and, most importantly, without it assimilating her. Because of the text's inward trajectory and its internal landscape, her text remains the most traditionally lyric of the poems under examination. The space the poem inhabits is the space marked by the self. Where Erdrich and Alexie project their visionary gaze outward, Rose looks within. But even this gesture serves an important role in re-presenting Native identity because it locates the self as part of a community. For Rose, as for Simon Ortiz, to speak with oneself is to speak to one's people. Ortiz claims that "Indian people are the ones my words are intended for. That is partly because I am an Indian person and it's like I'm speaking to myself. I'm speaking *with* myself. Language is an important act which has to do with a reaffirmation of self" (Bruchac 225).

Because “Holodeck” has feet in both public and private realms, Rose’s act of engaged resistance works on two levels. Personally, her work defies mainstream stereotyping that limits individual Native expression to reductive “Native American” discourses like shamanism, ecology, mysticism, and environmentalism. Rather than altering her voice to fit that of the culture that produces *Star Trek*, she forces *Star Trek* to collaborate with her voice; yet she does not subsume or appropriate Anglo expression. On a public level, she circumscribes tribal sovereignty through an articulation of difference that places her within both popular culture and Hopi/Miwok culture. In short, she creates dialogue based not on the benign imperialism of *Star Fleet* or the *Enterprise* but on dialogue that opens up to interaction and community. Where Wayne works as a symbol of destruction for Erdrich and Astaire as a symbol of neglect for Alexie, the holodeck becomes a symbol of sovereignty for Rose. It is the place without Anglo interference where Indians make decisions for Indians. It is the Ghost Dance realized.

Despite contrasting interpretations of visual media, these texts are ultimately linked by their origins: all arise out of absence. Rose’s poem takes as its point of departure an absence without, so she retreats into the presence within: “I go into my head / private holodeck / so easy / like breathing” (101). Missing is dialogue, audience. She longs for voices “that beg [her] not to die” (101) so she embraces the metaphor of the holodeck and its eager, invented audience in order to subvert monologue and engage in dialogue. The desire for telling and listening is so great that the story ultimately invents a site for its own making.

But who tells the story, and what story is finally being told? This is the question Erdrich addresses in “Dear John Wayne.” Like Rose, Erdrich’s poem responds not only to a personal but a cultural absence. When Erdrich imagines Wayne speaking the lines, “Everything we see belongs to us” (12), it marks an imperialist desire not only to possess everything in sight but literally to take it away from the Indians. Thus, Erdrich’s poem arises out of the space her desire creates, a desire for a cultural presence as captivating and as pervasive as Wayne’s. Wayne’s physical domination of the movie screen serves as a haunting metaphor for the geographic and cultural domination of the white man’s push westward—a domination that Wayne and the entire genre of Westerns embodies

for nearly half a century. Erdrich's response, a letter, is also an elegy not so much to the deceased Wayne but to deceased dreams and stories that Wayne's celebrity signals. Perhaps her choice of media, the letter, an outdated and perhaps dying technology serves as yet another metaphor for an outdated and dying perspective of which Wayne is representative. Conversely, Rose's choice of media, the highly technologized futuristic holodeck, may represent what she hopes is the perspective of the future: dialogue, transformation, sovereignty.

Alexie's darkly comic poem(s) fall somewhere between Erdrich's and Rose's. His are less earnest, more ironic. Perhaps because he is considerably younger than both Rose and Erdrich, his reading of the textuality of contemporary media is more postmodern; hence his sense of play. He is also a more overtly political writer than either Erdrich or Rose, and he understands that like Wayne and Astaire, he can rewrite the text that is the modern media. He has said elsewhere that only one percent of Indians have read N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *House Made of Dawn*, but that ninety-nine percent of Indians have seen the film *Powwow Highway*. For Alexie, movies and television are the new oral tradition; they are the new performative language. Because more people see them, more people interact with them; movies enact the kind of transformation today that was reserved for power songs a hundred years ago. Perhaps more than any other Native writer, Alexie is aware of the power of the media. He understands it is the new battlefield. Alexie's sophisticated internalization of films and television in these poems reveals the critical and cultural vision that would eventually push him to turn the written narratives of *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* into the visual narrative *Smoke Signals*. He knows how screens of culture and history can be manipulated. In this sense, his vision of a spliced celluloid and self seems in concert with Rose's. Ultimately, for Alexie, and, to a certain degree, for Rose and Erdrich, movies and films—and the engagement between them and the lyric project—are gestures of possibility, for reinventing the enemy's visual language.

## V

Laguna writer and scholar Paula Gunn Allen argues that true cultural colonization takes place within what Alexie calls “the reservation of the mind.” For her, the real battles are contended in the psyche: “the wars of imperial conquest have not been solely or even mostly waged over the land and its resources, but they have been fought within the bodies, minds, and hearts of the people of the earth for dominion over them” (Allen 214). As I have tried to demonstrate, these poems address and counter media attempts to win the hearts and minds of American Indians. The poems problematize the tension between the lyric space and the space of television and movies in provocative ways because while engaging the media and the culture that creates the media, Erdrich, Alexie, and Rose resist being defined by the media. In each instance, a Native American male and two Native American women poets affix their personal and poetic gazes on two different screens, two of most powerful forms of modern technology, and, in turn, project them onto another screen, the blank page.

Perhaps because they presume that inhabiting the visual screen to the degree of Wayne and Astaire is impossible, these writers work within the space of the linguistic screen.<sup>2</sup> As a young girl, sitting in the drive in, Erdrich intuits that Wayne and everything he represents can’t help but reinforce the sense of cultural loss that Erdrich must already feel as an Indian female, watching a Western. Rose understands this loss: “when I am lost / to forces so great / so out of control / it is not just loss / but tribunal” (*Bone Game* 101). Similarly, Alexie suggests that merely by imagining Astaire as an owl dancing model, an element of cultural connectivity is absent. The poets intuit the power of myth-making, and Erdrich particularly laments the mythology of the movie and the stereotyping and victimization decades of films have galvanized into doctrine. Their texts counter that canonization. They counter it by reminding their readers of the power of speaking, of bearing witness to both Anglo and Native cultures, for as Joy Harjo asserts, “to speak, at whatever the cost, is to become empowered rather than victimized by destruction” (Harjo 22). But writing and speaking do more than bear witness; they transform the means by which power is implemented. Harjo continues: “These colonizers’ languages, which often

usurped our own tribal languages or diminished them, now hand back emblems of our cultures, our own designs. . . . We've transformed these enemy languages" (22). To confront the enemy is to remake and reinvent history.

Ultimately, these poems function as tropes of agency and contingency, for in the final scene, they empower Natives and Native culture because each writer uniquely envisions alternative modes of being that do not define Indians in relation to Anglos but establish Natives as independent and interdependent communities. By viewing their poems as positive engagements with an increasingly complex cultural matrix, we not only broaden our conception of Native discourse, we also cultivate a more inclusive vision of resistance.<sup>3</sup> In *Resistance Literature*, Barbara Harlow claims that "the role of poetry in the liberation struggle has thus been a crucial one, both as a force for mobilizing a collective response to occupation and domination and as a repository for popular memory and consciousness" (Harlow 34).<sup>4</sup> These poems, these actions, these engaged resistances serve as important markers for cultural sovereignty because they are concurrently sites of struggle against a dominant discourse and sites of inclusion and demarcation. As cultural texts they mobilize Native responses *and* they preserve and sustain how individuals within a culture respond to domination. Like the Ghost Dance, these poems are important, viable weapons on the increasingly complex battlefield of contemporary visual culture. And while their aims may not be as absolute as those of the Ghost Dance, they are just as eminent, for rather than occluding or erasing one culture or another, the poems perform the most miraculous feat of all by fulfilling Edward Hirsch's mission for the lyric: they bring us into the right relationship to each other.

### Acknowledgement

A number of people helped bring me into the right relationship with this essay: Greg Barnhisel, Eric Anderson, Cary Cordova, Beth Barry, and Veronica Makowsky. I would like to acknowledge their input and officially offer thanks.

### Notes

1. For a close reading of the significance of Wayne's body in film, see Thomas.
2. Gillan adroitly picks up on the power of the blank screen in her reading of Alexie. Referring to the final line of the "Star Wars" segment of "Reservation

Drive-In,” in which “Indian boys cheer, rise up, and fall out of car windows, honk horns, flash headlights, all half-anger, until the movie ends and leaves us with the white noise of an empty screen,” (*FI 17*) she writes:

Although Alexie’s characters can reject the film’s assumed spectator position and refuse to cheer for Skywalker, they will pay the price for this rejection. When the movie ends, they discover that the white noise of the empty screen is scarier than the barrage of sound and light that preceded it. (102)

3. My own image for this study is also a form (although archaic) of visual culture: a triptych. I envision “Dear John Wayne” on the left panel, “Holodeck” on the right, and Alexie’s collage of poems in the middle screen, a kind of Janus-faced text gazing to each side. Each panel represents a unique but complementary form of engaged resistance, and, as viewers, we are both drawn in by the texts but unable to fully inhabit them. But then the figures on the panels begin to move, and it’s clear the triptych is not wood but a giant monitor, on which a documentary of American history unfolds, in real time, edited for content.

4. While Harlow’s study focuses on Third World literature, primarily in Latin America and the Middle East, her claims for resistance poetry can extend to American Indian texts.

### Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. *The First Indian on the Moon*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose, 1993.
- . *Indian Killer*. New York: Warner, 1996.
- . *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Atlantic Monthly P, 1993.
- . *Smoke Signals: A Screenplay*. New York: Miramax Books, 1998.
- . *The Summer of Black Widows*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose, 1996.
- Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon, 1986.
- Bierhorst, John, ed. *The Sacred Path: Spells, Prayers & Power Songs of the American Indians*. New York: Quill, 1984.
- Bruchac, Joseph. “The Story Never Ends: An Interview with Simon Ortiz.” *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets*. Ed. Joseph Bruchac. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1987. 211-30.
- Churchill, Ward. *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians*. Monroe ME: Common Courage, 1992.
- Erdrich, Louise. *Jacklight*. New York: Holt, 1984.
- Fast, Robin Riley. *The Heart as a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in Contemporary American Indian Poetry*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999.
- Gillan, Jennifer. “Sherman Alexie’s Poetry.” *American Literature* 68.1 (1996): 91-110.

- Goldstein, Laurence. *The American Poet at the Movies*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997.
- Gould, Janice. "American Indian Women's Poetry: Strategies of Rage and Hope." *Signs* 20.4 (1995): 797-817.
- Harjo, Joy. "Introduction." *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*. Ed. Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird. New York: Norton, 1997. 122.
- Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Hirsch, Edward. *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1999.
- Mooney, James. *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965.
- Ortiz, Simon. *From Sand Creek*. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1981.
- Rose, Wendy. *Bone Game: New and Selected Poems, 1965-1993*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1994.
- Thomas, Deborah. "John Wayne's Body." *The Book of Westerns*. Ed. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye. New York: Continuum, 1996. 75-87.
- Tongson-McCall, Karen. "The Nether World of Neither World: Hybridization in the Literature of Wendy Rose." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 20.4 (1996): 1-40.