"This is the world without end": American Indian Poetry from 1980-2010

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"There is no genre of Indian literature," writes Hopi/Miwok poet Wendy Rose. By this she means that American Indian writers do not necessarily feel bound by traditional distinctions between "poetry," "prose," "autobiography," "history," and "memoir." On one hand, Rose is correct—it is staggering how many Native writers publish (and publish well) in multiple genres. On the other hand, however, a lyric poem is not a novel. One has one set of characteristics and the other an entirely different set. When American Indian poetry is placed within the community of indigenous American writing, distinguishing between "poetry" and "fiction" is unnecessary, but locating recent Native poetry within the larger sweep of American poetry and poetry written in English requires looking at Native poetic texts through the lens of poetic history. Put differently, what *is* contemporary American Indian poetry? What does it try to do? And, how is it doing it?

Though American Indian poetry in English emerged back in the 1850s with the great Ojibwe writer George Copway (*Kah-Ge-Ga-Gah-Bowh*), the 1980s witnessed the arrival of contemporary Native poetry in the United States on an impressive scale. Though Native poets had been writing and publishing poems for decades, a perfect storm of groundbreaking books seemed to arrive all at once, announcing the presence and significance of American Indian poetic voices. In the early 80s, important figures like Lance Henson (Cheyenne/Oglala Sioux) and Maurice Kenny (Mohawk) published selected poems, while younger writers began to release their first books, such as Leslie Marmon Silko's (Laguna Pueblo) groundbreaking *Storyteller* (1981) as well as canonical collections like Meskwaki writer Ray A. Young Bear's *Winter of the Salamander* (1980), Osage poet Carter Revard's *Ponca War Dancers* (1980), Louise Erdrich's (Ojibwe) *Jacklight* (1980), Simon Ortiz's (Acoma Pueblo) *From Sand Creek* (1981), and Muscogee (Creek) Nation poet and musician Joy Harjo's *She Had Some Horses* (1983). Making a huge splash when it appeared in 1983 was *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back*, an anthology of Native poetry edited by Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki), which included poems by fifty-two Native poets. Bruchac's fabulous anthology paved the way for the massive *Harper's Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* (1988)—a 432-page tome that remains the single most important anthology of American Indian poetry.

The *Harper's* anthology, edited by Duane Niatum (S'Klallam), signaled a bellwether for Native poetry not only because of its heft but also because of what it represented. For one thing, it was the first anthology of Native poetry published by a major New York publishing house, which indicated to writers, readers, and publishers that American Indian poetry was, officially, part of the canon of American literature. Second, Niatum's decision to reduce the number of poets represented from Bruchac's book by nearly twenty while simultaneously increasing the page count by one hundred spoke to the issue of quality over quantity. In other words, Niatum had the luxury of being choosy—that's how good Indian poetry was becoming—which meant he could publish several poems by fewer poets so that readers got a range of a poet's style. Also key to this volume's influence and durability was the introduction, written by Brian Swann who does a fine job of contextualizing Native poetry within a larger indigenous framework. He suggests three main themes of Native poetry: "Voices of the Past: Oral Tradition," "Reverencing Tradition: Ancestors and Myth," and "Balancing Life: A Journey Toward Wholeness." Within and under these rubrics, one finds poems about alcoholism, colonialism, and tribalism, poems about America's violent past and the reservation's violent present, and the delicate balance between an oral tradition in Native languages and the written language of contemporary American English.

Indeed, for many years one could argue that this thematic trinity adequately encompassed Native poetry. But, in the remainder of this chapter, I want to push beyond these themes, just as I want to push beyond theme. By mapping the trajectory of Native poetry over the past thirty years, I would like to advance a more sophisticated reading of recent Native poetry that assumes an interplay of tribal and cosmopolitan concerns that are not simply thematic but formal as well. Of course, Native poets pay attention to ideas and concepts, but most also pay even more attention to poetic form—the shape a poem takes, how it looks on the page, how it plays with sound, image, and metaphor—in short, how it uses the vast toolbox of poetry. This approach is particularly important for American Indian poets where form feels unusually linked to content, and in some cases, actually determines content. In the movement from the 80s, through the 90s and into the 2000s, Native poetry has played increasingly with poetic form, allowing its poets expanding latitude in regard to the issues that poetry both explores and confronts.

The 1980s

Of course, categorizing anything by time periods is a random endeavor, whether it's poetry, art, or music. That said, a trajectory of Native poetry has emerged over the past thirty years, and one can, more or less, map that arc by way of decades. American Indian poetry in the 1980s, for instance, was often characterized by a foregrounding of many of the traits Swann identifies in his introduction to the *Harper's Anthology*—most notably its connection to oral traditions. Maurice Kenny's 1982 poem "They Tell Me I Am Lost," which appears in Niatum's anthology, is emblematic of much of Native poetry from this time. In this short excerpt, one sees many different elements at work:

my chant is the red willow, the clay
    and the great pine that bulges the woods
    and the axe that fells the birch
    and the hand that breaks the corn from the stalk
    and that waters the squash and catches stars
my chant is a blessing to the trout, beaver
    and a blessing to the young pheasant
      that warms my winter
my chant is the wolf in the dark
my chant is the crow flying against the sun
my chant is the sun
    sleeping on the back of the grass
      in marriage
my chant is the sun
    while there is sun I cannot be lost
my chant is the quaking of the earth
    angry and bold

From a formal perspective, this poem resembles a song or a chant through its intense repetition. The simplicity of the language and the elemental quality of the objects make the poem itself feel like it could be a chant as old as the hills.

Also at work here is what we might call an "environmentalist aesthetic." By this I mean that environmentalist beliefs function as ordering principles for the poem. The poet is at home in "nature;" the pheasant warms him in winter, and he celebrates the "marriage" of grass and sun. There is a notable, even a palpable holism that the poet relies on when "they" tell him "while there is sun I cannot be lost." Ultimately, it's a lovely poem. It lacks irony, very little is edgy about it, and it comes off, in 2010, as colossally earnest, but those things do not detract from its truth or its beauty.

Many similarities exist between Kenny and Joy Harjo, especially in her iconic "She Had Some Horses," one of the most famous poems by a Native writer to emerge from this decade:

She had some horses who were bodies of sand.
She had some horses who were maps drawn of blood.
She had some horses who were skins of ocean water.
She had some horses who were the blue air of sky.
She had some horses who were fur and teeth.
She had some horses who were clay and would break.
She had some horses who were splintered red cliff.

Notable for its repetitions and its mythopoetic images, the poem moves back and forth between the real and unreal, the beautiful and the ugly. Later in the poem she has horses who "cried in their beer," who "licked razor blades," and who "prayed as they raped her." Like Kenny, Harjo invokes tribally specific animals and landmarks, but unlike Kenny, her poem is punctuated with moments of despair, anger, and fear. In his essay on Harjo's poetics, the critic Andrew Wiget persuasively argues that this poem is also about borders as it embodies what he calls "crossing over into apocalypse." Those very emotions animate most of the collection, *She Had Some Horses*, including the more memorable poems in the book, such as "Call It Fear," "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window," "She Remembers the Future," and "I Give You Back." In these poems, the speaker attempts both to reclaim and reassemble the assailed self.

Simon Ortiz's project, *From Sand Creek,* remains one of the most important and most enduring American Indian books of the 20th century. To this day, there is nothing quite like it. Part prose, part poetry, part history textbook, it interrogates the 1864 massacre at Sand Creek, Colorado when United States forces slaughtered around 130 Cheyenne and Arapaho—tribes at peace with the government—most of whom were women and children. Many things make this book revolutionary. First, Ortiz was the first Native writer to turn to poetry in order to make the case that what happened to Indians in the 19th century, especially at Sand Creek, should be considered war crimes. In one poem, Ortiz imagines what the soldiers must have thought when they saw torrents of Indian blood on the plains:

> It almost seemed magical
> that they had so much blood.
> It just kept pouring,
> like rivers,
> like endless floods from the sky,
> thunder that had become liquid,
> and the thunder surged forever
> into their minds.
>   Indeed,
> they must have felt
> they should get on their knees
> and drink the red rare blood,
> drink to replenish
> their own vivid loss.
>
> Their helpless hands
> were like sieves.

Like Kenny, the short lines and frequent repetitions give a conversational quality to the poem, but unlike Kenny's, Ortiz's landscape is not one of holism or connection. Rather, it's a site of bloodshed, of disgrace, of genocide.

The temptation to reimagine or reinvent the contact zone of Indians and white settlers became a major trope of Indian poetry in the 80s and 90s. That poetic desire to rewrite history, to reframe, through language and figuration of past transgressions, underpins much of the poetry of Louise Erdrich, perhaps the most important Native poet of the 1980s. Her two books, *Jacklight* (1984) and *Baptism of Desire* (1989), both published by major New York publishing houses, have been among the most successful and influential collections by a Native writer. One of the characteristics of her first and most acclaimed book, *Jacklight*, is Erdrich's embrace of the poetic persona. Where many other Indian poets tend to gravitate toward the lyric "I" of the autobiographical speaker, Erdrich likes to create different speakers of and in her poems. For example, in one of her most cited and taught poems, "Captivity," the author adopts the persona of Mary Rowlandson, famous for writing *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), a compelling story of Rowlandson's abduction by Narragansett, Wampanoag, and Nashaway/Nipmuc tribes as they eluded the Colonial troops. For nearly twelve weeks Rowlandson and her three children lived and traveled with the Indians, an experience her narrative recounts in great detail. Yet, in Erdrich's version of Rowlandson's narrative, the traditional Colonial/Indian and male/female power dynamic is reversed:

> Rescued, I see no truth in things.
> My husband drives a thick wedge
> through the earth, still it shuts
> to him year after year . . .
> I lay to sleep.
> And in the dark I see myself
> as I was outside their circle.

Rowlandson begins to identify more closely with her Indian captors than with her Puritan culture, transposing the traditional relationship of colonizer and colonized. One of the best critics of Native poetry, Robin Riley Fast, argues in her fine book *The Heart as a Drum*, that the poem hints at a sexual relationship between Rowlandson and her captor. Interestingly, Native culture and its ability to transform personal and cultural identity becomes the object of desire, not Anglo culture. Susan Perez Castillo rightly notes that when Rowlandson begins to see her captor as a person instead of a stereotype, she crosses a threshold into power and liberation. As a result, Erdrich's poem emerges as a model of what can be accomplished by grafting Anglo and Native worldviews.

In another important persona poem, "Dear John Wayne," Erdrich uses a classic Native literary strategy of polyvocality to create a dialogue between the poet and the Western film icon John Wayne. The poem weaves dialogue from Wayne's character into the text of the letter itself, so that not even Erdrich's language escapes Wayne's influence. Wayne's imposition onto Erdrich's text mirrors the ways in which the speaker is 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 Ojibwe territory in the first place. The words that

Wayne speaks are words of eradication, removal. Erdrich's description of the wrath of the white settlers on pagan Indians not only finds resonance in many Biblical narratives but also is seemingly justified by scripture:

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.

Wayne's words evoke both in tone and theme a myriad of Old Testament admonitions. In his smart reading of the poem, Laurence Goldstein similarly observes that "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." The dark gaze of Wayne, a virtual panopticon of judgment and retribution, remains a force from which there is no escape, not even in the margins. Wayne is an icon for a certain type of American; 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, but Erdrich speaks back for all Natives silenced by the enormous cultural impact of decades of misrepresentation.

The 1980s also saw the release of *Skins and Bones: Poems 1979-1987* by Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna/Sioux), a major figure in Native studies. A scholar, teacher, and poet, Allen spent her career trying to reconcile the many opposites she found when Native and western epistemologies collided. In *Skins and Bones*, she asks provocative questions, like Erdrich, about the nature of this life and the afterlife. In "Myth/Telling—Dream/Showing" the minutia of everyday interposes on the eternal:

1.
so where do we go next?
(into sunrise)
2.
there is all the clutter:
on the walls, the table top,
in the sink, all over the counters,
on the stove, the sofa, the floors.

Here, the rather ethereal indigenous meditation about becoming one with the cosmos has to come to terms with the all-too-western realities of daily clutter. In a way, this poem, this problem, functions as a metaphor for Allen's poetics and her criticism—what do we do with American/western clutter, all that noise? Her poem "New Birth," the final in the collection might contain one possible answer: "You never feel it/till it's over—/the relief/at having survived."

This notion of survival also drives the work of Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok), whose 1980 collection, *Lost Copper*, was a nominee for the Pulitzer Prize. However, *The Halfbreed Chronicles and Other Poems* (1985) truly established her as a significant voice in American Indian writing. Like Allen and Erdrich, Rose explores the tensions of ethnicity, and the tensions of gender—and of course the often difficult regions where those terrains mix. Infused with anger, political awareness, and a sense of justice, the poems in *The Halfbreed Chronicles* draw not only from Native traditions but also from other poetic traditions, in particular the legacy of political poetry from South and Central America (á la Pablo Neruda). The final section of the book bears the same title as the book itself, and each poem in this section is dedicated to a specific person or region that has suffered at the hands of colonialism and tyranny, whether it's Yuriko (a girl born with birth defects after the bomb at Hiroshima), Truganinny (the last of the Tasmanians), or Julia Pastrana ("The Ugliest Woman in the World"). In these poems, Rose, like Erdrich, utilizes poetic persona in order to give voice to the voiceless, to animate those who have been left for dead. That notion of voice also extends to the personal in Rose's book in "If I Am Too Brown Or Too White For You." The "you" could be Anglos, it could be the reader, it could be the other self, but either way, the self is fragmented:

and you touch the matrix
shattered in winter
and begin to piece together
the shape of me.

Though it's impossible to categorize a decade neatly, many poems by Native writers from the 1980s explore this notion of biculturality. In her important essay "Native Literatures: Seeking a Critical Center," Kimberly M. Blaeser argues that American Indian writers, by default, write from a bi-cultural perspective: "The writers themselves have generally experienced both tribal and mainstream American culture and many are in physical fact mixed-bloods." Beyond this, Blaeser says, the works themselves generally proceed from an awareness of the "frontier or border existence where cultures meet." If the poems of the 1970s advanced holism, these poems acknowledged how so many Native communities had been driven by over 300 years of subjugation, removal, eradication, and colonialism. The toll the colonial project has taken on the self and society needs poetry to help return language and its role in society to its rightful place.

The 1990s

The 1990s have been, perhaps, the most important decade in the development of American Indian poetry. The final decade of the 20th century, itself, seemed to signal that the dynamite talent of American Indian writers was about to explode. Ray A. Young Bear's *The Invisible Musician* appeared in 1990, as did Janice Gould's (Maidu/Konkow) *Beneath My Heart* (1990) and Joy Harjo's *In Mad Love and War*, which won the prestigious William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America in 1991, the first such award granted to a Native poet. The 1990s also saw the release of incredibly significant selected and collected poems, which proved that there had been a great many talented writers working for some time. Wendy Rose's *Bone Dance: New and Selected Poems: 1965-1993*, Duane Niatum's *Drawings of the Song Animals: New and Selected Poems*, N. Scott Momaday's (Kiowa) *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems 1961-1991*, and Simon Ortiz's massive and impressive *Woven Stone* all appeared within a few years of each other. Similarly, the 90s gave birth to either first books or first books to be published by a major press for a staggering list of authors including Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), Susan Deer Cloud (Métis), Elizabeth Woody (Navajo/Warm Springs/Wasco/Yakama), Esther Belin (Navajo), Gloria Bird (Spokane), Diane Glancy (Cherokee), and Linda Hogan (Chickasaw). In this decade, Native poetry began, for the first time, to be populated by a true plurality of voices, styles, approaches, themes, and techniques.

Take for example, the Navajo poets Luci Tapahonso and Esther Belin. Despite the fact that both women are Navajo poets, their poems could not be more different. Tapahonso's poetics skew toward Henson and Kenny—they are gentle poems about family, landscape, and the beauty of a holistic mode of being characterized by living in *Dinetah*, the Navajo homeland. In fact, many lines of her poems are written in the Navajo language, helping to paint one of the most comprehensive and nuanced portraits of Navajo life. In "This Is How They Were Placed for Us," one of the best poems from *Sáanii Dahataał*, Tapahonso evokes the spiritual and historical powers of the holy mountains in hypnotizing, incantatory language:

> The San Francisco Peaks taught us to believe in strong families.
> Dook'o'ooslíí binahji' danihidziil.
> The San Francisco Peaks taught us to value our many relatives.
> E'e'aahjígo Dook'o'ooslíí˄d bik'ehgo hózhóní˄go naashá.

By offering her poem as a gift to both the spirits of the San Francisco Peaks and her readers, Tapahonso reveals the source from which her poems and their magic derive:

> All these were given to us to live by.
> These mountains and the land keep us strong.
> From them, and because of them, we prosper.
>
> With this we speak,
> with this we think,
> with this we sing,

with this we pray.

This is where our prayers began.

On the other hand, Belin, who was raised in and around Oakland, California, talks openly about not speaking Navajo and feeling disconnected from the reservation in *In the Belly of My Beauty*. Her texts—like this one, "Blues-ing on the Brown Vibe"—are gritty, urban, jarring poems that, at times, have more in common with hip-hop than Tapahonso:

And Coyote struts down East 14th
feeling good
looking good
feeling the brown
melting into the brown that loiters
rapping with the brown in front of the Native American Health Center
talking that talk
of relocation from tribal nation
of recent immigration to the place some call the United States
home to many dislocated funky brown

Though much of her writing is also about space and connection, Belin's landscape is decidedly urban. Belin's "own lived experience," to quote Susan Brill de Ramirez, is vastly different from Tapahonso's because there is little doubt that Anglo urban environments have informed Belin's "cultural heritage" and by extension her poetry. Not surprisingly, then, Tapahonso's work, which seems to rise from the sand and water of Diné itself, feels as though it is sculpted by an entirely different country than Belin's poetic landscapes. That two Navajo poets could produce such different poetries is an indicator of the menu of good poetry emerging at this time.

It is impossible to do justice to all of the poets and poems the 90s spawned. All of the writers listed above deserve an entire essay devoted to their work. But, I would like to focus on two poets in particular and the individual books that have been unusually transformative for Native studies and poetry studies—Linda Hogan's *The Book of Medicines* (1993) and Sherman Alexie's *Summer of Black Widows* (1996). *The Book of Medicines* is one of those rare collections in which everything works. Hogan, who had been writing good poems and fiction for some time before the book was published, finds a remarkable lyric voice in this volume. The book radiates with intensity, beauty, heartache, optimism and loss. Like Kenny, Momaday, and Henson, Hogan's work reflects an environmental aesthetic that feels grounded in a kind of pre-history. The book hums with an ancient wisdom but is rendered in such fresh innovative language that it feels both new and old at the same time. In "Map" for instance, traditional Native views of the land meet a sly postmodern awareness of the poem-as-text:

This is the map of the forsaken world.

This is the world without end
Where forests have been cut away from their trees.
These are the lines wolf could not pass over.

Part of the project of *The Book of Medicines* is to map the many forms of healing that Natives and non-Natives alike require to survive a brutal world. Sometimes that map takes on the form of myth, other times, political awareness, and at other times this same map directs us to the body, our original locale. In "Skin Dreaming" the map takes us back to the holiness of the body:

Skin is the closest thing to god,
touching oil, clay,
intimate with the foreign land of air
and other bodies,
places not in light,
lonely
for its own image.

The soft rhythms of these lines recall the easy elegance of Luci Tapahonso's poems. Like Tapahonso, Hogan's world is quiet, her voice but a whisper. The sounds here are gorgeous, particularly the assonance of the last four lines: "*o*ther b*o*dies/n*o*t in *l*ight*/lonely/*f*o*r its *o*wn *i*mage". Consider also the internal rhyme of "thing" and "touching" and "clay" and "places," the slant rhyme of "Skin" and "thing." These poems pull from the toolbox of poetry, revealing a craftsperson at the height of her skill. "At first glance, her relentlessly plain line may not seem to lend itself well to a formal analysis," writes Janet McAdams (Alabama Creek), "But she is a subtle technician, not a casual one." Too often, Native poetry is examined solely through the lens of "theme" but for many poets like Hogan, Belin, Revard, and Alexie, one must also pay close attention to form, since a poem's formal qualities can be part and parcel of the argument the text tries to make.

For no poet is this more the case than Sherman Alexie, who writes sonnets, haibuns, ballads, dramatic monologues, prose poems, poems in heroic couplets, and many other forms of poetic texts.* Most impressive, though, is how he indigenizes these forms. For example, in "Sonnet: Tattoo Tears," Alexie transforms the revered 14-line lyric into a 14-paragraph prose poem. In this manner, rather than restrict himself to the clipped, iambic verse so much a part of western tradition, Alexie creates a sonnet endemic of Native storying with its penchant for repetition. This level of high play, this knowledge of—and eagerness to riff on—established forms characterizes his 1996 collection *Summer of Black Widows*, arguably the most important book by a Native poet since Erdrich's *Jacklight*. Funny and furious, innovative and angry, bitter and beautiful, *Black Widows* is a high mark of American poetry—regardless of race. Alexie's Native-centered texts become a poetics of sovereignty; he tells his own story in his own voice in his own way, turning the site of poetry into a site of autonomy. [*For more on Sherman Alexie, see Lara Narcisi's chapter in this volume.]

One of the reasons Alexie's poems in *Black Widows* succeed is because they achieve an usually complex fusion of Native and western poetic strategies. Rather than thinking in terms of appropriation, it is more useful and more accurate to see Alexie's poems as zones of contact and collaboration. In his smart series "Totem Sonnets," the author, again, has great fun with the sonnet form but at the same time, he makes it his own. Each of the seven poems contains fourteen lines, usually divided into the traditional octave (eight-line stanza)/sestet (six-line stanza) split. However, each line in the poem is a noun, almost always a person or place. In the first poem, the opening eight lines are names of Anglo celebrities like Meryl Streep, Walt Whitman, and Bruce Springsteen, but after the *volta*, or the turn, the last six lines are the names of people of color the poet admires, including Zora Neale Hurston, Pablo Neruda, and Harriet Tubman. Similarly, in poem "3," the octave comprises Indian heroes who have died, whereas the sestet names Indian heroes still alive. This sequence creates a map of lyric emotion and personal topography. It lays out the terrain of importance for the poet—both personally and poetically.

The pleasure Alexie derives from locating personal and political issues within poetic modes of expression finds its best articulation in the now-classic text "How To Write the Great American Indian Novel." Here, Alexie uses stereotype, the terminology of fiction, and the mythos surrounding Indians in literature to make larger statements about writing Indianness:

> All of the Indians must have tragic features: tragic noses, eyes, and arms.
> Their hands and fingers must be tragic when they reach for tragic food.
>
> The hero must be a half-breed, half white and half Indian, preferably
> from a horse culture. He should often weep alone. That is mandatory.
>
> If the hero is an Indian woman, she is beautiful. She must be slender
> And in love with a white man. But if she loves an Indian man
>
> Then he must be a half-breed, preferably from a horse culture.

The mix of couplets, dark humor, and a knowing recognition of flat representation makes this poem work on many levels. We don't know who Alexie is mocking in particular, but we have a sense that it might be us.

Alexie goes arch about tragedy in this poem, but in "The Exaggeration of Despair," the poem directly following "How To Write the Great American Indian Novel," loss is no joke, as the opening five lines attest:

> I open the door
>
> (this Indian girl writes that her brother tried to hang himself
> with a belt just two weeks after her other brother did hang himself

> and this Indian man tells us that, back in boarding school,
> five priests took him into the back room and raped him repeatedly)

Like Hogan, Alexie calls attention to the dangers facing his tribe, all Natives, and, in fact, all peoples, and also her work, his poetry functions as a kind of medicine, even if it can come off as a bitter pill. In her fine essay in *American Literature*, Laura Leibman writes "The poems in *The Summer of Black Widows* serve as witness to the power of stories and show the Spokane community how to heal in the face of danger and tragedy."

No Native poet has been better at putting a face on tragedy than Alexie, but, at the same time, no Native poet is funnier. Those two extremes—and his willingness to embrace both—make Alexie and his poems uncommonly poignant and accessible. Another trait of Alexie's is his willingness to represent reservation life in all of its horrors. Where much Native poetry of the 80s worked hard to establish a Native voice and to celebrate Native worldviews, poets like Adrian C. Louis (Paiute) and Alexie, began, in the 90s to hold a brutal mirror up to the daily realities of Indian life.

One final note on the 1990s in terms of basic accessibility: in order for books to arrive in bookstores and in classrooms, they have to be published. The 80s and 90s were important decades for the small press. Independent presses like Hanging Loose Press, White Pine Press, Thunder's Mouth Press, Greenfield Review Press, Coffee House Press, and West End Press did yeoman's work in getting many of the poets here in print for the first time. But, no press has been more important than the University of Arizona Press's *Sun Tracks* series. Founded in 1971 with a mission of publishing and promoting poetry by Native American and Chicano/a writers, this series has produced some of the most important books by Simon Ortiz, Elizabeth Woody, Luci Tapahonso, Janice Gould, N. Scott Momaday, Ofelia Zepeda (Tohono O'odham), Joseph Bruchac, and Esther Belin. The 90s in particular witnessed the emergence of the *Sun Tracks* series as the premiere publishing venue for Native poets and one of the most significant projects in poetry publishing in the country.

The 2000s

If the 90s was marked by the *Sun Tracks* series, the 2000s have been the decade of Salt Publishing's *Earthworks* Series—a staggeringly ambitious indigenous poetry series edited by Janet McAdams. Aside from books by Alexie, who publishes with Hanging Loose Press and Joy Harjo who publishes with W.W. Norton, it is difficult to think of a major book of Native poetry published since 2005 that was not an *Earthworks* project. Not only does the press issue compendia of poems by major poets such as Diane Glancy and Carter Revard, but it also works hard to get the first or second book by a writer out in the world. As of 2010, there are around twenty titles in the series, and that proliferation of books is making an impact. LeAnne Howe's (Choctaw) *Evidence of Red* won an Oklahoma Book Award, and Heid Erdrich's (Ojibwe) *The Mother's Tongue* was short-listed for the Minnesota Book Awards. McAdams' collection *Feral*, and Revard's *How the Songs Came Down: New and Selected Poems,* sold extremely well for poetry collections and created a bit of a buzz in Native Studies circles. The most ambitious book in this series is the beguiling *Blood Run* by Allison Adelle Hedge Coke (Cherokee/Huron/Creek). A lyrical meditation on an area of important Oneonta mounds in South Dakota and Iowa now known as Blood Run, these poems chart a cartography of the mythic past and the dislocated present. In one of several poems called "The Mounds," Coke enacts, through internal rhyme, alliteration and Dickinsonian dashes, a poeticized psalm for the future world:

> We've seen
> passages—livelihoods—
> scattering doe, bird, larger herds...
> Here, in this wintering of our old world, this harboring—time—
> we've become another marker, one who must bear mortal memory.

Ultimately, though, it's about more than sales; the *Earthworks* books are augmenting the canon of American letters, not simply by making it more inclusive but by giving the free-floating flowering of American poetry roots to history, language and land that, for many years, its leaves have lacked.

Another exciting project was a special issue of *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetry and Poetics* released in 2009 that featured contemporary American Indian prose poetry. In a gesture of full disclosure I should be forthcoming and admit that I curated the issue and authored the introduction, but that should not take away from the importance of the project. Featuring McAdams, Howe, Alexie, Heid Erdrich, Glancy, Deborah Miranda (Esselen/Chumash), Revard, Gould, Blaeser, Belin, Coke, and many others, it represented the first anthology of Native prose poetry and one of the most interesting examples of the rich tapestry of contemporary Native writing.

Even though we are now nearing the end of this decade, it is extremely difficult to sum up or encapsulate Native poetry in the 2000s. If anything, this decade will be known as a time of diversity. In retrospect, the 90s were a decade when established poets really hit their stride—when Tapahonso, Alexie, Woody, Hogan, Glancy, and Ortiz wrote their best books. The 2000s appear to be largely about new poets finding a voice and making a name for themselves. The most celebrated book of the decade has been Alexie's *Face* (2009), but the most exciting two books are by newcomers to the field: Navajo poets Sherwin Bitsui and Orlando White. Bitsui's *Shapeshift* (2003) and White's *Bone Light* (2009) are laced with a skepticism toward and an embrace of language. Both poets eschew an expository poetry of theme and opt instead for an elliptical lyricism characterized by brevity, elision, and interiority. In Bitsui's "Apparition," for example, blanks and clipped lines send the message that the world is, among other things, fragmented, indeterminate, absent:

> I haven't ________
> since smoke dried to salt in the lakebed,
>   since crude oil dripped from his parting slogan,
>   the milk's sky behind it,
>   birds chirping from its wig.

Many of Bitsui's poems explore how different values, concepts, and ideas become when experienced in Navajo as opposed to English. In fact, at times, English (and its poetic tradition) feels more like an enemy than a mode of connection as in these lines from "Drought": "*Read this/understand their language,/or sleep in a bottle of broken nails for the rest of your life.*"

White, on the other hand, sees language as a means to an end—if not also an end in itself. For him, letters are works of art, little people, signs and symbols of liberation and confinement. In the opening piece, "To See Letters," White makes an emotional connection with the alphabet as a means of populating his poetic landscape:

> Everything I write requires this: Alphabet.
>
> It was a notion I did not know when I was six years old. In kindergarten I was more interested in the image of a letter on a flash card. I noticed its shape distinguishing itself from its background. Then, with my eyes I tore the O in half. In that moment I felt language separate from its form.

The rest of the book explores the ways in which letters become larger than what they embody, while at the same time reimagining letters completely stripped of their associations, enjoyed merely for their graphical beauty. The best of these is a series of poems on the letters "I" and "J," which Gabriel Gomez praises in his review of the book: "The poems of *Bone Light* are un-forced and un-patterned. They are stylistically risky and refreshingly non-committal to form and tradition, but engage the reader fully."

A lack of commitment to form but an awareness of it will likely be the framing mechanism of Native poetry as it evolves into the next three decades. Reading backwards from 2010 to 1980, one uncovers more than just a formal evolution, one also is able to trace a poetic revolution. In the 80s, poets were eager to show the world that American Indians were writing good poems and to remind readers that Native modes of telling and thinking were in concert with the poetic tradition. In the 90s, poets felt more leeway to experiment with form and with the representation of Indian life. LeAnne Howe's wonderful and hilarious series of Mascot/Noble Savage poems in *Evidence of Red* is a great example. In the 2000s, poets like McAdams, Bitsui, and White have felt even more poetic freedom—a freedom from having to write an overtly *Indian* poetry (whatever that might mean). Increasingly, Native poets are challenging readers *not* to read their poems through a Nativist lens, which raises a number of issues only future poets can resolve.

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