

## Resisting Resistance: Finding Cultural Hybridity in Sherman Alexie's Sonnets

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### Abstract:

American Indian writer and poet Sherman Alexie is well known for writing in mixed genres. His use and sometimes alteration of classic Western forms like the sonnet has led to his being labeled by literary critics as a writer of resistance against a society ruled by Western European ideals. While these assertions may not be wrong, this paper instead seeks to explore the many instances in Alexie's sonnets in which the author seems to be creating intersections and connections between cultures rather than emphasizing the dividing lines. By creating mixed genre pieces and even altered sonnets utilizing both American Indian and Western characteristics, Alexie is able to remind his reader of the atrocities of the past, both distant and recent, while still expressing unsentimental optimism for a future which embraces those of bicultural heritage like himself.



Sherman Alexie is a contemporary American Indian writer who grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation before moving off of the reservation to embrace an urban environment. He is well known for his dark humor, activist tendencies, and for writing in mixed genres. Over the course of his prolific career, he's written poetry utilizing several forms, including the sonnet.

Often, it seems, the sonnet in the hands of a minority writer is perceived solely as a vehicle of resistance. Certainly, African American poets like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes wrote sonnets of resistance during the Harlem Renaissance period. As Charles Bernstein notes about McKay in his essay, "Poetics of the Americas," "iambic pentameter is made the metrical mark of colonialism ... Pentameter is used to serve as the acoustic trapping of 'Old England'" (Bernstein 123). These classic formal elements of the sonnet are clearly being viewed as something that must be resisted, either in the content of the sonnet, or by altering the form away from "colonialism" or "Old England."

It is also true that Sherman Alexie's writing, in any genre, continually reminds us of tragedies such as Wounded Knee and Sand Creek, and the narratives are entrenched in a long history of smallpox blankets, alcoholism, and poverty-ridden reservations. This writing of resistance has been well documented by literary critics.

While I can't possibly disallow the presence of resistance in Alexie's sonnets, I do believe that other aspects worthy of interpretation are often overlooked. My interest in Alexie's sonnets lies not in his fight against past (and sometimes present) atrocities, but rather in the moments where he desires, and sometimes finds, connections between people and cultures. As Dee Horne explains in the preface to her book, *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature*, "hybridization need not be assimilation—one culture dominating and taking over another culture—but can be a recognition of the interactions between cultures" (xvii-xviii). In other words, Alexie is not

necessarily seeking to steal the sonnet from Western culture and force it to become a part of the indigenous conversation, but rather the possibility exists that he is seeking a path to cultural hybridization. As Alexie himself asserted in a 2004 interview with Diane Thiel, "I still love hybrids. I'm a hybrid" (*Conversations* 136). Alexie is referring to his own mixed-cultural heritage which consists of Spokane Indian, Coeur d'Alene Indian, and European, while also commenting on his preference for literature that makes connections.

While some critics allude to the possibility of hybridism in his writing, I have found little research which explores what often appears to be the opposite of resistance—that is, a desire, or even a need, to hybridize the two cultures, Indian and white, into something that Alexie can claim as his own, while also providing a path to survival for other individuals of Indian and European descent. In the following pages I will argue that while there are elements of resistance to a past dominated by white culture in Alexie's sonnets, there is also evidence of a strong desire to blend two opposing cultures into a unique hybrid form which represents a path to future survival for American Indian peoples.

To begin, it seems appropriate to first look at Sherman Alexie's own insights into his sonnets. In an interview on PBS Newshour, Alexie spoke about his choice of the sonnet as a form:

I grew up in a storytelling culture, a tribal culture, but also in an American storytelling culture...The form I most enjoy writing is the sonnet or sonnet-like forms...I'm a big fan of the concluding couplet these days. I like the summation of it. And it feels very traditional as well, because, when you're talking about tribal songs, you know, whether they're short or long, there's a lot of repetition involved. There's a lot of recitation of themes and ideas and sounds. But it always ends, you know, with that final drumbeat, that boom that tells you it's over. So, a concluding couplet in a sonnet feels like that last drum beat of a powwow song to me. So, I get my nice mix of Western culture and tribal culture (*PBS* 2009).

Just in this brief statement, Alexie points out several times that his goal is an attempt to combine "a tribal culture" with "an American storytelling culture." The sonnet was not something he chose in order to steal it or convert it from Western European to Indian culture, but rather, he realized that there were aspects already present within the sonnet that reminded him of elements that were already present in traditional Indian stories and music. Combining the two became a practice that seemed like a natural hybridization rather than a forced takeover that would be represented by an act of resistance. He chose to write in the sonnet form not in order to use it as an act of resistance against the dominant Western culture, but rather to find a "nice mix" of both cultures (*PBS* 2009). Furthermore, in the introduction to *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, a collection of short

stories, Alexie describes iambic pentameter as “the ba-bump, ba-bump sound of the heartbeat, of the deer running through the green pine forest, of the eagle singing its way through the sky” (xii). While this “indigenous rhetoric” as Alexie describes it, is unusual in his fiction and poetry, Alexie uses it here to highlight the commonality of the rhythm that the iamb represents (*Lone Ranger* xii). It is not arbitrarily a possession of Western culture, but rather a ubiquitous rhythmic repetition which is shared by the multiple cultures, and even everything with a heartbeat. In fact, many American Indian round dances, including the infamous Ghost Dance which arises as a recurring metaphor in Alexie’s writing, are performed to drums which involve the repetition of unstressed and stressed beats. Again, the use of the sonnet was a natural progression for Alexie.

A close examination of Alexie’s mixed genre piece “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers,” from his 2009 book, *Face*, will reveal many similar ideas of hybridization. I perceive this sequence as a response to the many literary critics who focus on colonialism and resistance in his work. This poem, unfortunately too long to reproduce here in full, combines four sonnets with four sections of what might be categorized as flash fiction or prose poems, except that in this instance, the form sometimes changes in the middle of a sentence. Take, for example, this section of prose followed by the first quatrain of the sonnet into which it changes:

Most Indians use “sovereignty” to refer to the collective and tribal desire for political, cultural, and economic independence. But I am using it here to mean “The individual Indian artist’s basic right to be an eccentric bastard.” I am using it here to attack Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, the Sioux Indian Writer and scholar, who

Has written, with venomous wit,  
That Skins shouldn’t write autobiography,  
She believes that “tribal sovereignty”  
Should be our ethos. But I call bullshit! (*Face*  
79-80)

While the sonnet itself is generally structured like a contemporary form with an a-b-b-a rhyme scheme in this stanza, the sudden switch from informal conversational prose to a more structured (though still conversational) sonnet form is more reminiscent of American Indian storytelling techniques which can embed songs within the narrative of a story. In his book, *Engaged Resistance*, Dean Rader, a well-known scholar on American Indian poetry, notes:

[T]he performance of a traditional Indian story requires the participation of many voices ... The speaker often stops or pauses, awaiting the phrases, sounds, or gestures from the audience before continuing, making the process dialogic rather than monologic. When a poet moves from prose to poetry within a text, she re-creates an aspect of that dialogic component of Native expression (145).

The movement between sonnet and prose in Alexie’s sequence follows this structural idea. It further recalls Native storytelling by allowing other voices to speak within the poem as well, using dialogue with other speakers in both the sonnet and prose

sections. Meanwhile, the sonnet itself remains intact as a sonnet in the western tradition, with a modernized rhyme scheme, pentameter in many lines, and often turns arriving just as expected at line nine with a lexical marker of some form (note the “And” at line nine in the excerpt below). The sonnets are, for the most part, more traditional in the Western structure than we would expect from many contemporary sonneteers. Therefore, it does not appear that Alexie’s goal is to usurp the sonnet and use it as the enemy’s own weapon against him, but rather, it is combined with Indian storytelling technique to create a unique genre which Alexie can claim as his own, while resisting neither.

Furthermore, within the content of this excerpt, Alexie expresses the opinion that the needs of the tribal culture should not overwhelm the needs of the individual. He is expressing the opinion that “tribal sovereignty” is not the solution because it encourages separation rather than learning how to exist as an individual in a bicultural society (*Face* 80). It may be difficult to see from this excerpt how Alexie is attempting to make cultural connections when he seems to be doing just the opposite by extolling the importance of individuality above all else. However, it becomes clear by examining the remaining stanzas of the sonnet:

My tribe tried to kill me—  
And I don’t mean that metaphorically.  
I’ve been to dozens of funerals and wakes;  
I’ve poured dirt into one hundred graves;  
And if you study what separates me,  
The survivor, from the dead and car-wrecked,  
Then you’ll learn that my literacy  
Saved my ass. It was all those goddamn texts  
By all those damn dead white male and female  
writers  
That first taught me how to be a fighter,

so let me slap Cook-Lynn upside her head with the right and of John Keats and the left hand of Emily Dickinson. Let me kick her in the shins with the left toe of Marianne Moore and the right toe of John Donne. I wasn’t saved by the separation of cultures; I was *reborn* inside the collision of cultures. So fuck Cook-Lynn and her swarm of professional locusts (*Face* 80).

Alexie makes a clear statement here by saying that he “wasn’t saved by the separation of cultures” but rather “was reborn inside the collision of cultures,” that he is making connections with the white culture rather than encouraging acts of resistance. The language here is still clearly emotional and combative, and the “collision of cultures” still suggests the underlying tone of resistance to a colonial *past* which led to the harsh realities of *present* reservation life which include “the dead and the car-wrecked.” However, the message for the *future* seems to be that in order to become “The survivor” one must be “reborn” into the realities of a bicultural society.

In another section of this same piece, Alexie describes the sequence as “An indigenous celebration of colonialism or maybe a colonial celebration of the indigenous” (81). Traditionally, the native people are not seen as being celebratory over the idea of



colonization, just as colonizers are not usually overjoyed about indigenous cultures. However, this is exactly Alexie's goal, to combine the two cultures that he claims into "A hybrid sonnet sequence" (80). In the final sonnet, Alexie reiterates both resistance and cross-cultural ideals.

This sonnet, like my reservation, keeps  
 Its secrets hidden behind boundaries  
 That are simple and legal at first read  
 (Fourteen lines that rhyme, two rivers that meet,  
 Poem and water joined at one confluence),  
 But colonialism's influence  
 Is fluid and solid, measureable  
 And mad. If I find it pleasurable  
 To (imperfectly) mimic white masters  
 Then what tribal elders have I betrayed?  
 If I quote Frost from memory faster  
 Than I recall powwow songs, then what blank  
 Or free or formal verse should I call mine?  
 I claim all of it; Hunger is my crime. (Face 81-2)

First Alexie relates "This sonnet" (ln 1) to "my reservation," (ln 1) drawing a comparison between a Western literary tradition and American Indian tribal land, which is, at least in theory, a sovereign state. One is a defining form of the Western literary canon and the other represents the defining limits of American Indian culture. Both have "boundaries" (ln 2) and "secrets," (ln 2) and when you first look at them, the rules are "simple and legal" (ln 3). However, both the structure of the sonnet and life on the reservation can be much more complex than it would appear at first glance. Again, Alexie is finding similarities. The Western tradition and the American Indian tradition are not so very different. The "Poem and water joined at one confluence" (ln 5) are the sonnet and the traditional Indian reservation life combining in cultural "confluence." However, now there is a turn at line six beginning with a common lexical marker "But," which reminds the reader that "colonialism's influence" is both the "fluid and solid" or rather, the water which earlier represented the boundaries of the reservation and the "solid" of the poem. It is also "measurable," which could suggest the meter of a sonnet and "mad" which could easily refer back to reservation life. In other words, colonialism has changed both cultures. It appears that Alexie is seeing great potential for connection between cultures, but somehow, colonialism itself has become such an overwhelming concept in the critique of American Indian literature, that its "influence" (ln 6) smothers the possibility of positive hybridization. Immediately after this, Alexie goes on to highlight some of the effects of actual colonialism. Just because he chooses to write in the sonnet form, he argues, he is not destroying his own tribal culture. Rather, he believes that he is the end result of two cultures and can therefore state confidently, "I claim all of it" (ln 14). The sonnet ends with the idea that the narrator has committed a "crime" by his desire to claim and combine two different cultures. Yet "hunger" (ln 14) is something that we would never think of as criminal. Therefore, Alexie finishes this long reply to those critics who believe that cultural sides must be taken by suggesting that "hunger" (ln 14) to learn beyond one's own culture and even to hybridize cultures should not be a crime at all.

In her book, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition*, Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez offers some insight into why Alexie might undertake a project which would likely be poorly received by his Indian culture, as well as apparently unacceptable to critics. While explaining her theory on "the conversive-discursive continuum," (155) Brill de Ramírez comments that:

Alexie ... writes in a powerful voice that speaks the realities of worlds that continually push each other to the point of discursive and actual implosion. Whether the results are burning cars, a trailer fire, alcoholism, domestic or racial violence, smallpox blankets, broken treaties, or human alienation and loneliness, for Alexie, the process is always the same: the clash of worlds that rarely gives more than temporary (and in fact illusory) respite from the unfulfilled dreams and lived pain that is the reality on either side of the divide (Brill de Ramírez 190).

What becomes clear here is that Alexie's poetry does resist "the clash of worlds" and the "pain that is the reality on either side of the divide" that Brill de Ramírez finds in his writing. However, while this can be interpreted as an act of resistance against the dominant culture, it can also be seen as a reason for promoting an existence which does not contain "worlds" in the plural and which does not have a "divide," but rather denies the inherent "clash" in favor of a more holistic world view.

Brill de Ramírez goes on to quote lines from two of Alexie's sonnets from his book *First Indian on the Moon*, noting that although the language of resistance is present throughout both, there is also "a transformative power within the conversive relationships of *First Indian on the Moon* that enables hope, survival, and love" (Brill de Ramírez 193). It is important to note that the relationships of which Brill de Ramírez speaks in the sonnets "I Would Steal Horses" (*First Indian* 55) and "The Game Between the Jews and the Indians is Tied Going Into the Bottom of the Ninth Inning" (*First Indian* 80), are both between two people of different cultures. Here, the interpersonal relationships serve as a bridge between cultures, exemplifying the possibilities of cross-cultural hybridization.

By examining "The Game Between the Jews and the Indians is Tied Going Into the Bottom of the Ninth Inning" (*First Indian* 80) more closely, both the resistance and the possibility become clear:

So, now, when you touch me  
 my skin, will you think  
 of Sand Creek, Wounded Knee?  
 And what will I remember

when your skin is next to mine  
 Auschwitz, Buchenwald?  
 No, we will only think of the past  
 as one second before

where we are now, the future  
 just one second ahead  
 but every once in awhile  
 we can remind each other

that we are both survivors and children  
and grandchildren of survivors.

First, the title sets the scene for the sonnet as being about two different cultures with a backdrop of America. However, this sonnet is less formal in terms of rhyme scheme, which is almost non-existent, and the lines are much shorter than ten syllables. So while the dominant culture is, as it always is, in the background, it does not have equal importance here, and so the sonnet does demonstrate some elements that can be read as resistance. In this sonnet, the individuals represent themselves, but also signify larger cultural considerations. In his essay "Sherman Alexie: irony, intimacy, and agency," David L. Moore notes that Alexie uses this tactic frequently in his work; "His social agenda, breaking boundaries of class, gender, and race across historically separated populations, is declared in personal terms" (303). Perhaps Alexie's theory is that it is easier for individuals to converse across cultural lines than it is to suggest the same action for entire populations.

The conversive quality that Brill de Ramirez writes about is evident in the changes from second person to first person singular to first person plural. Alexie allows the reader to become a part of the poem, in conversation with the first person singular of the narrator, and then, the reader is transformed into a part of the "we" from line seven to the end of the sonnet. This is one more process by which Alexie makes connections with readers of all cultures.

Line seven is also the point of the first turn, when the narrator provides an answer to the questions posed in the first six lines. When the two people, representing two cultures, are thought of as separate entities in the first six lines, they can only consider questions of the past and its influence on the moment. However, when they are joined as the "we," they can live in the present without forgetting the long history of interpersonal relationships and "survivors" (ln 14), which allowed them to be a "we" at all. It is obvious that there is still resistance here to the atrocities of the past. The second turn appears at line 11 with a lexical marker "but," after which he suggests that "once in a while" (ln 11) they should remember where they came from, but without letting it overcome their everyday lives. The message in this sonnet is one of surviving together, across cultural boundaries, without forgetting the past, but also not letting the past become something that informs every cultural interaction. I think Jeff Berglund sums this idea up the best in his introduction to *Sherman Alexie: A Collection of Critical Essays* by ending with, "while Alexie's writing has deep roots in a too-often-neglected past, it is involved in creating an unflinching forward-looking view of the world that awaits us in our shared futures" (xxxviii).

Undoubtedly, there are elements of resistance in Sherman Alexie's sonnets. It may be that it is impossible to write

hybridized, bi-cultural literature without the possibility of reading it as resisting the dominant culture. This may be even more true of typically western forms like the sonnet, which themselves resist conversion or hybridization into the dialogue of a different culture. However, this argument for resistance doesn't deny that there can also be, concurrently, an argument for hybridization. Recalling the atrocities committed at Wounded Knee and Sand Creek doesn't mean that Alexie cannot also be urging a future which is the opposite of that, a future in which his own multi-cultural heritage is equally accepted, a future in which he is not ostracized by Indians for reading Emily Dickinson any more than he is stereotyped by white people for his Indian-ness. With the sonnet, he is able to fuse western literary tradition with native storytelling techniques. He is able to stress cultural and interpersonal connections by writing in a form that came from western tradition, but recalls his native heritage. With the sonnet, I believe that Sherman Alexie succeeds in his goal of stressing similarities and creating points of connection between cultures.

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