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**Poetry and the Post-Apocalyptic Paradox:
North American Indigenous Disruptions
to the Westernized Self**



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: Thomas L. Morgan, Ph.D.

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Abstract

This three-chapter project explores the work of three poets, each identifying with different North American indigenous tribes. Their work challenges western poetic conventions and notions of individualism to offer alternative worldviews and complicate mainstream oversimplifications of American Indian identity. Brandi MacDougall investigates assumptions of the Western Self represented by the "I" Perspective common in Western thought; Sherman Alexie revises the sonnet form to portray the complexity of how contemporary American Indians navigate the blending of capitalist institutions and native traditions; Kristi Leora offers readers an enlightened conception of self-hood by balancing processes of western socialization with native cosmology. Ultimately, this project is a student's dive into the shallow waters of a deep, perhaps infinite pool of understanding and existence that can never be fully learned, understood or experienced from his personal, subjective perspective.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

Thank you dearly to my professors and peers of the English department. Your feedback and guidance extends far beyond any written text. To those at the Honors College committed to the cultivation of passion in young, ambitious students—thank you.

Dr. Morgan, your scholarship parallels your advising; you are a role model and a friend. I have the utmost appreciation for your ability to push students towards the best version of themselves. This project is a result of your craft.

Thank you to my family, friends and those who have always welcomed my questions.

Hopefully, within these pages, some idea illuminates a mental room in need of improvement as we continue to push for a socially conscious community.

Dedicated to my late grandfather, Dewey Ziegler



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Poetry and the Post-Apocalyptic Paradox: North American Indigenous Disruptions to the Westernized Self

Joseph Ferber

“No one can speak *for* the Native American. For any non-indian to assume superiority in expressing the ‘correct’ indian perspective is arrogant folly at best, intentional and self-serving distortion at worst.” - *(from Ward Churchill’s introduction to Marxism and Native Americans)*

Introduction

Can the American Indian experience be theorized as Post-colonial? The notion of contemporary indigenous experience as post apocalyptic, to use Kristi Leora’s term, perhaps more aptly recognizes the indigenous perspective on American colonialism. The notion of existing as Post-Apocalyptic acknowledges the genocide and erasure initiated by American colonialism. The contemporary state of American reality is the effect of a colonial encounter, one that has produced culturally blended ideas, identities and art-forms that reflect the complexity of navigating multiple cultures and worldviews. This project explores the representations of colonial histories, geographic spaces and cultural backgrounds, from Brandy Nalani McDougall’s reflections of Native Hawaiian experience to Sherman Alexie’s and Kristi Leora’s continental North American experiences. Each uses personal strategies to explore creation of the self, as indigenous, as western, as a participant of natural life, compartmentalized by competing definitions of personhood. These poems dissect and restructure, navigating the rationalization and perpetuation of ensconced whiteness as it creates physical, mental and emotional realities of western capitalism. Through moments of daily experience, these poets are revelatory

to the make-up of western mainstream routine. They use poetic form to engage colonial oppression and argue for indigenous sovereignty. Reimagining the white-indigenous relationship as overlapping as opposed to dichotomized embraces cultural hybridity as a means to understanding the complex contemporary notion of self-determination.

While the writing for this project is transmitted in an academic medium, the spirit and motivation behind it rests in the poetry. While the relationship between western theory and indigeneity has a difficult history, this poetry intentionally speaks back to it and is in conversation with that theory. The indigenous art examined here is textual, produced through western print institutions and mediums, thus I like to think there is value in analyzing it within the lens of western academia. My intention is to question the normativity of American based settler colonialism to make the unconscious structures of power that these poets question clear to readers. These essays demonstrate my awareness as a reader of how literature can excavate entrenched cultural conventions that create notions of western self and identity as we know it. Proper homage must be iterated, for these poets have prompted personal self-journey and necessary critique of mental and physical reality.

The epigraph above acknowledges the challenge of my role as a heterosexual, middle-class, white man studying indigenous poetics. A fissure exists between subject and object, as I am left up to personal interpretation with no direct contact with any of the indigenous writers discussed in the project. My claims, to quote the epigraph, risk being “folly” and “self serving.” However, this challenge has shaped my approach, to further my understanding and awareness. Rather than speak for, I see try to engage with, by making individual pieces that invigorate on their own, expand when put in conversation

with each other. In keeping with some of the poetic techniques discussed, I hope to have utilized some of Leora's disembodiment techniques, removing personal interjection from analysis. In the spirit of interdependence, when put together there is potential for new meaning, and new consciousness that relies on relationship. While the close-readings may dissect and specify down to the level of punctuation, as a unified whole these pieces gain strength in readership, making whiteness look in the mirror. Including three different indigenous writers together as part of a single project offers different expressions of relatable, yet hardly identical situations.

The combination of secondary sources used for this paper create a conversation that intends to balance indigenous worldviews with the western practices they specifically engage. From her book on the Chicana experience *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa describes differences between indigenous and western functions of art, and how decontextualizing a piece of art from its original culture changes the meaning and function of the piece. She acknowledges the relationship of indigenous art existing within western contexts: "Ethnocentrism is the tyranny of Western aesthetics. An Indian mask in an American museum is transposed into an alien aesthetic system where what is missing is the presence of power invoked through performativity ritual. It has become a conquered thing, a dead 'thing' separated from nature and therefore its power" (90). Art adopts its limitations to transform the context itself. In attempting to establish a self-defined notion of indigeneity from subjugated subject position, these poets restructure the conventions they takes on, utilizing the formative power of language. Post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha speaks on self-determined identity, citing a distancing from "the negotiation of the preconstituted social contradictions of the past or present; [and

instead]...the renegotiation of those times, terms and traditions through which we turn our uncertain, passing contemporaneity into the signs of history” (155). Inserting moments of contemporaneity into the narrative of history can renegotiate certain effects of socialized traditions. Put simply, to renegotiate is to inject history with a dose of alternative contemporary experience, revealing and changing traditions that have made western ideals and lifestyles seem both normative and universal. Art that takes on the art form itself can disrupt the historical narrative, and undercut systems of dominance.

It is vital to recognize oneself as both a subject and object of perception in order to empathize and be truly open to difference. Gloria Anzaldúa expresses this via the symbol of a mirror as a way to reflect on the self as a simultaneous other: “There is another quality to the mirror and that is the act of seeing. Seeing and being seen. Subject and object. I and she. A glance can freeze us in place; it can ‘possess’ us. It can erect a barrier against the world. But in a glance also lies awareness, knowledge. The seemingly contradictory aspects—the act of being seen, held, immobilized by a glance, and “seeing through” an experience—are symbolized by the underground aspects of *Coatlilcue*, *Cihuacoatl*, and *Tlazolteotl*, which cluster in what I call the *Coatlilcue* state” (64). For Anzaldúa, the mirror deconstructs the acceptance of a postcolonial dichotomy between the colonized and colonizer, acknowledging a need for acceptance that both are merely two sides of the same coin—she calls for a state of consciousness attuned to both the experience as a subject and object of perception. By knowing this duality, one can more effectively, and selflessly operate in a community. Our individuality risks letting the power of glance become a one-way function that dichotomizes the self from the exterior world. This entrapment differs from the knowledge iterated by the indigenous Coatlicue

state which promotes the need to see “through” such barriers, and craft the ability to understand perception from dual vantage points. This reciprocity is the relationship between the self and other, a relationship corrupted by social barriers.

This project began with an interest in the relationship between poetry and post-colonialism in regards to contemporary North American Indigenous life. Weishin Gui’s work on identity challenged the western notion of the completed self, represented in written and spoken language by the lyrical “I” perspective that assumes authority of a completed, individual self. Gui’s alternative conception, of the individual person as physical embodiment of historical and socio-cultural “stitchings” coincided with my reading of Brandy Nalani McDougall’s poetry that reflects Native Hawaiian island culture. Her poem “Tehura,” about the Tahitian wife of French painter Paul Gauguin, vocalizes a silent side of island history. She weaves her own narrative perspective with Gauguin’s explicit words, excerpted from his autobiography. The juxtaposition between narrative, first person “I” perspectives reveals the validated icon’s flaws, as McDougall spirals time and space, giving voice and agency to the silent subject of the painting. This cross-genre, cross-cultural conversation that McDougall creates makes me wonder how much perception of Tahiti and specifically Tahitian women would change for the cultured westerner, educated in island life secondarily through Gauguin’s filtering gaze? Of course, the very nature of the canon itself reinforces these types of dominant paradigms, but I was less aware of how those dominant paradigms contribute to silencing indigenous voices.

Sherman Alexie is the most famous of the three poets discussed in this project. Throughout his nine poetry collections, Alexie has experimented with poetic form,

specifically in his work with the sonnet. His sonnets in his most recent collection, *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned* are genre-blending; they de-simplify perceived cultural dichotomies and highlight the mash-up of influence that creates all persons of modern America. The careful work of *What I've Stolen, What I've Learned* challenges the institutions and industry standards that pigeonhole the type of art it permits. With characters that seem to embody personal experience, Alexie bends the support beams of ideology, unafraid of the collapse and rebuild. This paper specifically focuses on his revisions to the sonnet form in this collection, creating new iterations that challenge the notion of the sonnet as a conventional love poem. For example, several sonnets include parenthetical prose between the opening and closing stanzas, operating as implicit thought that underlies the ideology of the rest of the poem. In a dialogue in 2014 at the University of Dayton, Alexie himself revealed that he has a whole series of rules related to his sonnet writing, rules that continually shift and change for each sonnet. The goal of this process is in part connected to his interest in questioning both form and the ideologies carried by generic form. This given collection is about the complexity of identity. It is about having worldviews that contract inescapable capitalism, where financially defined success is essential for practical happiness.

The final chapter of this thesis explores the work of Kristi Leora—a poet originally from Quebec. Her work centers on interrelationship between life forms and movements of thought. Her collection *Dark Swimming* includes no first-person perspective; no lyrical “I” voices are used. By lacking a first-person narrative perspective, Leora approaches the nature of humanity with community oriented interdependence. Unlike McDougall’s attention to specific moments of history via the physical body of an

individual, Leora approaches experience of the epistemologically, invoking the notion of the individual person as itself a westernized concept. Her work embodies the content she relays, emphasizing the importance of how we influence each other, in habits of language and action. She makes clear that the notion of existing as a person is itself a learned concept, limiting humanity from connection in the natural world. The collection's forward acknowledges the individual as a descendant, a figure carried out through poems that cite genealogy as the line of thought that becomes embodied in daily actions.

The chapters appear in order they were written; each stands on its own as an argument but they also build from each other. By having McDougall's poetry as the first chapter, readers experience a specific example of how narrative perspective can restructure relationships of power. The author establishes a relationship with the poem's subject Tehura, giving agency to a native voice against colonial objectification which in turn reverses the preset colonial hierarchy. This example lays ideological groundwork for thinking about individuality as it appears in the final chapter about Leora's work on disembodiment. Both voices from different cultures combine to create a fascinating critique and restructuring of the self as an actor in daily racial realities. The middle chapter on Alexie delves into a rigorous analysis of poetic form. Where McDougall juxtaposes narrative voices as formal repurposing in the instance of "Tehura," Alexie's change to the sonnet form is a consistent pattern in the collection, drawing clear attention to the power of form in regards to structuring and restructuring cultural mindsets. Finally, Leora's work, as the headiest of them all, is a nice conclusive chapter as it drifts from the trenches of specificity in character and individual experience to the realm of connection, where a personal daily interaction impresses upon broader consciousness. Leora raises

the stakes, taking the specificity of single instances to streams of consciousness, creating insight for how entire movements of thought circulate through generations. Hopefully, this chapter propels the intention of this project into the future, via the work of an artist who has yet to garner the notoriety her work deserves.

Poetry and poetic form can challenge long-standing and seemingly-normative structures of western colonial power. The poetry discussed in the coming pages has the power to wound and heal. It cuts open the stitches of history and navigates the oppression embedded in the nuances of language. As a reader, experiencing the immediacy of poetry provides moments of focus—where generations of rhetoric become clear, where the results of age-old traditions become intellectually understood and emotionally felt. Ideologies are debunked—as truth, fact, and fiction lose their presumed authority. Being open to the sensitivities that these poets engage does more than identify the cyclical nature of western-capitalist individualism; it promotes re-definition of future consciousness through examples of personal experience. Poets like Brandi Nalani McDougall, Sherman Alexie, and Kristi Leora re-orient the self, pushing for a culture attuned to the lenses it casts. By disassembling constructs of white naivety sustained by the legacy of American colonialism, they re-filter consciousness, forcing readers to examine their own internalized histories.

Chapter 1

Revising the Lyrical I: Postcolonial Poetry and Subject Formation

For a Friend

Who remembers him also, he thinks
(but to himself and as himself).

Himself alone is dominant
in a world of no one else.

-Robert Creeley, *For Love* (91)

Introduction

Narrative perspective is one of the central sources of a poem's meaning. No matter how explicitly present the narrative voice may be, any allusions, images or philosophical insight are depicted through its lens. It is the medium with which a poet frames language in order to induce specific reactions out of readers. The overall effectiveness of a poem relies on a reader's investment in the narrative perspective. Often, the less obtrusive the narrative perspective, the more likely a reader's attention will remain on a poem's content. As Richard Wright notes in his *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, "at its best, perspective is a pre-conscious assumption, something which a writer takes for granted, something which he wins through living" (Wright 1408). Wright offers via a minority lens the tendency for "pre-conscious" or internalized values to shape narrative perspectives in Western writing. Although culturally different from my interest

in indigenous Hawaiian and Native American poets, Wright calls attention to the common Western artists' lack of attunement to his or her underlying social ideologies that shape the meaning of their work and often fail to equally empathize with all ethnic groups. For example, in the epigraph, Robert Creeley acknowledges limitation in perspective but simultaneously fails to address all perspectives equally; he uses exclusively male pronouns thus excluding women as people who are equally limited by their own perspective. My interest is in how several indigenous poets make narrative perspective a focus in order to make explicit common Western tendencies to discriminate against minority groups. These poets challenge the unobtrusive narrative voice by making the "pre-conscious" conscious in order to demonstrate how awareness of internalized structures of belief promotes empathy towards cultural difference.

Use of the first person makes readers experience the poem along with the narrator, building a relationship that often leaves narrative claims free of critique. By framing the narrative perspective as part of a specific cultural identity, its observations become like those of a person from that society—able to be critiqued from an outside perspective. The Western narrative voice has origins in the dominant, white culture making it easily acceptable to Western readers who privilege it by acknowledging whiteness as a common Western trait. Thus, non-white minority groups are excluded as peoples who aren't identified as being part of a general Western culture. In her book, *From a Native Daughter*, Haunani Kay-Trask notes that "indigenous peoples by definition lack autonomy and independence" (103). "By definition" invokes a Western perspective where indigenous peoples are normatively grouped together and understood as lacking autonomy. Further, "indigenous" qualifies "peoples" demonstrating how the common

Western notion of “peoples” does not invoke the indigenous, hence the qualifier is needed to specifically refer to those who aren’t characterized as the normative, Western person. The Western narrative voice often assumes the privilege of whiteness, making observations without consideration of alternate cultural belief systems. Indigenous narrative perspectives bring to light internalized notions of privilege that allow whiteness to be accepted as normatively Western and American. By manipulating the narrative perspective, non-Western authors draw attention to the internalized lack of empathy Westerners have towards other cultures. Although representative of an African-American perspective, Wright similarly to Trask experiences how people of minority ethnic groups are forced to be aware of the dominant culture’s tendencies, whereas people who make up the majority groups often accept their actions and ideologies as universal. Wright claims, “[i]n the creative process meaning proceeds *equally* as much from the contemplation of the subject matter as from the hopes and apprehensions that rage in the heart of the writer.” (1409) Attention to the system of social and cultural values that shape the “hopes and apprehensions that rage in the heart of the writer” is equally important and deeply intertwined with the portrayal of subject matter in a specific work. My attention is on how indigenous perspectives manipulate the common Western poetic perspective in order to challenge the limits that whiteness puts on indigenous agency. The unconventional application of pronouns creates relationships between multiple cultural perspectives within the poem in order to ultimately expose normative Western usage of the poetic voice as carrying notions of individualism that directly contribute to perpetuating sexual exoticism.

Revising the Lyrical “I”

In traditional Western poetry, the lyrical “I” assumes the perspective of a narrative voice that controls the meaning and language of the rest of the poem. Interactions between the lyrical “I” and other cultural perspectives draw attention to the individualistic tendencies of the Western “I” narrative voice. In the essay, *Lyric Poetry and Postcolonialism: The Subject of Self-forgetting*, Weihsin Gui suggests an alternative to the traditional Western lyrical “I” in referencing how writers Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott “demonstrate how the poetic ‘I’ is a suturing of social and historical forces rather than the expression of an already existing individual or collective self and identity” (264). “Rather” is used to indicate one preferred option over another. “Rather” indicates two distinctions of the lyrical “I.” The traditional Western lyrical “I” is “bound” or fixed to readers’ preexisting assumptions about the narrative perspective’s identity. “Suturing” is the process of cohering that which is not whole; it also invokes notions of stitching. “Suturing” suggests an understanding of the lyrical “I” as a stitched together product of historic and present cultural ideology. The lyrical “I” in the traditional Western sense tends to accept the lyrical “I” as a cohesive source of insight as opposed to a product of complex interactions between societal belief systems of many generations. Investment in the idea of a unified self limits reflection on the relationship between individual and collective.

The theoretical idea that the poet carries an ultimate philosophical truth is a readily accepted idea within the Western lyrical tradition. The notion of a unified lyrical “I” represents the investment that which Western tradition grants both the narrative and authorial perspectives. As the sole narrative voice in a poem, the perceptions made by a

lyric “I” can go unquestioned, thus invoking notions of authenticity and legitimacy in its observations. However, once pinned up against competing narrative perspectives, the traditional Western lyrical “I” is demystified and exposed as a representation and manifestation of the capitalist society it comes out of. Critic Linda Kinnahan, in discussing the breakdown of the poetic “I” as it relates to feminism, alludes to the normative authority granted to the lyrical “I” when noting how a lowercase “i” loses its gravitas. She first quotes a Geraldine Monk poem to identify a manipulation of the lyrical “I”: “...ALONE drips i/n front who behind.” (Kinnahan 194) Kinnahan states, “[t]he subject, already lacking the authority and singularity suggested by the capital *I* alone, rhetorically alters function—subject becomes preposition” (195). She indicates that the lowercase “*i*” has lost “authority” acknowledging a degree of control it would have had in its capital “I” form. Enjambment splits the lowercase “*i*” across the line giving it the ability to stand on its own without being capitalized. The grammatical rule which capitalizes the lyric “I” demonstrates the authority that which the English language grants the singular, capital “I.” The use of a singular lowercase “*i*” draws attention to the commonly overlooked authority that the English language grants the lyrical “I” when capitalized. By manipulating the lyrical “I” into the lowercase via enjambment the authority granted to the capital “I” becomes apparent due to the inability of the lowercase “*i*” to hold the same weight. Capitalization insinuates importance and authority but is often overlooked as nothing more than aesthetic grammatical rule.

Indigenous poets critique the authoritative lyrical “I” by juxtaposing traditional Western “I” perspectives against other pronouns that represent non-Western thought. Each narrative perspective perceives a subject of the poem differently according to its

cultural belief system. In Kimberly Stafford's "Indigenous Aesthetics and Tribal Space: Figurations of Landscape in Contemporary Indian Poetry," she acknowledges the specificity of a culture's belief system when stating "[s]ign systems incorporate their own inherent logic and rationality, and in this case, the Western sign systems of space and geography cannot rationally articulate the relation of people and land" (97). "Sign systems" refer to language, thus, differences in languages produce different systems of logic. While her point focuses on the Western assumptions of superiority in regards to humans over land and animals, her allusions to "sign systems" suggest rationality as being culturally specific. Cultural specificity demystifies rationality as being inherent or universal. Because, in the poems I will examine, other culturally specific perspectives have as much agency as the traditional Western "I," the observations of both are presented as legitimate. Further, equality in legitimacy allows them to critique one another in their perception of poetic content. Cultural specificity demystifies the notion of universal rationality promoting legitimacy in minority ideology.

One strategy used to juxtapose competing belief systems is the incorporation of a second lyrical "I" perspective that represents a different cultural background in order to challenge the traditionally functioning Western lyrical "I." Unlike a poem with a single narrative voice, negotiating meaning between multiple narrative perspectives requires acute attentiveness to specific cultural differences between the two equally authoritative lyrical "I" perspectives. The use of alternate narrative perspectives reveals a limit to the awareness of the Western lyrical "I," as its observations are demonstrated as being products of a culturally specific belief system. The use of an "I" to represent both non-Western and Western perspective makes the two aesthetically similar and thus

immediately presented as having equal validity. Leveling the Western and non-Western perspectives via aesthetic similarity sets an even playing field for opposing observations to be made and presented with equal validity. Equal legitimacy promotes impartiality in interpretation of multiple narrative perspectives.

Formal manipulation of the lyrical “I” within the sentence structure effectively demonstrates a shifting away from an individualistic perspective. Gui quotes a poem by Asian-American writer Shirley Geok-Lin Lim that employs a shifting position of the narrative subject in order to reduce some of its authority over the rest of the phrase. She identifies a loss of identity that the lyrical “I” experiences, stating:

The lyric “I” emerges as the subject of the poem, but quickly dissolves into a series of sensory images and memorization: in the second stanza, the speaker is both the indirect object (“Older brother drives *me*”), and then a simple subject (“*I* eat a green mango”) superseded by both the mango (“it cuts the back of my throat”) and “a memory of tart unripeness” [representing] a moment in which the self dissolves into language. (274)

Shifting of the narrative voice between subject and object positions creates a change from being an actor to becoming acted upon--by agents such as “brother” and “mango.” This specific formal play with the lyrical “I” makes it vulnerable to agents such as “mango” which wouldn’t normally be given authority over an “I” representation of human identity. This vulnerability, as created by the flexibility of the lyrical “I,” demonstrates alternative roles of the lyrical “I” in the sentence, invoking any of its assumed authority as subjective. Gui further alludes to a notion she calls “counterfocalization,” which via interactions between multiple perspectives shifts attention away from the narrative voice. She states:

Here is a sudden shift—a counterfocalization—from the first person singular (“*I* eat a mango”) to a grave reflection and interrogative challenge issued in the first-

person plural (“*where do we go*”)...this transforms the tendency towards nostalgia and sentiment attendant upon a diasporic subject’s return home into a critical self-questioning about the problems associated with the exploitation of global capital as well as the ‘brain drain’ of human resources from the Third World to the First. (274)

Her “transformation” occurs in the shift from the singular “I” perspective to the collective “we,” which enables this instance of “counterfocalization.” The change in pronouns from “I” to “we” reflects the transition in focus from the individually gratifying notions of “nostalgia,” to a socially progressive action of “self-questioning” regarding Western exploitation of the indigenous. Without a transition to the “we” perspective, notions of individualistic “nostalgia” would have neglected any concern for its material relationship with the rest of the world. The integration of multiple perspectives creates relationships between pronouns within the poem that fosters a broader reflection on how a concern of the individual self limits engaging communal problems. Hegemonic individualism produces collective unawareness and lack of empathy. Western individualism taints multicultural relations with internalized hierarchies of culture that subject the indigenous to colonial exoticism.

Indigenous Challenge of Western Narrative Perspective

Interactions between indigenous and Western Perspectives in the following examples show the material consequences of failing to employ an empathetic narrative voice. In Brandy Nālani McDougall’s poem, “Tehura” from her collection *The Salt-Wind: Ka Makani P’akai*, she incorporates two lyrical “I” perspectives, one representative of a Western cultural perspective and the other of an indigenous. The indigenous narrative voice resembles Gui’s notion of a culturally competent and aware

perspective. The Western lyrical “I,” which is created using direct excerpts from artist Paul Gauguin’s autobiography, *Noa Noa*, is unaware of its pre-conscious social biases. Gauguin was a French Impressionist painter who ultimately left France for Polynesia in order to escape the European “aggravating circumstances of colonial snobbism...and absurdities of civilization” (*Noa Noa* 2). The poem’s subject is his young Tahitian wife, Tehura. The interaction between the two narrative perspectives in McDougall’s poem contests traditional notions of authority associated with the lyrical “I.” McDougall’s use of an indigenous narrative voice exposes the limitations of the traditional lyrical “I” as it fails to see beyond its Western stereotypes, ultimately dehumanizing Tehura.

Sentence structure and sexually focused imagery depicts Gauguin’s lyrical “I” as acting according to normative Western individualistic standards. The first passage of Gauguin’s lyrical “I” reads:

*Quickly I struck a match and saw Tehura,
immobile, naked, lying face downward on the bed:
Feet crossed at the ankle, hands palm down,
eyes inordinately large with fear* (48).

The “I” is in the subject position and takes on the active voice. The active voice focuses on the action of the speaker, in this case Gauguin, giving him, from the onset, authority over the impending observations of the sentence’s subject, Tehura. In making Tehura the object of the sentences, thus, she is being acted upon and lacks agency in the characterization of her own body. Gauguin’s characterization of Tehura’s physicality mirrors her objectified sentence position. “Immobile” denotes a physical inability to move. Tehura is perceived by Gauguin as literally stuck to the bed. The asyndeton of “immobile, naked, lying face downward on the bed” draws connections between the three

concepts via the lack of a conjunction. The missing conjunction makes “naked” act as a qualifier of “face downward” associating nakedness with her physical position depicting Tehura’s pose as being promiscuous or representative of her desire for sex. The asyndeton also associates Tehura’s sexualized physicality to her inability to move, invoking a literal lack of agency over whether this sexual impulse of the lyrical “I” is carried through. The sexualized characterization of Tehura is strictly the product of Gauguin’s perception invoking the Western tendency to associate sex with nakedness. In this case, the Western lyrical “I” fails to engage Tehura’s perspective resulting in objectification of the subject it perceives. Assumed universality in signs of sexual promiscuity distorts understandings of consent.

Gauguin’s lyrical “I” has no ability to empathize with Tehura. Her objectification is further enhanced via the second instance of asyndeton from the above quote of “feet crossed at the ankle, hands palm down, eyes inordinately large with fear.” This phrase is separated from the first example of asyndeton with a colon indicating the phrase as acting as an explanation or list. The colon enables the phrase to lack a subject, rationally enabling Tehura’s namelessness according to linguistic rule. Tehura’s namelessness detaches notions of personhood from Gauguin’s descriptions of her physical body. “Fear” is the emotional reaction to danger. “Fear” acknowledges recognition of Tehura’s emotionality. However, the passage ends at the level of recognition with no further reaction or analysis upon it. Gauguin’s lyrical “I” fails to see the possibility that the danger is his own objectifying gaze. Detachment of body from humanness promotes sexual objectification.

Western connotations of civility subordinate people of non-Western cultures. Recall Trask's acknowledgement of how the indigenous lack autonomy; according to Western values of economic prosperity and technological advancement indigenous cultures are qualified as less advanced and thus dependent on Western society. Gauguin's lyrical "I" alludes to an inherent promiscuity in Tehura as McDougall quotes: "With a scattering of flowers, completely naked, waiting for love. Indecent!" "With" creates a relationship between the two agents it conjoins. The neutrality of "[w]ith" invokes a peaceful coexistence between Tehura and the "scattering of flowers." "Flowers" are aesthetically pleasing plants further enhancing Gauguin's attraction to the visual scene centered on the image Tehura's naked body. "Indecent" suggests a display of improper sexuality. Further, it denotes Tehura as uncivilized. Lacking civility subordinates Tehura as being less advanced according to a Western hierarchy of civility. Western assumptions also associate nakedness with sex invoking anyone unclothed as promiscuous. "Waiting" suggests an expectation for something to happen. Expectation invokes Tehura as being engaged in this sexual encounter. Asyndeton between "flowers," "love," and "waiting" creates a correlation that invokes Tehura as having a natural, inherent state of sexual promiscuity. Hierarchical classification of civility fosters a belief in primitivism that sexualizes nakedness and breeds paternalistic ideology toward indigenous culture.

An alternate, indigenous lyrical "I" critically reacts to Gauguin's preconscious display of Western paternalism. In the first passage of poem succeeding the epigraph, the narrative perspective engages Tehura on equal terms:

The chill of violet around you, you lie pito down:
 a burnished, brown body like mine, draped
 over white sheets. And for the moment,
 I can't move--How did we get here?
 Your framed face turning toward mine,
 I see a pleading in your eyes, on your lips

a moan of dread (48).

“You” directly addresses Tehura. This second person pronoun directly contrasts to the third person pronoun, “her” used by Gauguin’s lyrical “I.” “You” engages Tehura on a conversational level in no way subordinating her to the whim of this narrative voice. Tehura’s body is described here as “a burnished brown body like mine.” The simile of “like mine” invokes a likeness between the narrative voice and Tehura further emphasizing a degree of equality between them. However, the nature of simile also recognizes traces of difference, in that they are literally different bodies and exist in different cultural contexts. Historical remove gives agency to this minority perspective unlike Tehura who remains objectified by the characterizations of Gauguin’s lyrical “I.” “We” acknowledges a collective identity and characterizes the narrator as having experienced similar situations to Tehura. This collective identity invokes a relationship created via similar experiences of subordination demonstrating how this lyrical “I” gives giving more agency to Tehura in terms of attempting to understand her perspective. Shared notions of subordination based on physicality create empathy despite cultural difference. Empathetic understanding promotes solidarity.

The description of Tehura’s physicality in the above quote differs from Gauguin’s characterization of Tehura. “Pito” is the native Hawaiian word for naval. The use of indigenous language depicts the narrative voice as being of indigenous culture, further emphasizing a likeness with Tehura. “I can’t move” mimics Tehura’s perceived

immobility. The shared experience of immobility suggests that Gauguin's characterization of Tehura has equal effect on the narrative perspective. "Turning" is an ongoing act of movement. Movement connotes Tehura as having an ability to move her body. This agency in movement directly contrasts to Gauguin's observation of Tehura as immobile. The equality of authority in the two competing narrative perspectives makes Gauguin's perceptions able to be critiqued. However, the relationship established between Tehura and the indigenous narrative voice via similarity in cultural understanding poses itself as more believable in its depictions of Tehura. The narrator sees itself in Tehura. Similarity in experience fosters accuracy in interpretation.

An example from different collection of poetry by an indigenous author demonstrates the Western tendency to assume cultural competency. In her poem, "Squatters," Allison Adele Hedge Coke presents a collective Western perspective that assesses indigenous culture based on Western standards. Unlike how "Tehura" has an alternate narrative perspective able to demonstrate a differing culture's interpretation, the single narrative perspective here demonstrates the risk of generalized ideology:

What good is this to savages
 who have learned no appreciation
 of possibility of a ripened, bountiful place?

They know no possibility, no progress, no personal greed! (50).

"Ripened" suggests a readiness to be consumed. Readiness invokes the land as being destined for Western consumption. Alliteration, parallelism and asyndeton are all employed in "no possibility, no progress, no personal greed" to draw correlations between the three ideas. The lack of a conjunction correlates "progress" with "personal

greed” invoking the underlying authorial indigenous perspective that perceives Western standards possibility as being reliant on individual selfishness. Similar to Gauguin’s unawareness to his culturally specific understanding of promiscuity, the narrative perspective falsely accepts a universal notion of progress. Unlike “Tehura,” “Squatters” lacks any relationship between the lyrical “I” and a larger collective identity causing this collective identity to function like the traditional lyrical “I” who is able to exist unquestioned by any other narrative perspectives. There is no opportunity for skepticism or critique on the narrative perspective. A collective identity without individual critique produces conformity. This collective identity embodies individualistic value it only accounts for those who accept its beliefs. Collectivism needs individual critique to avoid complicity with appropriation.

The interaction between individual and collective perspectives demonstrates culture as a collective makeup of individuals. From her collection of poetry, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*, Hunani-Kay Trask demonstrates in “Makua Kane” how the lyrical “I” represents necessity of individual awareness within an overall collective identity. The narrative perspective speaks:

me, I fight
for the land but
we feel there is
no hope

only sounds
diminishing
at dawn (5)

“Fight” is an action of passionate advocacy. Advocacy gives the individual a medium for engaging the collective. The rhyme between “me” and “we” explicates the connection between the individual and the collective. To “Feel” is to emotionally experience. The

lack of physicality invoked in the collective acceptance of hopelessness contrasts to the notion of individual action. Although mentally part of a collective conformity, individuality can still rebel against complicity via physical action. The lyrical “I” is the product of the surrounding collective ideology and its individual reaction to such. Individual critique of collective thought fosters awareness that enhances recognition of culturally specific ideology.

Difference in cultural ideologies become explicitly juxtaposed towards the end of “Tehura” as the competing lyrical “I” perspectives interact more frequently juxtaposing two contrasting interpretations of a sexual encounter between Gauguin and Tehura:

I was afraid to move. Might she not take me for tupapa 'u?

blankly, unbending. In its hands,
the spark of a bud lights the tiaras—

Yet, such coppery beauty, gold skin—

On your mattress, each blossom opening
Into a glorious sneer.

*...and the night was soft, soft and ardent, a night of the
tropics... (49)*

“Tiaras” are native flowers Native to French Polynesia. This specificity contrasts to Gauguin’s previous acknowledgement of a more general “scattering of flowers.” The narrator’s specificity invokes an understanding of Polynesian culture that Gauguin lacks. “Yet” is a transitional phrase used to move between thoughts. The transition shifts Gauguin’s perspective from a brief attempt at understanding Tehura’s fear to back to observations on her physicality. “Coppery” invokes both a brown metallic color and a resource able to be mined or harvested. “Gold” insinuates value, further invoking

Gauguin as perceiving Tehura's body like resource to be plundered. A "sneer" is an expression invoking suspicion or a lack of respect. However, suspicion goes unnoticed by Gauguin whose focus remains on Tehura's skin color. "Soft" is a physically pleasing sense of touch. The repetition of the physical sensation is linked to "ardent" via the conjunction "and." "Ardent" or passion is characterized as an inherent trait of the general tropics via "of." The cultural likeness between the indigenous lyrical "I" and Tehura contrast to Gauguin's allusions to an inherently sexual, primitive tropical culture. Justification of sexual activity as natural fosters racism. Attunement to social ideology promotes cultural competency over exoticism.

The traditional Western lyrical "I" often functions without attention to the authority it assumes in both its capital nature and its ability to go without critique. The internalized cultural ideology that shapes its observations exists in the pre-conscious, thus only implicitly embodying Western values of individualism and self-profit. Only when positioned against alternate narrative perspectives representative of different cultures is the Western lyrical "I" able to be critiqued as identified as a product of culturally specific ideology. Confrontation between Western and indigenous narrative perspectives demystifies the perceptions of lyrical "I" as objective or universally applicable. Competing narrative perspectives call into question Western notions of civility that promote hierarchical ranking of cultures, denigrating the indigenous according to Western standards. Investment in primitivism fosters racism and belief in inherent sexuality. Recognition of culturally imbedded discrimination fosters individual action against collective dehumanization. Indigenous confrontation of Western conformity promotes awareness rooted in reflection on the reciprocity of influence between self and

society. Awareness of socially defined thought promotes empathy in establishing cultural competency.

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“Spirit of the Dead Watching”

-Paul Gauguin

Chapter 2

The Deconstruction of Simplified Sovereignty in the Sonnets of Sherman Alexie's *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned*

"Our sovereignty is alleged sovereignty"

—Sherman Alexie (July 2010)¹

"Maybe Native American geeks will hack-blackmail Hollywood into portraying us as complex residents of the 21st Century"

—Sherman Alexie (Twitter, December 2014)²

*"we are not mere victims but active agents in history, innovators of new ways, of Indian ways, of thinking and being and speaking and authoring in this world created by colonial contact."*³

---Craig Womack

Sherman Alexie uses poetry as a platform for exploring the complexity of contemporary Indian identity.⁴ He both negotiates the relationship between Indians and whites and explores how contemporary Indian culture continues to be marked by American colonial practices. Alexie channels his own multicultural background to depict ways that Indians have historically internalized notions of sovereignty. His experiences of

¹ Joshua B. Nelson, "Humor is my Green Card": A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," *World Literature Today*, 84.4 (March 2010): 39-43.

² Sherman Alexie. 18 December. 2014. Tweet.

³ Womack 6.

⁴ I use "Indian" rather than "Native American" following Alexie's own distinctions between the terms. For example, in a 1996 interview published in the *LA Times*, Erik Himmelsbach writes, "Hollywood types also would be wise to avoid calling Alexie a 'Native American.' [Alexie] dismisses the term as meaningless, a product of white liberal guilt. 'I'm an Indian,' [Alexie] says. 'I'll only use 'Native American' in mixed company.'" (32)

reservation life and white culture contributes to an awareness of how contemporary Indian identity carries elements of both. Navigating both spaces enables the poet to deconstruct oversimplified notions of Indian sovereignty through transformative poetic moves that infuse the western sonnet form with indigenous narrative perspectives.

Disrupting the Western Sonnet Form

Alexie's transformation away from the traditional Petrarchan sonnet structure reflects ways that contemporary Indian identity is influenced by the overarching American capitalist system. His choice to maneuver within the western form as a means to disrupt its colonial context, resembles certain elements of what critical theorist Homi Bhabha calls the process of "mimicry." In discussing how mimicry functions between the colonized and colonizer, Bhabha states that "the *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (126). This "*double* vision" occurs as colonized people imitate the actions of colonizers during the process of assimilation, yet can never literally become the colonizer themselves; because colonized people learn the "colonial discourse" from their own subjugated perspective, their knowledge of the discourse disrupts its ideological stability as it becomes learned and reproduced in a new, changed way.

Alexie's strategies do not fully adhere to Bhabha's notion of mimicry. Bhabha theorizes about India's colonial relation to Britain while Alexie is concerned with disrupting and reforming the American ideological whole. Also, Bhabha's notion of mimicry occurs by nature of the process of colonialism, while Alexie's manipulations of the sonnet form *intentionally* challenge normalized conceptions of identity to create

practical space for Indian self-determination. While Bhabha's notion of mimicry doesn't fully identify the degree of intent behind Alexie's sonnets, it is a useful concept to engage Alexie's poetic strategies that challenge how common conceptions of "sovereignty" rationalize Indians' involvement in capitalism. Specifically, Alexie juxtaposes two modes of sovereignty, cultural and economic, to demonstrate how conflation of the two perpetuates exploitation on Indian reservations.

He formats entire sonnets into prose paragraphs, numbers individual sections to resemble sonnet-esque line counts, and inserts full prose paragraphs at the volta, where traditional sonnets would transition from the initial conflict of the opening octave, to the resolving sestet; with these techniques, he demonstrates how the cultural practice of demarcating something as "traditional" can simultaneously hide internalized dominant capitalistic beliefs. As a result, these sonnets employ formal and ideological cultural blending between whites and Indians to deconstruct the oversimplified understandings of sovereignty, demonstrating how acceptance of syncretism fosters transformative possibilities in regards to Indian self-determination.

Alexie has experimented with the sonnet throughout his career. In this paper, I focus on two sonnet variations from his most recent collection, *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned*. The first, demonstrated in both "Sonnet, with Slot Machines," and "Sonnet, with Vengeance," is formatted as a single paragraph with fourteen numbered sentences to maintain recognition as a sonnet. The other, demonstrated in "Monosonnet for Colonialism, Interrupted," consists of an initial octave, then an interjecting prose paragraph, concluding with a resolving sestet. In these two variations, Alexie manipulates the formal structure to navigate the intercultural experience of a modern-day Indian still

entrenched in white institutions, to examine the postcolonial paradox of being acknowledged as sovereign yet simultaneously subjugated.

The poet combines the conventional two stanzas of the Petrarchan sonnet into one, deconstructing the binary that separates the first octave, which traditionally poses the conflict, from the concluding sestet, which traditionally acts as the resolution. Obscuring the separation between conflict and resolution reflects the blended narrative perspective Alexie employs to complicate the colonial whole. The formal blending of the traditional break between the sestet and octave reflect how Alexie examines the ideological overlap between both Indians and whites rather than focusing on the two racial groups as distinct ethnic and ideological entities. American poet Carrie Etter invokes Alexie's shift away from tribalism as effective in challenging solidified systems of belief:

Through his sonnets, Alexie “countersocializes” his reader to accept the irresolution inherent in American Indian experience, revising the Western belief that action solves. What imagination and irresolution together create is the potential for agency—not as a move toward a definitive solution but, through the imagined dialogic, a place where the hierarchical dialectic cannot impose its historically bound limitations, and thus, a place that enables agency for the native speaker. (168)

Through such “countersocialization,” Alexie explicitly challenges the imposition of social beliefs on how people understand Indian identity. “Hierarchical” is a quality of ranking based on superiority; by using the notion of superiority as a frame for addressing normative ways that the “Indian experience” is understood, Alexie denotes whiteness as the dominant ideology that controls portrayal of Indian identity. The term “dialectic” invokes the process of reaching synthesis from two distinct entities; here, Etter suggests that shifting away from dichotomizing whites and Indians creates better understanding of

how whiteness permeates all those living in the contemporary western world. Engaging the commonality of whiteness as an ideology fosters awareness one needs to challenge the institutions that such maintain racial hierarchy.

Alexie's cross-cultural poetry complicates general conceptions of Native poetry as a genre isolated from its assimilation into whiteness. The rhetoric of authenticity often upholds the correlation between racial and ideological distinction, failing to account for ways ideology can similarly permeate across cultures. Referring to a sonnet sequence in Alexie's 1996 collection, *A Summer of Black Widows*, Nancy J. Peterson challenges a critic who suggests that Indian poetry writ large downplays cross-cultural relationships as being part of Indian identity: "Alexie's sonnet-sequence, in contrast, challenges this formulation by embracing cross-cultural fusions—perhaps to such a degree that some readers may question its authenticity as a Native poem" (141). Peterson suggests that by "embracing cross-cultural fusions," Alexie's sonnets critique notions of authenticity that fail to acknowledge the relationship between Indian and white culture. Alexie accepts this cultural overlap to debunk oversimplified cultural binaries and portray realistic, complicated representations of modern-day Indian identity.

Indian "Tradition" and the Conflation of Sovereignty

Alexie has publicly expressed his views on sovereignty. For example, his reference in the first epigraph to Indian sovereignty being "alleged" or merely speculative, comes after a longer comment during a 2010 interview in *World Literature Today* attesting to the danger of conflating cultural sovereignty with economic sovereignty:

SA: But it's never about culture. It's always economic sovereignty. Native American sovereignty is expressed in terms of casinos, cigarettes, fireworks. It's engaged in exploitation, almost always engaged in the worst parts of capitalism. You know, the exploitation of human weakness. That's how our sovereignty gets most expressed. (Nelson, 41)

Alexie draws attention to ways in which economic sovereignty stands in for other types of sovereignty, keeping conversations of cultural exploitation at bay. The phrase “engaged in exploitation” acknowledges the tendency for Indians to perform the same acts of subtle exploitation as whites. Gambling and the presence of casinos on Indian reservations exemplify how profit-driven enterprises use claims of cultural “tradition” as a selling point. In the poem, “Sonnet, with Slot Machines,” Alexie illustrates how the practice of gambling blends Indian and capitalist traditions via the casino industry. The sonnet's first two lines read:

1. Gambling is traditional. 2. So is the sacrificial murder of mammals, but who is going to start that up again?” (32)

Here, the metaphor between gambling and “tradition” invokes a close relationship via what Homi Bhabha would identify as linguistic “slippage” in the conceptions of gambling as it relates to Indian culture. According to Bhabha's notion of mimicry, because the colonized person can merely imitate and not fully become, the difference in how one learns the colonizing discourse creates “slippage,” or an ambivalence in meaning between the colonized and colonizer. This applies to Alexie's intentionally ambiguous metaphor. “Traditional” is something that has long been established as part of a culture. By using this word, Alexie identifies “gambling” as being part of Indian history; however, it is unclear whether he is referring to modern-day casinos, pre-contact

gambling activities, or both. This ambiguity creates linguistic slippage, suggesting that tradition can be manipulated and defined differently between historical contexts.

Distinguishing between gambling and gambling *in casinos* draws attention to how Indian “tradition” becomes conflated with capitalist-driven institutions. As the sonnet continues, Alexie demonstrates how conflating Indian and capitalist practices leads to exploitation:

6. So what about Indian casinos? 7. It’s all about economic sovereignty for indigenous peoples! 8. Well sure, but can’t a slot machine ritually murder a gambler’s soul? 9. The Indian woman, defending her tribe’s casino, says “The average patron only gambles \$42 dollars a night.” (32)

The use of a question in line 6 suggests that this is the poem’s first allusion to “casinos,” implying that the initial ambiguous mention of “gambling” in the first line refers to pre-contact, pre-casino wagering. When Alexie links “economic sovereignty,” the power to be financially independent as a nation, with “casinos,” he implies that the latter represents a beneficial and constructive step toward Indian independence. However, line 8 examines the effect of such “economic sovereignty” on the individual. By invoking “a gambler’s soul,” the sonnet reminds the reader that a gambler has value beyond economics. “Murder” pits economic-based sovereignty against innate human value. Further, the use of “murder” takes on the dominant discourse by acknowledging how capitalist practices are beneficial to the institution yet destructive to the individual.

The shift in focus from the general “gambler” to a specific “Indian woman” between the eighth and ninth sections illustrates how economic sovereignty via the profits of casinos operates on Indian exploitation. Between lines 8 and 9, Alexie does not employ a formal break, where the conventional Petrarchan stanza would have a *volte* to clearly demarcate a shift from the conflict raised in the initial octave to the resolution of

the sestet. Instead, a shift to a more specific character creates a transition from abstract to tangible, meant to highlight how group politics rationalize individual loss. His use of the word “defending” invokes protection against an accusatory claim; it identifies the Indian woman as investing in the benefits of “economic sovereignty” created by Indian casinos. “Only” further solidifies the woman’s position, reinforcing her denial of exploitation in casinos: although the gambler loses money, her logic deems those losses small and insignificant. This justification invokes denial of institutional exploitation. While formally the *volte* is unclear, the resolving quality of the conventional sestet is carried out, as the sonnet moves away from the initial ambiguity of “gambling” to one clearly rooted in American capitalism.

The poem’s conclusion makes explicit the emotional cost of understanding sovereignty solely in terms of economic profit. In response to the Indian woman’s aforementioned justification for gambling, Alexie writes in the penultimate line:

13. Wait, here it is, make the “b” silent, and pronounce it “*nummer*,” as in “remove sensation, especially as a result of cold or anesthesia, as in “remove emotion.” (32)

By using “*nummer*,” a word nearly identical in spelling and pronunciation to “number,” Alexie equates casinos to drug-like agents that foster desensitization to harmful practices. Thus, the use of “only” in line 9, reveals an underlying assumption of authority able to determine how significant a gambler’s losses are. The poem’s final line allegorically illustrates how repeated instances of exploitation create long term desensitization and complicity:

14. If you punch a kid once, then he'll cry. If you punch a kid once an hour for a year, then he'll learn how to make the fists feel like flowers.
(32)

Alexie uses “kid” in this analogy to invoke the long-term socialization that fosters desensitization to pain. In doing so, Alexie describes how lack of perception to casinos as exploitative enterprises exemplifies a numbness to the collective trauma brought on by colonial capitalism. This resolution further clarifies the initial ambiguity of “gambling” as the ambiguity itself can be interpreted as a result of having been numbed to the nuances of exploitation of Indian people and culture.

“How Indian Are You?” The Disidentification of Indian Identity

In an interview with Ase Nygren, Alexie responds to a question about the effect of collective trauma on Indian identity by stating, “The whole idea of authenticity—‘How Indian are you’—is the most direct result of the fact that we don’t know what an American Indian identity is. There is no measure anymore”(Peterson 147). Alexie invokes the numerical rhetoric of a fixed standard, a “measure,” of Indianness, to indicate the nonexistence of a contemporary, fixed Indian identity. Alexie’s explorations into the nuance of contemporary American Indian identity align with what author José Esteban Muñoz acknowledges as “disidentification”: a process of self-actualization that denies conceptualization of identification as a “restrictive or ‘masterfully’ fixed mode” (Muñoz 28). The application of “disidentification” to these sonnets is useful in understanding how Alexie’s deconstruction of the fixed colonial form creates space for complicated Indian selves that don’t align with a singular fixed notion of normalized Indian identity.

The narrative voice of Alexie's "Sonnet, with Vengeance," is an indigenous poet and filmmaker ruminating on the potential for self-determination within the context of the white-dominated film industry. In the ninth line of the poem, the content shifts from detailing limitations of the white film industry to personal aspirations and project goals:

8. I rarely write screenplays about Indians. I have written screenplays about superheroes, smoke jumpers, pediatric surgeons, all-girl football teams, and gay soldiers. 9. I often dream of writing a B-movie about an Indian vigilante. 10. No, not a vigilante. That would be too logical. (53)

⁵ Similar to the example of "Sonnet, with Slot Machines," the shift in focus to a particular subject between lines 8 and 9 acts as a disguised volte. Here, the shift aims to explore the relationship between individual and institution; however, unlike the Indian woman in the previous poem, this narrator seems fully aware of his dependency on the industry. He reflects on his maneuverability within it and questions to what degree he has reciprocal influence back upon the institution. The act of "writing" invokes the transfer of individual thought into public engagement; it offers the potential to change cultural surroundings. This engagement with the public sphere invokes Muñoz's claims regarding the process of identity normalization:

The disidentificatory identity performances I catalog in these pages are all emergent identities-in-difference. These identities in-difference emerge from a failed interpolation within the dominant public sphere. Their emergence is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counter public sphere. (7)

The notion of “failed interpolation” reveals an alternate effect of the disguised volte. The content shifts from a description of presumably successful screenplays to the low-quality, lowly ranked “B-movie.” This ranking suggests that movies about “superheroes, smoke jumpers, pediatric surgeons, all-girl football teams, and gay soldiers” would draw more success than one about an Indian vigilante. These financial rankings in tandem with the listing of specific identities illustrate degrees of acceptability within the “dominant public sphere.” The filmmakers’ follow-up description of the Indian vigilante as being “too logical” invokes the character as taking on an identity that makes sense to spectators; even when hinging on stereotype, a movie with an Indian protagonist is deemed second-tier. The choice to disidentify the Indian protagonist from normalized conceptions of Indianness demonstrates how complicating Indian identity further removes it from the realm of publicly accepted identities. The narrator’s desire to employ a realistic, complex Indian protagonist relates to Alexie’s statement in the second epigraph of this paper: “*Maybe Native American geeks will hack-blackmail Hollywood into portraying us as complex residents of the 21st Century.*” The use of “maybe” functions similarly to how “dream” works in the poem, as both invoke hopeful desire that presents the difficulty of complicating the simplified, stereotypical notions of Indian identity engrained into a public sphere rooted in tradition and the rhetoric of authenticity.

“Insinuation” via the Interrupted Monosonnet

Homi Bhabha’s description of the relationship between minority discourse and master discourse is useful in terms of thinking of how Alexie strategically infiltrates a colonial form to disrupt its ideological stability:

Minority discourse does not simply confront the pedagogical, or powerful master discourse with a contradictory or negating referent. It interrogates its object by initially withholding its objective. Insinuating itself into the terms of reference of the dominant discourse, the supplementary antagonizes the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidity. (Bhabha, 155)

The use of “insinuating” invokes the ability of minority discourse to subtly manipulate itself inside the dominant ideology where it can effectively implement its subversive objective; an objective that is initially “withheld” to avoid dismissal. Once inside the “terms of reference of the dominant discourse,” proper “interrogation,” or effective critique, can occur where when minority literature can deconstruct the solidified whole of dominant ideology and social structure. In the what Alexie coins the “monosonnet” form, he inserts parenthesized prose paragraphs in between the octave and sestet, resembling the aforementioned process of insinuation. These paragraphs situate an indigenous perspective into the initial context of the white, “master discourse,” making the poem a culturally blended form that identifies an alternate, perspective on colonialism by the poem’s conclusion.

Alexie establishes “Monosonnet for Colonialism, Interrupted,” with a context of institutionalized white violence against Indians. The first octave attests to the decimation of native people via American colonialism:

Yes,
Colonialism
Created
George
Custer
And
Andrew
Jackson (42)

Custer and Jackson represent the institutionalized practice of separating Indians and whites via mass killing and displacement. “Created” acts as the bridge between institution and individual, demonstrating how an individual carries out the desired ends of the institutional apparatus; here, it invokes the process of perpetuating institutionalized colonial practices. By placing “colonialism” in the subject position, Alexie emphasizes its ability to shape individual thought and action. He then inserts a prose paragraph between the octave and sestet that acts as the formal disruption and adaptation of the conventional fourteen-line sonnet to acknowledge a more complex, overlooked understanding of postcolonial syncretism:

(who were genocidal maniacs, but without American colonialism we would not have action-adventure movies like Die Hard or the consolations and desolations of Emily Dickinson. I am a man who loves cinematic gunfire and American poetry, if not equally, then with parallel passion. In fact, at one point, I considered writing an action-adventure movie about Emily Dickinson. Now, tell me, who wouldn't want to see that flick? Of course, such a film would never be made, but can you appreciate the basic principle of the cultural mash-up? Can you appreciate this improvisational and highly American olio of poetry, film, and comedy?) (42)

The notion of “basic principle” recognizes “cultural mash-up” as an easy concept to understand. However, the conclusion that “this film will never be made” acknowledges its misalignment with accepted American visions of multiculturalism. The repetition of “can you appreciate” challenges the ideal of a melting pot culture by asking readers whether or not they embrace culturally-blended art forms. Essentially, Alexie breaks the fourth wall to interrogate readers about their own reactions to this very sonnet. The sonnet embodies “improvisation” as it reacts to established notions of acceptance and pushes to reconstruct more complicated consumers. In their improvisational capabilities,

both the hypothetical film and the poem stake claims to being part of the “highly American olio of poetry, film and comedy,” while simultaneously hinting that they are unacceptable or beyond the “basic” American notion of multiculturalism. Parentheses around the paragraph further emphasizes the stanza as implicitly existing within, or between the octave and sestet, that without the paragraph, would that present a much more dichotomized of approaching the postcolonial subject.

Before analyzing the transition, it is useful to revisit how Bhabha conceptualizes a particular effect of mimicry. In describing how the colonized learns the way of the colonizer, Bhabha discloses the potential for an alternate, new knowledge:

The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing. For in ‘normalizing’ the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms. (123)

Because the colonized people can only imitate without ever being able to become the colonizer themselves, a new knowledge of the master discourse emerges from the colonized people. The concluding sestet of “Sonnet, for Colonialism” employs a figurehead that doesn’t embody the imitation of mimicry, but does conceptualize an “alternate knowledge” that carries its own agency far beyond a limited “knowledge of the [colonial state’s] norms.”

The final sestet epitomizes the potential for a new knowledge, developed by the colonized voice. Alexie counters the initial figures representing institutionalized whiteness with the invocation of American trumpeter Miles Davis, who revolutionized the genre of jazz music several times throughout his career. The concluding sestet reaches an awareness of the potential beauty in art emerging from colonized subject positions:

But

Colonialism

Also

Created

Miles

Davis. (42)

The use of “but” contrasts to the first word of the initial octave, “yes,” enacting a transition in how the poem explores colonialism. As a conjunction, “but” bridges the opening and closing stanzas as if to acknowledge the inability for the colonized subject to detach from an institutionalized reality. However, Miles Davis, a revolutionary American musician (and adamant critic of white power), invokes a focus on future, new art forms able to break down dichotomies of culture and genre. The use of “created” acknowledges Davis as a product of colonial structures; however, Davis’s awareness of institutionalized racial dynamics as well as utilization of his restrictions fostered his ability to reconstruct the genre of jazz as well as broader musical spheres. He exemplifies an artist’s ability to shape the surrounding cultural context, via the process of learning and implementing personal perspective within it.

The transition through all three stanzas of the poem reflect an intentional insinuation by Alexie who pushes on the concept of a new postcolonial knowledge that is able to itself become a complicated, impactful ideology. Miles Davis became part of the American musical canon, and while African-Americans and American Indians have very different relationships to US colonialism, the example of Davis seems to offer potential for the modern day Indian artists to permeate white disciplines and insinuate self-defined

identity into general awareness. Embrace of complex postcolonial dynamics fosters potential for cultural transformation.

Breaking Tradition: Poetry as a Means for Self-Determination

The three poems analyzed in this paper illustrate how Sherman Alexie manipulates the colonial sonnet form in his latest collection to engage the difficulty of actualizing a complicated American Indian identity into general public awareness. His ability to make the sonnet his own through the use of numbered sections and interjecting prose paragraphs allows him to insinuate an indigenous perspective within the colonial form to challenge common liberal notions of American multiculturalism that fail to account for, let alone embrace the syncretic identities of complex colonial history. He underscores the existence and limitations of Indian self-determination within the broader context of capitalism as he explores the necessity of understanding the contemporary Indian identity as one having emerged out of assimilation into whiteness. Alexie exposes how fixation on the rhetoric of “tradition” and “authenticity” reinforces exploitation and oversimplified conceptions of American Indian sovereignty. By recognizing the potential for beauty in genres that defy accepted norms, Alexie pushes for a culture more open to change. While the potential for revising public conception of the modern-day Indian is difficult, it is a challenge that Alexie takes on in order to deconstruct deluded notions of authenticity in the minds of the both the colonized and the colonizer. The intentional choice to disidentify with fixed notions of Indianness helps Alexie push to create space for self-determination via literature.

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Chapter 3

Awareness to Action: Navigating Ideological Duality in Kristi Leora's *Dark Swimming*

Since the colonization of North America the concept of race has been used to make biological and cultural distinctions between Indigenous North Americans and colonizers of European descent. Western science has fragmented people according to their belief systems, creating mainstream conceptions about the relationship between individual human beings and the surrounding natural and social world. While the images and symbols produced by western institutions have changed over time, a consistent trend has validated western experience and ideology and suppressed those of indigenous people in North America. Through her poetry, Kristi Leora, member of the Kirigan Zibi Anishinaabeg nation in Quebec, grapples with the tension of dual worldviews, where her awareness of her own indigenous genealogy informs daily life in western capitalist society. Her collection *Dark Swimming* utilizes narrative perspectives that navigate these dual epistemologies via moments that traverse social worlds of consumerism and competition, with knowledge and perspective of interrelationship between all facets of life.

While Leora's poetry lacks explicit political intention, it repurposes constructs of the English language that sediment paradigms of western culture by deconstructing notions of individual, and success defined by finality. By approaching such ideas with a perspective rooted in indigenous ideas, Leora's poetry demonstrates compatibility between cultures, rather than popular juxtapositions that pit western and indigenous life

against each other. However, Leora's notion of interrelation hardly promotes sugarcoated harmony between people of all backgrounds. It is useful to consider Jace Weaver's notion of communitism when theorizing how Leora's poetry acts as a confluence of multiple consciousness's. "Communitism," defined as the synthesis of community and activism casts *Dark Swimming* as a text that weaves in and out of epistemologies, threading together moments of environmentalism, post-colonialism and love, portraying the ideological and spiritual complexity of the embodied human person. These poetic endeavors delve beneath the physical self, into the web of cosmic vibrations that impress upon the experienced reality.

Many of the poems in the collection are informed by a genealogical perspective attune to collective existence, where all life forms participate as actors and embodiments in a shared planet and cosmos. Vine Deloria, prolific writer on American Indian experience, provides valuable context regarding American Indians' relationship with the outside world:

The major difference between American Indian views of the physical world and Western science lies in the premise accepted by Indians and rejected by scientists: the world in which we live is alive...Science insists, albeit at a great price in understanding, that the observer be as detached as possible from the event he or she is observing. Indians know that human beings must participate in events, not isolate themselves from occurrences in the physical world. (40)

This notion of "participation" counters how Deloria describes western knowledge as fragmented, where people achieve specializations in one area at the cost of adequacy in many others. Leora's use of inclusive pronouns (no poem in the collection takes on a first person "I" perspective) situates an indigenous sense of collectivism and interdependence within the material circumstances of the western world, pitting collective inclusivity

against western notions of individualist desire and motivation. This sense of inclusion emphasizes relationship between the narrator and other poetic content, pushing readers to think in terms of connection rather than individual parts. Deloria elaborates the difference between western compartmentalization and indigenous “interrelation”:

Indians came to understand that all things were related, and while many tribes understood this knowledge in terms of religious rituals, it was also a methodology/guideline which instructed them in making their observations of the behavior of other forms of life. Attuned to their environment, Indians could find food, locate trails, protect themselves from inclement weather, and anticipate coming events by their understanding of how entities relate to each other. (41)

By explicitly mentioning the absence of an “I” perspective in the introduction of her collection, Leora frames her collection as an exploration of an alternate understanding of individual personhood. She shakes the foundation of individuality, offering potential for a redirected sense of personal identity. Individual characters in the collection are brought to life via the third person, thus consistently placing them in relation to their social and natural surroundings. The introductory passage from *Dark Swimming* frames the collection as:

A narrative through wrenching spaces in the life of one descendant wrestling with post-apocalyptic identity, grounded by persistently supportive ancestors and helpers determined to see their blood survive and resist colonial assimilation through disembodiment.

After a paragraph expressing thanks to important people and places, Leora offers the final thought from the voice she signs as her own: “We are the embodiment of the divine that has spurred into existence. The word *I* deliberately does not appear within these pages” (78). From here on, the collection takes on a collective “we” perspective. Leora

explicitly challenges the western tropes of individuality by identifying the single human person as a “descendant,” or one who temporarily embodies a moment in a genealogy that threads through past, present and future. Editor of the collection and established poet in her own right, Allison Adele Hedge Coke describes Leora as informing her poetry with a “fluency in the Western paradigm” as well as “the traditions and cosmology of her ancestors” (240). Her collection reflects the balancing of both perspectives and experiences as an indigenous woman in western society.

It is necessary to understand how the notion of personal, individual identity is conceptualized by western, racial realities. In describing the relationship between the experience of race and the individual psyche Shu-Mei Shih remarks that “[r]ace is a psychological experience because it is a social one, thanks to the Antillean’s ideological induction to whiteness through education or lived experience of space” (Shih 1350). The metaphor drawing comparison between race and psychological experience invokes the duality of intro-jection (internalization of external influences) and projection (one’s impression on the social reality). “Psychological” speaks more to the construction of ideology in the self while “social” pertains to the ideologically informed everyday interactions between people. The use of metaphor identifies a degree of interchangeability between these inner and outer realms invoking the body as a naturally transparent object that becomes a socialized filter between the two. Race contributes to the opacity of the body, building up the wall between intro-jection and projection, distracting one from a natural state of interdependence. Essentially, the reciprocity of effect between belief and perception reinforces each other to create solidified mindsets

and belief systems. In terms of race, such external triggers translates to the composition of one's own consciousness.

From the same article, Shih cites Charles Mills in an effort to identify how the awareness of one's racialized lens becomes lost without proper understanding of how concepts of race define contemporary thought and lifestyle. Discussing Mill's critique of John Rawls, Shih observes, "He notes that liberal philosophy's insistence on the ideal form of social contract has always ignored the material and social experience the racialized. Whether left-wing or right-wing, racial liberalism does not deem it imperative to question its own racial unconscious. This unconscious passes as racial and colorless, hence deracialization for Mills paradoxically requires 'coloring in the blanks'" (Shih 1353/4). Leora's poetry probes the white unconscious to become aware of internalized racialization a means for critiquing and analyzing the social role and desire of the *individualized*, rather than the individual, person. Leora's deliberate choice to omit the "I" perspective instills the experienced described in the poetry with an indigenous understanding, as it refuses to engage such scenarios with the ideological background that invests in the idea of the individual.

Indivi(ded)uality: Personhood in the Material World

The definition of personhood is itself a racialized concept. In Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract*, he expands on the way personhood was established to develop distinctions between Europeans and Native peoples: "The simplified social ontology implied by the notion of 'personhood' is itself, of course, a product of capitalism and eighteenth century bourgeois revolutions" (55). "Ontology" denotes the metaphysical

nature of being; it aims to encapsulate the natural essence of humanness. However, the use of “social” to qualify humanness attests to how the essence of life becomes perceived through an ideological lens. While “ontology” claims to aptly define a natural state of being, its emergence from a language situated in capitalist ideology demonstrates how it is working backward, attempting to cover its own roots by essentially forgetting its origins as English, western and white. Thus, life and existence as they are understood via “ontology” are white capitalist notions that take on an essence of objectivity, barring alternate epistemological notions of being from relevance. The use of “simplified” bastardizes a complex entity, emphasizing a limitation to socially defined understanding of existence. The financial motivation implied by “profit” exemplifies implicit capitalist intentions in description of natural phenomena. Thus, “personhood” carries out the financial intentions it derives from; its meaning serves the purpose of its context, making it a subjective and limited way of understanding existence or being. This emphasis on capitalist enterprise marks the overarching, economically driven system of the western world; it is the capitalist system itself that wields control over such a term. Situating the definition of humanness within the ideology it comes out of reveals how financially motivated systems produce flawed assumptions and conceptualities of being.

Specifically, grounding “personhood” in its financial, socio-historical context invokes the intentions of competition that have become instilled in western perceptions of human nature. Capitalist intentions become engrained as the default state of the western self, a state that one must work hard to unlearn and achieve alternate understandings of existence and ontology. While for the white westerner, such achievement requires a choice to work against and through filters of the mainstream, those with knowledge of

multiple worldviews such as Leora live daily with experiences of navigating the western social reality with contradicting epistemologies.

Leora writes about the constructs and purposes of language in the western world as a way to examine notions of personhood and individuality. She identifies beliefs in individuality as “perceived” distinctions based on thoughts grounded in the meanings of a single language. “So We Spoke” juxtaposes limited ideological thought with expanded consciousness to situate readers in the space of lived versus ideal reality. The poem is divided into two sections, both describing human relationships to water. The poem laments about an individual character’s rationalization of the disconnect between herself and other life forms such as water:⁶

One
 perceived separation
 deficient self-image
 thought herself unable
 to talk to the water
 because words were English
 and not
 an authentic language (133)

The notion of “perceived” identifies perspective as subjective, identifying it as one way of thinking out of many. It’s pairing with “separation,” as the two words make up the

⁶ In several other poems, Leora identifies how language is the source of human separation. From *Perimeters: Their* revolution she notes: “The only separation between groups of humans is the tongues they speak with, despite a contrived world of owned and divided places. With imaginary lines with all that division no one, nothing, is in balance.” (93) From the same poem, Leora correlates linguistic divisions with geographical ones: “Years ago men stood at the base of water’s extended canyons drawing absurd maps of ownership, lines that have come to stand for the difference between skin and tongue.” She then offers the more promising statement: “Still, there are ways to know better” (91). Additionally, from *So We Spoke*, the narrative perspectives notes the duality of language as a mode of separation stating: “*it’s not how you talk,/but how you listen*” (133).

entire line, invoke the distinction as subjective and not in fact true. Leora uses “perceived separation” to describe the female character without naming her, or describing a full individual identity. The placement of “thought” in the subject position of the fourth line emphasizes the process of how the character’s belief system renders herself physically “unable.” The character then rationalizes such inability by specifically noting “English” as inauthentic, rendering the division she perceives between herself and water as a life form. This character is representative as the western, English speaking individual, who perceives and uses language, specifically English, as a mode of communication that separates rather than connects. The notion of an “authentic” language that inaccessibly exists via spoken or written English widens such separations, reinforcing the cognitive walls of separated “personhood.” Awareness of subjective perception in terms of individuality fosters possibility and redirection of the intended use of English as a medium of connectivity rather than division. Leora’s collection exemplifies this reorientation of the English language.

The poem’s conclusion portrays the lived reality of wealthy peoples as a dream that distracts from a more attuned understanding of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Here, Leora leaves the reader with an image of western success and happiness as she describes characters:

sinking into earth’s rickety terrain
 over plush beach towels
 reeking of coconut, barbecue and minds that do not worry

such a nice dream for us/ humans, persons

(136)

The notion of “sinking” invokes the westerner’s tendency to conflate natural and social concepts. It also poses the two often dichotomized subjects as part of a dual relationship; “sinking” describes the physical sinking into part of earth’s natural core but also describes the luxury of a vacationer. The use of “rickety” accents how “sinking” is able to be interpreted as natural and social simultaneously: the body literally sinks into the sand, the earth’s terrain, yet such interaction with the natural world is socially informed by materialistic notions of luxury, success, relaxation, vacationing etc. Thus, “dream” which acknowledges the experience of images and thoughts that seem real but are actually illusory and unreal paints the luxurious beach image as a composition of surreal reality that has distorted engagement with the natural world through a lens of socialized perception. The beachgoers partake in an unreal, fantasy-like experience of existence based on the lack of “worry” in their “minds”. Their thought is entranced by the concept of the vacation. The comma inserted between “humans” and “persons” identifies a distinction between the two, more specifically a clarification. This clarification addresses how, in regards to the beachgoers, the human experience is constructed by westernized notions of personhood. The comma looks to clarify ontology from socialization; it distinguishes apparently synonymous terms to shed light on internalized, subconscious comprehension of what it means to exist rather than be a “human, person.” As consistent with the perspective of the collection, the use of “us” situates the narrator within the human/person juxtaposition, relating herself to notions and perhaps the appeal of the worry-free dream state of the socialized ideal “person.” With awareness of how one’s understanding of the natural world has been shaped, re-arranging intention becomes possible.

Leora delves further into the nuances of socialization as she explores how the American colonial encounter backgrounds the contemporary notion of the human person. In her poem, “Postcolonial Musings,” she reflects on how normative western understanding of natural world as it exists today is the result of North American colonization. By using the imported honey bee as an example, Leora continues to debunk the natural/social dichotomization by demonstrating how nature as we know it, is itself a concept of both colonial endeavors and naturalized social thought. Blending the distinction between social and natural processes is emphasized via Leora’s allusion to the honey bee as a product of colonialism that has become ingrained into so-called natural processes of North American agricultural practices. While the bee is often a subject of protection by conservationists, the fact that honey bees are not native to these lands speaks to how language of the natural world shifts and blends over time. As noted by the New York Times in 2008:

Honey bees expanded to North America with human-assisted migration during the 17th century. Many Europeans fleeing wars, poverty, land laws or religious persecution brought extensive beekeeping skills to the United States during the next two centuries. Meanwhile, English colonists took bees to New Zealand, Australia and Tasmania, completing human-assisted migration of *Apis mellifera* around the globe.

Honey bees, along with European colonizers, were an effect of North American colonization, demonstrating how even our contemporary relationship to nature as well as our understanding of what is “natural” has been manipulated by settler colonialism. The article further acknowledges how “Honey bees are such efficient pollinators that industrialized countries developed specialized agriculture dependent upon migratory pollination and one race of honey bee, *Apis mellifera*.” This “dependence” invokes how

the western relationships to the land at the most fundamental level (food production) has been shaped by capitalist, colonial ideology. While divisions between nature and nurture are murky, it is useful to think of western relationship to the land as subjective and very much intertwined with a colonial social system; it is also necessary to recognize how indigenous peoples lived for generations with ecosystems that predated the importation of honey bee via North American colonization.

This discrepancy is the focus of “Postcolonial Musings.” The poem’s conclusion attests to misuse of what westerners often deem inherent: “many of the things/thought to be needed/thought to be natural/are illusions carried/illusions so charming/but like the sweetness of honey/not lasting” (142). The alliteration of “needed” and “natural” emphasizes the belief that honey bees are vital to the survival of the ecosystem in American lands, and that they always have been. While other species of bees predate the colonial encounter, the honey bee was an import upon settler boats. The naturalization of the honey bee exemplifies how generalized thought becomes engrained so much so that the notion of survival becomes muddied by socialized belief; and thus necessarily prone to critique and specific interrogation. The repetition of “thought” in the next line creates parallelism that strengthens the correlation between “needed” and “natural,” invoking perceptions of survival, a biologically driven concept, as being culturally constructed; it invokes a relationship of concepts that become virtually synonymous through the “progress of history.” Such generalized acceptance risks glossing over important differences in the meanings of terms. Further, the effect of colonial logic being made normative displaces pre-existing indigenous worldviews.

Tendencies to generalize and oversimplify historical details create misguided rationalization of contemporaneity. The use of “illusions,” or false perceptions, attests to the existence of misinterpretation in belief patterns. Illusions are created by “charming” attributes, those which appeal to the physical sense and are partial to a subjective cultural string of consciousness. The label “not lasting” pins temporality to the western belief system that idolizes the beach dream, invoking impermanence and false investment in all-knowing rhetoric regarding interaction with the natural world. Acknowledgement of ideologically constructed beliefs fosters both resistance to appeal and room for critique.

The naturalizing logic applied to the honey bees extends Leora’s notion of the colonial dream, where mainstream western thought disconnects from its colonial origins in order to rationalize the duality of luxury and oppression. Instead of focusing poetic content on structural components of the colonial enterprise, Leora emphasizes accountability by rooting the magnitude of the “post apocalyptic” present in our very understanding of what it means to be a living person. Ultimately, Leora puts into perspective the individual self by calling for a re-understanding of existence as one based on a genealogical consciousness where experience is a captured moment of a much greater thread of life.

“The Penguin Feeding”: Individual and Group Impression

*...we have known all along
while we are in these shells
we can reach to
mold one another
with our earthly time
where each path is lined
with golden strands of holy
sweet grass
where the same vibration
echoes within each of our bodies
where translating these answers
is the beginning
of a life's work, work
that cannot be done alone*

From “Our Holy Days” (114,115)

Leora’s notion of shells invokes the individual person as a container for a medium of life and thought that passes through generations. Understanding personhood as a temporary embodiment of ancient thought and feeling rather than a completed, isolated form exemplifies differences between indigenous and western conceptions of existence. Awareness of the self as dually existing as a source of impressionability in the present but also as a protective iteration of past thought and feeling helps Leora’s poetry balance multiple cultural backgrounds.

Leora’s “The Penguin Feeding” observes children to investigate the socialization processes that create belief in the individual self. The poem juxtaposes an indigenous genealogical perspective with the western social motives of competition that children become indoctrinated into at an early age. She plays with pronouns in this poem, shifting between focus on the protagonist, a young boy, as an individual as well as a single part to

a collective whole. In doing so, Leora's character offers readers a symbol for themselves, as socialized agents made conscious through her poetry of these separations. With such newfound awareness, the boy, and readers alike, have the agency of choice when interacting in the social realm.

The shift to a "you" perspective in the consecutive poem continues to examine the role of the individual in shaping community in a common western social experience. Via the use of a singular "you" perspective, the narrator establishes a relationship between herself and the character who finds himself in a situation where he must navigate normalized competitive inclinations. The sequential movement from collective to singular pronoun usage in the transition from "Our Holy Days" to "The Penguin Feeding," grounds conceptualization of the individual/communal duality in a realistic social situation where a child must interact with peers to witness a penguin feeding, presumably occurring at a zoo. The narrative voice reminds readers of the little boy's existence as a descendant of the wisdom and experience of past generations:

Tiny beloved
 planted within you
 are remnants so familiar
 little boy whose perfect heart
 expands far beyond
 the years of jaded strain
 infecting those elder to you
 at times, but not ever
 in our time together

(116)

The opening of the poem situates the main character within a broader collective via the description his size. Both "tiny" and "little" describe the character, "you," as a small portion of a much larger whole. The notion of "expands" carries out aforementioned

notions of interconnectivity via elements of the inner self; as a physical being, the boy is a small fragment of a large population, yet his “heart,” a synecdoche for love, as well as a literally emanating source of vibration and life pulse has the ability to transcend a particular social scenario. The use of natural language i.e. “planted” to qualify “within” links the inner self to the rest of the natural world including past present and future generations; it enables a transcendence of age-based restrictions that enforce the boy’s tininess and inability to connect to those of other generations on a social level. This division is invoked by “never in our time together.”

Other North American Indigenous cultures also use inter-generational thinking to inform social action. While native Hawaiian activist and writer Haunani Kai Trask represents a different indigenous perspective than Leora’s, her insight on the perception and treatment of age in Hawaiian culture offers a useful, non-western model countering the western dichotomizations of both individual and communal, and young and old. Her essay *Lovely Hula Hands*, Trask acknowledges that “Within this [Native Hawaiian] world, the older people, or *Kupuna*, are to cherish those who are younger, the mo’opuna” (citation). To “cherish” youth seems paradoxical to the western tendency to idolize adults-- learned in successfulness of the social world. To “cherish” is to regard with the utmost value. Such notions of worth contrast to Leora’s initial, negative portrayal of youth invoked by “feisty.” This notion resonates with how Leora describes the little boy’s “perfect heart” as “infecting” to elders. The notion of “perfect” invokes lack of contamination brought on by the process of aging in a competitive socialized world. Trask’s acknowledgement of “this world” seems to establish distinction between how native Hawaiian culture conceives age compared to the western, Americanized world that

invests in the idea of thresholds between childhood and adulthood. While the American socialization experience fosters competitive drive ingrained in the rhetoric of economic success, both Trask and Leora invoke indigenous worldviews that value the pre-socialized experience of childhood, where filters of professionalism and success have had less time to harden one's individual shell around its spiritual essence. The transition the narrator goes through, where he eventually seamlessly integrates into the youthful crowd could be identified as a move toward a more indigenous societal interaction where ages are not dichotomized but unified in duality.

The imagery of the penguin feeding explores the notion of competition as a divisive tactic employed to reinforce the ideal of an individualized self. Via the use of past tense, as well as the colon at the end of the initial stanza, the narrative voice takes on a "we" perspective that recalls the image of the penguin feeding:

When we visited our aquarium friends
as promised, we watched them
bite nip and compete
over corpses
flung to them
from a bucket

From the onset, "watched" situates the narrator and the boy as observers, invoking separation from the event. The notion of "friends" describes a relationship based on care and respect. "Friends" seems to describe the relationship between narrator and the penguins, invoking an indigenous worldview where animals are acknowledged as equally important as humans. However the subsequent description of "bite nip and compete" invokes competition, allowing "friends" to simultaneously describe the narrator's

relationship to the rest of the children, pressed against the glass fighting for a vantage point in the exhibit. Thus, Leora highlights multiple worldviews via the analogy between children learning the western adage of competition and domesticated penguins fighting for food distributed by the zookeeper. The rather haunting description of food as “corpses/ flung to them/ from a bucket” invokes how the natural process of consumption becomes defined by literal and figurative institutional walls. The emotive range between “friends” and “corpses” seems to pose friendship and likeness as a veil for the more disturbing processes that have formed such relations and interactions to happen. From an outside observer’s perspective, the care and respect people at a zoo have for the animals and other tourists can be seen as the result of competitive, morbid processes of history.

The proceeding stanza break re-orientes the boy as an individual in a competitive social situation that seems more light-hearted than its brutal origins. In describing the boy’s personal desire to witness the penguin feeding, Leora writes:

Sent, you walked
 not two feet away
 to a flock of pushy kids
 they all wanted their turn
 they looked like you
 in stature and fashion
 little fleece pants
 flashing sneakers
 t-shirts of cartooned animals
 and Kool-aid stains
 cheese puff smears.
 They, too were just learning
 the nature of animals, confinement
 a life defined by wars

The notion of “sent” acknowledges the child’s movement as one initiated from an outside force, whether it be the narrator, or a more amorphous social force that informs attraction.

The juxtaposition of “sent” with “not two feet away” adds spatial detail to the image to depict a more exact movement of the boy; it also juxtaposes implications of both great and small distances occurring at the same time. The contradiction between the strong force of “sent” and the casual, relaxed sentiment of “not two feet away” highlights the competing cultural narratives at work in this passage. Perhaps the author is acknowledging the ease of being attracted to those “that [look] like you,” through the power of appearance and group mentality. “Learning” acknowledges an ongoing process of socialization. Leora further invokes a likeness between the children and the penguins via “they, too” as both exist in isolated social scenarios, defined by capitalist institutions that divide and control social groups. The duality of both the penguins and children being present in the same exhibit, on different sides of a shared glass wall demonstrates how the control that humans employ over the natural world is reciprocally restricting themselves due to factor such as capitalist competition and dichotomization of self and others.

By situating contemporary mainstream competitive drive within the historical context of American wars, Leora notes how certain social intentions become engrained into the subconscious formation of the individual. She reflects on such history via the boy’s initial inclination in this given social scenario:

Right away you thought
you would need to push your way
to the front
and asked how to make it
through the crowd to the glass
you were told to ask, explain
that you, too, would like to see
the penguins eat
there was no way to know
how the kids would react
a feisty bunch, but moments later

over their small heads
there you were
at the front of the line
the crowd gave way for you

Like the strength of “sent” in the previous stanza, both “right away” and “push” invoke forceful qualities and feelings of immediacy for getting what one desires. “Push” invokes action that forcefully removes blockades from a desired path; it acknowledges the other zoo-goers as obstructions to an end goal. Like the capitalist desire to be on the winning end of any contest, success in both scenarios hinge on individual achievement through division between self and others. The notion of “way,” attests to the learned intention to implement one’s personal vision for success or goodness. Told” acts similarly to “sent” in the previous stanza; both invoke action derived from another’s direction. Thus, the boy has learned the inclinations of competition from others who have been presumably socialized under similar “ways” or epistemology. The juxtaposition of “you, too” further acknowledges the child’s intentions as similar to those of the others at the front of the exhibits showcase. Forceful self-inclination contrasts from the unity of knowledge as discussed previously. The final juxtaposition of “gave way” offers an alternative to competition, one of sharing and communal harmony. However, Leora identifies a lack of social awareness that such an alternative is ever-present; in fact it happens, without realization. While the crowd gave way, the notion of crowd happiness versus individual happiness seems to exist “over their small heads,” playing on their characterization as children but also socialized persons regardless of age in a reality driven by competition. Such an alternative worldview, where awareness of group dynamic as priority fails to permeate mainstream western consciousness.

The juxtaposition of competition for individual achievement and communal harmony relates to ways that Leora critiques conceptualizing age in terms of binary. Similarly to how she deconstructs the dichotomy of life and death by invoking intra-generational consciousness and connection as life forms, age as it is conventionally divided between eras of childhood and adulthood become equalized, where no hierarchy exists that deems one generation more important or wise than another. Instead, by moving away from conceptualizing a dichotomized understanding of age in terms of adults and youth—one that aligns with conventional western social mores, to a duality that acknowledges their interrelation, Leora promotes openness to surroundings as an effort to learn from each other.

Uncertainty is the cause for the distinction between generations. The apprehension of not fully understanding a generation's differences causes distrust and negative perception. However, a bridge between youth and adult is foreshadowed by the previous invocations of unity in knowledge between generations. The use of "remnants" in the opening stanza bridges perceived generational gaps within a single person. Generational differences can be realized as socially constructed, existing within the realm of temporality. In consideration of boundless and interrelated generations where life's end is accepted just as much as a beginning, transcendence of the dichotomy between young and old can end the perpetuation of isolation and the forced individual desire. The duality between young and old relates to that of being oriented towards individual or communal based mindset, where they are commonly believed to be separated as opposed to one in the same.

Importance of lacking finality in one's perceived "way," or life intention as a way to be open to others is emphasized in the poem's conclusion. Leora offers a future for the little boy in his engagement with the social situations he will come to encounter:

The hope is that this will happen
 again and again, as your gentle life and its curious purposes unfold
 as you become the pacifist unafraid to ask permission and give
 before you move forward
 before you leap into the sacred unknown

The use of "hope" acknowledges such peaceful intention as ideal but not guaranteed. The initial state of force contrasts to this description of life events as occurring in a "gentle" state, implying a harmonious existence with others. Unlike the assertive implementation of "way," the description of letting "curious purposes unfold" lacks competitive intention; rather, "curiosity" invokes questioning and openness to the surrounding environmental as motivation for constructing an individual life. "Curiosity" advocates one to probe interests and striking impressions as a means for actively engaging those in the world undergoing their own processes of individuality. The pairing of "pacifist" with "unafraid," linked via the missing comma where grammatically one should be, emphasizes the ability to be peaceful yet active in subject formation. "Unafraid" fosters a readiness to take on the world without being passively created by it. The pairing invokes a positive way to form individuality, through peaceful interaction with others, while maintaining a confidence that fosters ability to carefully compile fragments from the outside world as a part of identity. "Give" is an actionable impression rooted in generosity, fostering a smooth engagement with social interactions based on force or demand.

The final concept of the “sacred unknown” attests to this alternate way of thinking that remains beyond the mainstream of western thought. Rather than characterizing darkness as evil, fear or hatred, Leora consistently calls it exactly this: sacred and unknown. By promoting generosity and openness to others as a positive approach to life, the unknown becomes more a leap of faith than a source of fear that aligns with tensions of force and competition. The notion of the “unknown,” or the unforeseeable future is a result of fluidly developing actions, ones that leads stages of life into each other without self-inflicted tension; ultimately it is acceptance and commitment to surroundings. Ultimately, this notion of the unknown promotes communal interaction through peaceful work rather than motivation for individualist success. Often such individualist tendencies often fail to disregard broader purposes of community betterment and social ascension.

Reorienting the Self: Indigeneity in the Western World

A final Trask quote aptly describes Leora’s approach to creativity and the craft of her art in *Dark Swimming*. It speaks to how Leora’s poetry navigates western social spaces with an indigenous sense of applied creativity. Trask highlights the intention of creativity in the Hawaiian native community: “This creativity is not individual, in the western sense. Hawaiians write for other Hawaiians, for their immediate pleasurable response; the activity is truly collective, even when the actual words and phrases are individually imagined” (Trask, *Decolonizing Hawaiian Literature* 171). This collective sense of creation echoes of Leora’s notion of molding and shaping one’s surroundings. Her acknowledgement that “Hawaiians write for other Hawaiians,” relates to Leora advocating the individual to engage the world with generosity and passivity as a method

of connecting with others. Breaking selfish trends of creativity via passion for connecting with others enables the re-orientation of the self, towards communal betterment and happiness rather than self-fulfillment through individual success. The notion of “individually imagined” attests to importance of directing personal thoughts and images towards collective growth.

Leora’s poetry is laced with multiple cultural worldviews, instilling the social interactions with an awareness of how her characters have been ideologically formed, and are still forming, by surrounding impressions and genealogical thought. *Dark Swimming* attests to the daily realities of the western social world as much as it delves deep into perpetuation and embodiment of consciousness passing through the human medium. It explores the origins and effects of language as it defines the social world from communities to individual selves. Leora’s expositions of geological perspectives put the western world as we know it into a temporal context, one that de-mystifies its apparent objectivity and allows readers to see it as a constructed moment of a grandeur historical thread. The promotion of engaging duality rather than dichotomy fosters the recognition of interdependence, clarifying barriers humans have created between themselves and other life forms. Ultimately, this collection explores both the divisive and unifying potentials of language; it serves as its own best example for re-orienting language as a catalyst for connection.

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