In a nation whose capital sports a team called the Redskins and whose attraction to enduring colonialist fantasy—coated in blue skin—recently made Avatar a blockbuster, it should hardly prove surprising that most contemporary American Indian literature remains an unknown country to nonspecialists. In a nation where Native Americans are hypervisible as cartoons, commodities, and casino caricatures yet virtually invisible as diverse, real people, Sherman Alexie’s very public literary and media success is stunning. If televisual culture constitutes a vital site for redirecting the place and presence of indigenous peoples, consider Alexie’s repeat appearances on the wildly popular late-night show The Colbert Report. His wickedly brilliant sparring with Stephen Colbert, the faux conservative talk show host, has included exchanges over smallpox blankets, Columbus statues, and “Indian giving.” For Alexie, wielding such deadly humor is no game: as he reminds us in his recent poetry collection, Face, “comedy is simply a funny way of being serious.” About the place of Indians in the big picture, Alexie claims that “we’re usually just the extras, the brown folks at the edges of the screen.” Every time Alexie grabs screen time, he changes its face; however briefly, he transmits the possibilities in disrupting the formula.

On the small screen and the big screen, in prose poems and in novels, Sherman Alexie constantly reinvents the literary wheel to counter, re-imagine, and transform the one-trick Indians transmitted over generations of film and television. A “self-proclaimed sitcom kid” who has claimed, “I think I’m actually the first practitioner of the Brady Bunch school of Native American literature,” Alexie profoundly messes with the picture, changes the dials. That screen time has served him well: in both form and function, his writing enacts what television actually does. Television “works,” after all, through multiple transmutations: an image transformed into an electromagnetic wave that is then broadcast, decoded, and reconstructed. As such, it also works as a remarkably apt metaphor for Alexie’s signature style of refraction (and infraction): transmitting, but also always transmuting; bending genre, and bending the rules.

As an example, take the tenacious screen life of Indian-white conflict, encapsulated by those tele-westerns that are both synonymous with and symptomatic of the enduring distortions of media in the United States. Like many Native writers, Alexie transmutes the ways U.S. popular culture has long made a romance out of genocidal violence, casting it in entwined languages of elegy and romance, of fantasy and faux nostalgia. Noting the formula, he reformulates it. Not the Lone Ranger and Tonto, but The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. Not simply John Wayne, but also, as we learn in Smoke Signals, John Wayne’s teeth.

Yet Alexie also relentlessly complicates acts of reappropriation or role reversal by challenging heroic narratives of indigenous resistance, most especially that of the warrior stance. For example, in his novel Flight, the traumatized Irish-Indian fifteen-year-old foster kid, “Zits,” claims: “Everything I know about Indians, I’ve learned from television. I know about famous chiefs, broken...
treaties, the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Indian wars of the 19th century.” In the ensuing chapters, Zits learns otherwise. Like his literary ancestor, Billy Pilgrim of Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Zits finds himself “unstuck in time”—entering and exiting the bodies of young and old, white and Indian, through theuntelevised scenes of PBS and History Channel documentaries of “how the west was won.” After all, as Gil Scott Heron sang back in the 1970s, “the revolution will not be televised.” Zits experiences impossible ethical predicaments as he successively inhabits the body of an FBI agent working with murderous members akin to the American Indian Movement; a young Native boy rendered mute by an American soldier’s mutilation, yet resisting directions to mutilate dead soldiers at the Battle of Greasy Grass (Little Bighorn); and a white scout who tries to change the script of the Indian wars by helping a young child escape the slaughterhouse of American soldiers.

Zits’s own flight pattern veers to the present as he shares his pilot’s aftermath of betrayal when the friend he had taught to fly deliberately crashes a passenger plane. Zits’s final “landing” into his estranged father’s homeless body extends the novel’s lessons both outward and inward, both globally and locally. With each agonizing scene of instruction in *Flight*, readers are compelled to revisit an entangled national story in all of its irreparable complexities. Zits, too, must confront his own complicity, having just massacred customers in a bank, the act that catapults him through time and space. With its echoings of violent torsions in the fabric of national life—mass murder committed by teenagers, terrorist hijackings—*Flight* underscores Alexie’s increasingly pronounced shift since September 11, 2001, in exposing the anatomy of violence wherever it manifests. Most particularly, he has repeatedly deplored fundamentalism in its varied contemporary incarnations, denouncing its humorless fixation on a conforming vision, its unbending allegiance to form, its adherence to being ruled by rules.

*Flight* thus enlarges his ongoing concerns with the living legacy of genocide against indigenous peoples to complicate any easy sympathies, any tendency to fix people into categories of heroes and demons, of “us” and “them.” Driving this book are uncomfortable questions about the banality of evil, about our capacities for betrayal, about “revenge [as] a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle.” Confronting the materiality of violence and its imprint on our bodies, Zits closes his eyes when he cannot bear the horror in and outside of him. Yet Alexie makes us look. In the opening poem of *War Dances*, Alexie writes, “Why do poets think / They can change the world? / The only life I can save / Is my own.” Yet the possibility of this one kid choosing a different script than the terminal one imposed on him gestures to the possibility of more than one saved life at novel’s end.

Indigenizing Vonnegut or globalizing Native stories? Alexie’s writing does both as it ceaselessly reinvents literary rules and seeks out new ways of telling stories that matter. And he’s not alone: many contemporary Native writers actively transmute media culture, stereotypical assumptions, and conventional generic expectations. Routinely rejecting formulas of literary categorization, Native writers instead engage in shifting, often startling innovations of form. As Dean Rader notes in the journal *Sentence’s* feature section on contemporary American Indian prose poetry, “Western demarcations of genre have little or no truck in Indian country.” Shape-shifters of genre, contemporary Native writers participate in what Rader calls a “legacy of inter- and intragenre expression.” Moving fluidly among multiple genres across and within works, Eric Gansworth, LeAnne Howe, and Allison Hedge Coke, among others, enact Tuscarora artist Rick Hill’s assertion that “creativity is our tradition.”

All the more discordant, then, are the enduring, fossilized notions of Indians and American Indian literatures rife in broader U.S. culture. Alexie’s national visibility in literary arts and his growing visibility in popular culture, abetted by his stints on *The Colbert Report* and by recent books—including *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, his best-selling, award-winning young-adult novel—may deflect such burdensome notions. As a gateway Native author, Alexie might pull in a wider range of readers to the pleasures and perils of the many indigenous literary texts published by university and independent presses. If he does, it won’t be because he lets his readers off easy. With each publication, Alexie unsettling readers of all kinds by refusing to play by the rules. In *Face*, Alexie explicitly turns to formal innovation to transmute the tyranny of expectations, especially regarding his status as a public literary figure. Through his self-reflexive engagement with questions of literary genre and influence, *Face* makes visible his stake in constitu-
tive questions driving the field of Native literary studies.

In a PBS NewsHour segment on poets, Alexie describes two entwined influences on his writing:

I grew up in a storytelling culture, tribal culture, but also in an American storytelling culture. I was obsessed with TV. . . . The form I most enjoy writing is the sonnet or sonnet-like forms. . . . I am a big fan of the concluding couplet these days. I like the summation of it. It feels very traditional as well. Talking about tribal songs, whether they are short or long, there’s a lot of repetition involved, recitation of themes, and ideas, and sounds, but it always ends with that final drumbeat, that boom that tells you it’s over. So the concluding couplet in a sonnet feels like that last drumbeat of a powwow song to me.5

Even while announcing the productive confluence of U.S. popular culture and tribal culture, of TV and powwow drumming, Alexie articulates the indigeneity of that most canonical of fixed forms: the sonnet. As many Native intellectuals have argued in recent years, for too long critical discourse has positioned, in Craig Womack’s terms, “Native people as ‘adaptors’ and ‘adopters’ rather than originators, incorporating tribal worldviews into extant forms such as the novel, the short story, and the poem, the argument being that such expression is not indigenous to tribal cultures.”6 By upending the interpretive conventions that have long supported a binary logic separating non-Native and Native literary forms, Womack also challenged critical approaches that have relied on reductive categories of identity, authenticity, and artistic production. In the decade following the 1999 publication of Womack’s Red on Red, the field of Native literary studies has reconstituted around a continuum of Nation-based, indigenous-informed methodologies that trace crucial relationships between individual texts, sovereignty, and what Gerald Vizenor terms survivance, or an active sense of resistance and continuance.

At the same time, many scholars in Native literary studies recognize Chadwick Allen’s claim that “indigenous literatures written in English—or primarily in English—are products of complicated genealogies, genealogies that include diverse and multiply intersecting lines: political, social, personal, textual, linguistic, aesthetic.”7 Native poets, such as Alexie, thus inhabit multiplicity; their work intervenes through innovation. For example, Luci Tapahonso’s sestinas serve Diné (Navajo) ways of knowing; Heid Erdrich’s caustic revision of Frost’s “The Gift Outright” as “The Theft Outright” reframes the possessive logic of U.S. settler discourse with affirmative claims of indigenous sovereignty. Whether indigenizing forms typically associated with Western traditions or transmuting texts fixed within a singular vision, these poets show both the power in identifying affinity and the power in asserting dissonance. For Alexie, then, the sonnet is not an alien form. From his earliest publications in poetry, in fact, he has revealed in the sonnet, flexing its rhymes and lines, or as Dean Rader characterizes “Sonnet: Tattoo Tears”: “like a musician doing his own take on a standard, Alexie ‘covers’ a sonnet Indian style.” In Face, Alexie continues his tradition of forging creative possibility out of this form with “The Blood Sonnets,” a cycle of five sonnets that offers up rich, interconnected relationships of blood, re/generation, and mourning. The cycle’s tense juxtaposition of beginnings and un/endings—of life, loss, and grief—is enhanced by the sonnet’s compressed form and unresolved sorrows.

In a book preoccupied by the question of beginnings and endings, “Vilify” extends this thematic refrain through its refraction of the villanelle form. “Vilify” liberally adapts the villanelle while fourteen footnotes, comprising nine pages of text
after the poem, create satellite texts. The footnotes reposition the villanelle as part of an interactive set of admonitions, corrections, and commentaries spanning—in true tragicomic Alexie fashion—aesthetic theory and blown glass art, bad presidents, genocide, and ironic indigenous patriotism. By redirecting readers to footnotes, which typically occupy the edges of the page yet are made central here, Alexie transmutes the tired notions of center and periphery that have conventionally separated Western and Native writings. Readers must consider the relationship between constituent parts and also his simultaneous construction and decomposition of form. At the same time, the footnotes unfix form in a poem vilifying a painfully intrusive fixed form of national identity—Mount Rushmore—carved into the still-contested Black Hills.

In the fourth footnote, Alexie offers an artist’s statement of sorts through his humored critique of abstract art (“there’s no wit here . . . It doesn’t change my mind about the world”) and of the monumental literalism embodied by Mount Rushmore: “Okay there are four giant heads up there on the mountain. That makes them important, but without knowing the back story, the history, those four giant heads mean nothing.” In “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers,” Alexie reminds us of the cost of Mount Rushmore—carved into the still-contested Black Hills.

His declaration of creative freedom launches his ensuing refutation—in sonnet and in prose—of what he views as another form of bullying: the “ugly fundamentalism” of Lakota writer and literary critic Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s contentious insistence that Native writers focus on tribal sovereignty. He juxtaposes prescriptive notions of indigenous aesthetics with a playful homage to Haida fashion designer Dorothy Grant, whose tuxedos with eagle feathers embody Tlingit artist Larry McNeil’s affirmation that for Native artists, “the traditional and contemporary are both traditional and contemporary.”

However, in the poem’s concluding “hand-sewn” sonnet, Alexie reminds us of the cost of that beautiful tuxedo. Invoking the complicated, bounded space of the sonnet and of his reservation (“fourteen lines that rhyme, two rivers that meet”), Alexie identifies colonialism’s long reach as both “fluid and solid, measurable / And mad.” The sonnet form thus encapsulates an uneasy confluence of origins: the deceptively natural borders of the Spokane Reservation—dammed rivers emptied of salmon—with the “white masters” he mimics. In a concluding couplet that concludes nothing, Alexie settles on the fractious creativity of containing multitudes. Might poetry save a life? Yes it can. He asserts: “I wasn’t saved by the separation of cultures; I was reborn inside the collision of cultures.” In declaring his right to “claim all of it,” all of the beauty and messiness of conflicting literary legacies, Sherman Alexie transmutes possibilities for re-envisioning our entangled national story.

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2 In “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys,” Alexie writes, “Indians never lost their West, so how come I walk into a supermarket and find a dozen cowboy books telling me How the West Was Won?” First Indian on the Moon (Hanging Loose Press, 1993), 102.
4 Rick Hill, qtd. in Lawrence Abbott, ed., I Stand in the Center of the Good: Interviews with Contemporary Native American Artists (University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 60.
6 Craig S. Womack, Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 137.