

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Conversations with Sherman Alexie. Edited by Nancy Peterson.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/63z5085d>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 35(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Sexton, Steven Bayhille

Publication Date

2011-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

group, is a significant shortfall. Clearly this document is intended to continue the charge to elevate the IHS as a significant savior of the Indian people.

Caring and Curing: A History of the Indian Health Service is a well-researched document, complete with pages of references. It chronicles the history of the IHS, when the health and welfare of American Indians were in the hands of the Department of the Interior (a little known fact is that this effort began in the Department of War), through several reorganizations and policies that restricted American Indian tribes and provided health-care services to Indian communities. Highlighted in the document is the 1955 transfer of the program to the US Public Health Service, which was a major event in the lives of Indian people. Additional transfers and adjustments within the system resulted in the current-day relationship between the IHS and federally recognized tribes and communities across the United States.

Caring and Curing is a history book, a colorful presentation of tribes and leaders in the IHS. Personal stories, illustrations of historical documents, and narratives of events that impacted the American Indian population are highlighted throughout the book. Overall, the authors portrayed the IHS in a positive light, pointing out that its attempt to elevate the health-care and medical services to the highest level possible (at least comparable to that of the US population) was a positive and successful achievement.

As a historical document, the book provides a one-sided view of the challenges and opportunities of the federal program charged with the responsibility of providing health-care services to American Indians. As a coffee-table book, this document is colorful, entertaining, and quite interesting. The book presents significant events over the years and reports on successful goals reached by the government. Thoroughly researched, the book leaves little information behind, save that regarding the contributions of American Indian peoples.

Caring and Curing is a handsomely packaged book that is educational and entertaining. This book is a must-have for individuals interested in American Indians and their ongoing relationship with the federal IHS.

Felicia Schanche Hodge

University of California, Los Angeles

Conversations with Sherman Alexie. Edited by Nancy Peterson. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009. 224 pages. \$50.00 cloth; \$22.00 paper.

With an impressive career spanning nearly twenty years, Sherman Alexie (Coeur d'Alene/Spokane) has published twenty books in a variety of genres (poetry, short fiction, novel, and screenplay); written the screenplays for two

feature films—directing one of them; and earned numerous honors, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a National Book Award, and, most recently, the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. He is also the subject of *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*, one of the more recent additions to the University Press of Mississippi's Literary Conversation Series. This series features a long list of collected interviews with distinguished writers, such as Ernest Hemingway, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou, and Native writers, such as Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna), Louise Erdrich (Ojibway) and Michael Dorris (Modoc), and N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa/Cherokee). The collection includes interviews that span most of Alexie's literary career.

Conversations includes twenty-one interviews conducted by an interesting mix of people, which helps to distinguish it from previous books of interviews focused on Native writers, those appearing in the Literary Conversation Series notwithstanding. Joseph Bruchac's (Abenaki) *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets* (1990), for example, offers the reader an array of viewpoints by different Native American poets, all of whom offer exquisite perspectives on Native American literature, poetry in particular. All interviews are conducted by one person and have a singular topic—Native American literature—despite the diversity of viewpoints. Charles Woodward's *Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday* (1991) focuses upon one single author, but like *Survival This Way*, all interviews are conducted by one person and take place within a relatively constrained time span.

Alexie is the sole subject of the interviews featured in *Conversations*; the topics of each individual interview, however, are as diverse as the interviewers and the publications in which the interviews originally appear. Editor Nancy Peterson has selected a nice assortment of interviews that reflect Alexie's own artistic diversity. Some of the interviewers are fellow writers/poets (for example, Tomson Highway and Dianne Theil), while others are academics (for example, Åse Nygren and John Purdy) or professional journalists (for example, Erik Himmelsbach and Duncan Campbell). The publications in which the interviews originally appear are just as diverse, including *Bloomsbury Review* and *Publishers Weekly*. Others appeared in publications concerned with indigenous issues, such as *Aboriginal Voices* and *Indian Artist*, or in scholarly journals such as *Studies in American Indian Literatures* and *MELUS*. Alexie's film work has also captured the attention of *Cineaste* and *filmcritic.com*. One interview appeared in *Real Change News*, a Seattle-based newspaper sold by the homeless as an alternative to panhandling after Alexie's short story, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," appeared in the *New Yorker* (2003). The mixture of interviewers and the publications in which the interviews appear speak to the vast appeal of Alexie, and Peterson highlights this with her choices.

Another strength of *Conversations* is the amount of time the book covers. The interviews span fourteen years, with the first one occurring in 1993 after *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was published and the last one in 2007, following the publication of Alexie's young-adult book, *The Absolute True Dairy of a Part-Time Indian*, for which he won a National Book Award. No huge time gaps exist between interviews, the longest being three years between the first and second selections, which allows the reader to track Alexie's thoughts on his writings and film work, Native American literature and film, the general literary world, and social and political issues that Native people face. Alexie's personality emerges in these conversations, and his voice remains relatively consistent throughout the years, yet one cannot help but notice how he matures as an artist and a person.

The interviews are chosen to reflect the significance of events and cultural and social shifts that have influenced Alexie's worldview. For example, in 1996, Alexie claims, "I use a racial criterion in my literary critiques. . . . I have a very specific commitment to Indian people, and I'm very tribal in that sense. I want us to survive *as Indians*" (20). This attitude certainly reflects Alexie's earlier works, which are set primarily on the reservation and inhabited mostly by reservation Natives, though he has been criticized for focusing on the more negative aspects of reservation life. Eventually, however, his characters leave the reservation, as Thomas Builds-the-Fire does at the end of *Reservation Blues* (1995), and the settings of his stories shift to urban areas inhabited by urban Natives. Accordingly, Alexie's view of tribalism shifts. In a 2003 interview with Matt Dellinger, Alexie says that the "worse part about tribalism is its tendency to fundamentalize, and if I can fight fundamentalism in any of its forms I'm happy" (123). In another interview with Timothy Harris that same year, Alexie admits that he has become less Indian-centric, and after the 9/11 attacks, he rarely talks about Indians. He claims that his politics are "not about race, region, or country, but about a particular group of people sharing the same circumstances. . . . That's been my response [to 9/11]: to see people by their power or lack thereof, rather than the color of their skin" (130). In order to avoid fundamentalism, Alexie imagines a multiple tribal affiliation rather than a singular one. In a 2007 interview with Tanita Davis and Sarah Stevenson, he says, "My strongest tribes are book nerds and basketball players, and those tribes are radically, culturally, economically, and spiritually diverse. . . . I think fundamentalism is the mistaken belief that one belongs to only one tribe; I am the opposite of that" (190). One might wonder how Alexie's view of tribalism might affect Native literary studies, and Native people in general, especially considering that most Native Americans live off reservations. Alexie's nuanced approach to tribalism certainly reflects his migration to (sub)urban areas where

Natives become immersed in a pluralistic environment and must learn how to deal with such an environment while maintaining some sense of a tribal self.

Alexie's view of tribalism is only one thread that the reader can follow through the interviews. *Conversations* offers the reader a relatively unfettered text of fourteen years of Alexie's insights on a variety of topics. Peterson has reprinted them in their entirety with minimal editing, in keeping with the series' standards. With the exception of her introduction and the interviews she chose to include—or more to the point, the interviews she chose not to include—Peterson's presence is negligible. The interviews she has selected represent a myriad of interviewers and publications, each looking for something different from Alexie. Through his responses, Alexie brings up issues that should be further explored by scholars of his works and of Native American literary studies in general. Alexie is also spontaneous, a natural result of the genre, and brutally honest in these interviews, revealing the personality that is so characteristic of the works that his fans have come to enjoy, which should appeal to the casual reader. With the exception of Peterson's introduction, which does a great job of summarizing the issues these interviews present, *Conversations* does not offer much in terms of criticism. Considering the methodology Peterson uses, however, it is doubtful the book was intended to be a critical work. Regardless, the book is important to Native American literary studies, given Alexie's presence in the Native and non-Native literary world and the issues that are explored in the interviews.

Steven Bayhille Sexton
University of Oklahoma

Documents of Native American Political Development, 1500s to 1933.
Edited by David E. Wilkins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 560 pages. \$99.00 cloth.

David Wilkins's latest book is a collection of laws, tribal constitutions, and reports documenting the political histories of a diverse selection of Native American peoples in the era before the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) in 1934. The IRA famously encouraged the drafting of new tribal constitutions as part of what John Collier and his allies hoped would be a more just relationship between Indian nations and the United States. As Wilkins notes, however, by the 1930s many Native peoples had a long experience with political institution building, tribal leaders having frequently reshaped their peoples' systems of government as they responded and adapted to American colonialism. In reproducing evidence of that experience, Wilkins challenges