



NAVIGATING NATIVE AMERICANS' INDIGENOUS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ALEXIE'S *TO FIND SASQUATCH*: A CULTURAL CRITIQUE

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Abstract

This research will analyze Native American's indigenous and cultural identity that has been recreated in Sherman Alexie's *To Find Sasquatch* appeared in his poetic collection *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996) under the lens of cultural theory postulated by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz in her book *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (2014). The study is grounded in settler-colonial history of marginalization, misrepresentation, and erasure of Indigenous people in America. Alexie's poem is about Sasquatch, less as a mythical being than as a symbol of Native presence, cultural memory, mystery, and survival. This study aims to examine the representation of indigenous identity, the challenge to a colonial stereotype and the reclamation of native cultural knowledge by *Sasquatch Poems*, as told through the medium of storytelling, cultural practices, and pan-tribalism. *Sasquatch Poems* are selected because they directly deal with Native identity and cultural memory. The central symbolic figure selected for analysis is: Sasquatch. The findings suggest that Alexie takes Sasquatch as a symbol for Native Americans' indigenous identity. The study concludes that the poem is a resistance as well as **rebuttal** to colonial discourse about the erasure of Native Americans' reservations, cultural norms, religious and linguistic identity. The poems under discussion are a testament to the survival of indigenous people through memory, oral traditions, and cultural diversity.

Keywords: *Indigenous Identity, Native American Literature, Cultural Practices, Sanctity Of Land, Euro-American Discourse, Manifest Destiny, Settler Colonialism, Cultural Critique, Storytelling, Survival, Resistance.*

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1. Introduction

Sasquatch Poems have been extracted from Alexie's famous poetic collection entitled *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996) written in the context of Native American literature. Sasquatch is not simply a folk-lore but an indigenous symbol through which the themes of cultural identity, historical memory, colonial agendas, and survival strategies can be explored and interrogated. In the poem, Sasquatch is not just a creature of the woods but also a symbol of Native existence in a society that swears it can't see indigenous peoples but keeps taking up land, telling their stories and socio-cultural norms. This study entitled *Negotiating Native Americans' Indigenous and Cultural Identity in Alexie's To Find Sasquatch: A Cultural Critique*, examines how the poem's depiction of Sasquatch reveals the paradoxes of visibility, belief and disbelief, history and myth, cultural survival, and colonial denial. Dunbar-Ortiz challenges the conventional notions of the U.S. as a modern state, and instead posits that the country is a settler-colonial state that was established through conquest, land theft, forced expulsion, and the attempt to destroy indigenous sovereignty. Her work rejects the widely-held narratives and myths of discovery about America, arguing that indigenous survival needs to be at the heart of a historical narrative (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). In the poems, Sasquatch serves as a way to question the mysticism and fiction often associated with Native existence, and to focus on its historical and political aspects. It also sheds light on her ideas about cultural genocide, **manifest destiny**, expulsion of the Cherokees, Indian resistance, cultural practices, and linguistic diversity. The persistent cultural interest in Sasquatch in Alexie's *To Find Sasquatch* (1996), is similar to the fascination that often exists in America for mythical, vanished Indians, rather than with living Indians. Sasquatch is thought to be by some, ridiculed by others, hunted by outsiders, and object of spectacle by others. As with other peoples' cultures, indigenous identity in U.S. culture has often been misrepresented, stereotyped, and disembodied from its sovereignty and contemporary cultural vitality through museums, school textbooks, movies, tourism and myths (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Bigfoot implies a popular commercialized outsider term and Sasquatch has meaning and cultural roots in the region and among the indigenous people. Native identity is not a pristine purity or a frozen tradition for Alexie. Sasquatch's evasiveness, therefore, is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of survival. His unwillingness to be 'captured' by cameras, newspapers, scientists or believers represents the denial of indigenous identity to be fully captured by colonial categories. This paper also contends that the politics of evidence is

the subject of this poem by Alexie. The people in the poem are discussing whether or not Sasquatch exists, and American culture asks the same question about Native identity, sovereignty, treaty rights, and historical suffering, unless they are recognized by colonial institutions.

1.1. Research Objectives

- To examine representation of Native Americans' indigenous and cultural identity in Sherman Alexie's Sasquatch Poems
- To highlight the cultural practices and survival strategies
- To analyze the ways in which Alexie criticizes the misrepresentation of Indians by the Euro-American epistemology and colonial discourse

1.2. Research Questions

- 1) How does Alexie employ the image of a monstrous and mysterious Sasquatch to manifest Native Americans' indigenous and cultural identity?
- 2) How does the idea of manifest destiny help clarify the themes of erasure, invisibility, and survival in Sasquatch Poems?
- 3) How does Alexie's poem defy stereotypes about the colonized and defend indigenous memory and culture?

2. Literature Review

Anand (2025) in his research paper entitled *Indigenous Perspectives: Unveiling Native American literature through the lens of postcolonial theory*, narrates the salient features of Native American literature and culture in the context of postcolonial theories of resistance. The concept of cultural identity plays a vital role in the analysis of Native Americans' indigenous literature. This paper examines how Native American authors channelize the complex aftermaths of colonial era. The basic purpose of indigenous culture is to reclaim elements that have been labeled as "savages" and "primitives" in Euro-American colonial narratives. Language plays a vital role in preserving oral traditions and indigenous knowledge (Anand, 2025, p.525).

Murtaza, Bhatti, and Shafiq (2020) critically analyze Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in the context of "aboriginal education" which was threatened by the Euro-American educational policies of white missionary schools. Euro-American education was a misleading to ethnic minorities. This research has been done applying Chouliaraki and Fairclough's concept of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). According to these researchers: "Education is an ambivalently transformative phenomenon for Native Americans" (Murtaza, et al; 2020, p.17).

Zohra and Karima (2017), in their research work entitled *The Use of History in Cooper's Novel "The Last of the Mohicans"*, unveil the American history and colonization applying the theory of New Historicism. These researchers cite historical references to the Dutch, the English, and the French colonizers while delineating the dark colonial ages of

Native American history. They also describe the aftermaths of colonial period in the history of Native America. Further, they highlight the rich culture of Native Indians while mentioning their food, language, tribes, cultural dance, prayers, and reservation life (Zohra and Karima 2017).

According to Murtaza and Bhatti (2016), Sherman Alexie tends to focus on the poetics and fiction as a formidable critique of historical representations of Native Americans. Alexie's work deny the stereotypes of the "vanished Indian" and instead portrays complex Indigenous themes that exist in the realm of memory, humor, sorrow, popular culture and resistance (Murtaza & Bhatti, 2016).

A research work was conducted on Native American literature under the title *Land, Identity and Community in Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine and Four Souls* (2011) by Gizem UZUMCU. The research is about cultural diversity, Pan-tribalism, and land commitment in the context of Ojibwe culture. In Erdrich's fictions family and land commitment play a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of Native Indian ecology and traditions (UZUMCU, 2011).

This is significant when reading *Sasquatch Poems* as the poem does not present a traditional indigenous identity. Rather, Alexie employs Sasquatch as a cultural icon which exists in the space between myth, memory, belief and survival. The repeated focus on Spokane storytelling in the poem demonstrates that indigenous identity is not just biological or racial, but historical, community, and narrative as well. The phrase "**we are Spokane**" is very prominent in Alexie's line and is indicative of a cultural identity and ancestral storytelling and collective memory.

3. Theoretical Framework

The central theoretical lens for this study is the work of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, entitled, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (2014). Her argument is that the United States is, simply put, a settler-colonial nation, and its national mythologies of democracy, progress and civilization often mask the violence and force of conquest, land theft, genocide and forced removal (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). The theory pages uploaded also focus on the ways in which U.S. colonialism operated: elimination, forced dependency, misrepresentation of history, and the denial of indigenous sovereignty. It is a nice way to look at it for the poem by Alexie because Sasquatch is a state of being outside the control of the settler culture. Sasquatch is still treated as if he is beyond official knowledge, weird, and possibly nonexistent, but he is still here, in this land, in our memory and in our oral tradition. Sasquatch is part of a place where outsiders attempt to research, hunt, photograph, and prove its existence, but do not grasp its cultural significance. Alexie's poem, then, breaks stereotypes of a system of colonization that transforms indigenous knowledge into entertainment or curiosity. In this way, Sasquatch can serve as an emblem of a culture's knowledge that persists even when it eludes the dominant.

The poem humanizes a figure that has long been portrayed as a joke and/or a myth for the purposes of discussing Native continuity instead. Native identity has also been a topic of discussion among scholars and a theme of concern for Alexie in the context of the present-day conditions of culture. The poem is particularly relevant to Dunbar-Ortiz's concept of historical denial. A settler colonial culture is one that can, and does, deny the nature of colonialism, suggesting that it is either a form of settlement or progress or a manifest destiny. The poem thus becomes a political commentary. In general, the literature available suggests that the Sasquatch poems are a cultural critique of the cultural erasure of settler-colonialism and the survival of Indigenous people. Prior and recent research have concurred that Alexie's works reconstruct the Native identity, which is achieved through a deconstruction of stereotypes and an uncovering of colonial power. Methodology the study is qualitative, given that it explores meanings, symbols, cultural identity, historical memory and indigenous representation in the poems of Sasquatch by Sherman Alexie. The research is not numerical-based, but it is based on interpretation and critical understanding. The primary aim is to examine the symbolic human form of Sasquatch as a representation of Native American Indigenous identity, cultural survival, invisibility and resistance in the context of settler colonial history. The method of research used in this research is the textual analysis research method. The chosen poem is analyzed using close reading, focusing on images, symbols, the language, tone and cultural connotations. Sasquatch is examined as a central symbol of Indigenous presence, mystery, misunderstanding and survival. In this approach, students will gain insight into how Alexie uses poetry as a means of objecting to any colonial stereotype and for a Native identity that is not easily wiped clean or managed by the dominant culture. The theory employed in this study is limited to the theory used by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz in *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. The theory she developed about the United States is a settler-colonial nation that was created by settler occupation, settler genocide, settler forced removal, settler cultural erasure, and settler denial of indigenous sovereignty. The theoretical work also comes with notes on colonial violence, indigenous resistance, dispossession of land and false national narratives that conceal Native presence, which were also uploaded. These ideas are then directly discussed in regards to Alexie's Sasquatch Poems, to explore how this poem is a reflection of colonial erasure and indigenous cultural identity. *To Find Sasquatch* is selected because it ties directly into Native American cultural identity, myths, memory, invisibility and storytelling of Indigenous peoples, and survival. Sasquatch is chosen as the focal point as it symbolizes a powerful indigenous presence that is hidden. The research is conducted utilizing a qualitative paradigm, textual analysis, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's cultural theory, which explores the ways in which Sasquatch Poems has engaged with Native American identity as silenced but still extant, mythologized but also real, and marginalized yet culturally powerful.

4. Textual Analysis

Sherman Alexie's *To Find Sasquatch* (1996) has been explored in light of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's theoretical perspectives on Native Americans' indigenous cultural identity and their critique to Euro-Americans' colonial agendas of manifest destiny and genocide. Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (2014) highlights historical issues faced by the Native Americans and their subsequent response to Euro-American epistemologies of Native erasure to defend their culture and land.

Alexie's *To Find Sasquatch* has been deeply rooted in Native American culture and ecology. Sasquatch, the mysterious titular figure, is a potent symbol of Native Americans' indigenous identity, particularly the identity that is challenged, misinterpreted, erased, or mythologized by colonial society. The Sasquatch Poems are highly marked by mystery, oral traditions, ancestral land, superstition, and indigenous survival. At the outset of the poem, Alexie shows his regard for Sasquatch as he says: **"I believe in Sasquatch/ Just as much as I believe in God"** (Alexie, 1996, p.103). The opening often immediately weaves the themes of belief, shamanism, religion, visibility, and cultural truth while dealing with Sasquatch. In the dominant Western ideology, God can be embraced as a sacred mystery, but Sasquatch is regarded as a superstition or folklore.

Dunbar-Ortiz's cultural theory is a critique of settler colonial epistemology. Colonial culture has a way of denigrating indigenous belief systems as primitive or irrational, and its own religious and national myths as true. So the poem is not just a question of whether Sasquatch exists, it's a question of why indigenous knowledge must prove itself in the face of the colonial system of oppression. In Sasquatch Poems, priests and politicians represent power dynamics but Alexie claims that the authorial power is misrepresented as indigenous experiences are full of enigmas that require more than religion, science, or politics. Alexie admits that: **"Mystery is a series of large footprints"** (Alexie, p.103). Dunbar-Ortiz's idea of settler colonialism operates through official narratives. These stories suggest that conquest is natural, legal and good. Similarly, priests and politicians mythologize history and whitewash the violence of colonization. Sasquatch is left as a symbol of that which is not explained. Sasquatch is connected to footprints, forest, and desert, objects connected with Native American ecology. "Large footprints" are not just physical prints; they are the signs of the Native presence. Indigenous peoples are frequently invisible, erased or past in many colonial histories. The footprints reveal movement, survival and direction. Alexie exemplifies the colonial discourse of erasure by mentioning an **"Anasazi pot"** which was an archaeological object and cultural emblem for indigenous people. The central pot in the desert becomes a cultural artifact which refutes the settler notion of "wilderness". It demonstrates the existence of indigenous history before the arrival of the colonial and how that history continues to inform the present. Alexie continues, "In Hopi, Anasazi means ancient, alien one" This is significant

as these lines concern The term “vanished” is used with reference to one of the main myths of settler colonial history, that of the “disappearing Indian.” Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) powerfully counters this colonial narrative by demonstrating that indigenous erasure is not inevitable but a result of genocide, removal, broken treaties, land theft, and history-washing. While the Anasazi are said to have “vanished” in Alexie's poem, the speaker immediately sets the record straight when he says **“Only the Hopi know where they went.”** Disappearance does not imply complete disappearance. The knowledge remains and should be retained by the indigenous people, rather than outsiders. The erasure of Native American identity has been exemplified by capital lettered “N” that has been mentioned four times in *To Find Sasquatch*. As Alexie says: “A Sasquatch chased N/ from Benjamin Lake to Turtle Lake” (p.104).

4.1. Storytelling: A Representation of Native American Culture

Storytelling is one of the survival strategies employed in Native American culture. The repetition of the term “grandparents” produces a chain of cultural transmission. Identity is not given as a personal decision but as a living legacy handed on from generation to generation. Native cultural continuity is maintained through story-telling. Sasquatch stories become a form of worship when they are a thread that brings the community together with their ancestors, with place, and with shared history: “Our grandparents told Sasquatch stories/ Our grandparents heard Sasquatch stories” (Alexie, 1996, p.105).

4.2. Indigenous Cultural Identity

The sentence **“we are Spokane Indian”** lies at the heart of the cultural critique. It challenges a universalistic or stereotypical Native identity and demands a sense of tribal identity. The poem isn't just about “Indian,” it's about “Spokane Indian.” This is important because settler colonial narratives tend to make “Indigenous” a vague category, collapsing several tribal nations into one. Indigenous communities have their own histories, territories, political identity, and system of knowledge. That specificity is restored by Spokane identity, which is what Alexie uses. Sasquatch story is not only a universal story of a monster; it is a story from a certain indigenous cultural world. The poem thus is an act of cultural recovery.

The speaker explains that they like to think **“science replaced religion”** (p.106). This sentence challenges the rational superiority of western claims. In many ways, science is believed to be in opposition to religion, but Alexie proposes that science can be another religion when it is without mystery. Science denies Sasquatch because he poses a threat to its God, and science is an entity that is like a religion defending its God. Science, anthropology, cartography, epistemology, and archaeology of settler colonialism were used to dominate indigenous peoples and lands. These systems were declared objective but actually worked for colonialism.

4.3. Euro-American Scientific Epistemology: An Indicative of Native Erasure

In the line, “The scientists don’t want Sasquatch to exist / because her existence would destroy their God” (p.107). Alexie’s criticism of scientific authority is evident. In this instance, the science is offered as a set of beliefs, which are defending themselves. The words “their God” imply that science is sacred when it serves the interests of the dominant power, just as religion is sacred when it serves the interests of the dominant power. The presence of Sasquatch in the poem would threaten science’s certainty, as the survival of indigenous peoples threatens the national myth of the disappearance of Native peoples.

The findings of this study reveal that Sherman Alexie’s Sasquatch Poems depict Sasquatch as a symbol of Native Americans’ indigenous and cultural identity. Through the image of Sasquatch, Alexie explores colonial history, cultural erasure, scientific objectivity, religious faith, and indigenous survival. The poem is a recurring image of Sasquatch being disbelieved by outsiders, but recalled and understood by insiders. It is a reflection of the place of Indigenous peoples within settler-colonial history. The continuation of the culture of Indigenous populations through the centuries, despite their displacement from the land and history, is what empowers them to continue to live and survive. The third discovery is that Alexie is a critic of colonial systems of proof. In general, the poem portrays indigenous identity in a minority but not erased state, in a secret but potent state, in a state of doubt, and with a historical presence, and in a state of cultural survival.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that Sherman Alexie’s To Find Sasquatch (1996) provide an important cultural interpretation of Sasquatch as a powerful cultural symbol that reflects Native Americans’ indigenous identity, colonial erasure, ancestral memory and cultural survival. Sasquatch Poems do not treat Sasquatch just as a mythical creature or a mysterious being. Sasquatch is a poetic figure of Native identity: it is not a thing, but it is a presence; not a voice, but it is a memory; not a question, but it is a question. Native identity is embedded in place and memory in the poem through references to footprints, forests, deserts, rivers, the Anasazi pot, the Spokane reservation, and grandparents. Alexie’s To Find Sasquatch, is a cultural critique of settler-colonial denial and a celebration of indigenous continuity overall. The poem demonstrates the continuity of Native identity in the poem, through land, oral tradition, memory, cultural practices, and spiritual belief.

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