

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Song of the Oktahutche: Collected Poems. By Alexander Posey.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hz044g3>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 34(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Foster, Tol

**Publication Date**

2010-09-01

**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/>

**Song of the Oktahutche: Collected Poems.** By Alexander Posey. Edited and with an introduction by Matthew Wynn Sivils. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 272 pages. \$40.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

Nearly all of the most well-known and celebrated Native American novelists and artists that have emerged since N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1969) have also been poets, even as their success and renown has largely sprung from other media. Sherman Alexie, for example, though best known as a writer of novels and film, is perhaps at his very best in his poetry and he continues a long-running allegiance to the medium. This can also be said of Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, the late James Welch, LeAnne Howe, and Momaday. Even the emergent artist Bunky Echo-Hawk (Pawnee/Yakama), whose vivid and gaudy paintings reference Star Wars and hip-hop influences, published poetry during his days at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

The production of new poetry has been central to what Kenneth Lincoln has termed the "Native American Renaissance" of writing and production since the 1970s, an artistic effluence that has its roots not only in the mentoring and guidance of great poets like Simon Ortiz, Joy Harjo, and Alison Hedge-Coke, but also—perhaps—an understanding that although the indigenization of the hanging canvas, contemporary novel, and projection screen are new things, no form is more central to indigenous artistic expression than sung and spoken chants and songs. Perhaps then, within the dynamics of Red Power and cultural decolonization, it should not be a surprise that the spoken-word poet John Trudell served as the American Indian Movement's chairman for seven years. Within that rhetoric, one might argue that though prose and film may have once been *theirs*, poetry has always been *ours*.

Intimations of cultural chauvinism and ownership aside, however, poetry in English is also ours and has been the primary vehicle of artistic expression by Native peoples since that language first interlaced our tongues, as demonstrated by the title of Robert Dale Parker's anthology *Changing Is Not Vanishing: A Collection of Early American Indian Poetry to 1930* (2010). A strain of Native poets wrote in English long before Momaday, of which Creek writer Alexander Posey (1873–1908) is perhaps one of the better known, having written more poetry than any other Native American up until that time (xxxiii). When my ninety-six-year-old grandmother Carolyn Camp Foster, a retired English teacher, referred me to Alexander Posey as an exemplar of Indian Territory writers, she did so not thinking of his political commentaries penned as owner and editor of the Eufaula *Indian Journal* newspaper, collected by Daniel Littlefield and Carol Hunter as the *The Fus Fixico Letters: A Creek Humorist in Early Oklahoma* (1993), or of his stories and journals, recently collected and edited by Sivils as *Chinnubbie and the Owl: Muscogee (Creek) Stories, Orations, and Oral Traditions* (2005) and *Lost Creeks: Collected Journals* (2009). Instead, like many readers throughout the United States, during Posey's time my grandmother read his work as reprinted in *The New York Times*, the *Kansas City Journal*, the *Criterion*, or a number of other publications noted by Sivils and Littlefield. My grandmother considered Posey foremost for his poetry

(xxi). Posey's wife Minnie—who endeavored to print his poems first, followed by his *Fus Fixico* columns, and, finally, a collection of his other writings, a project completed by Littlefield and Sivils—shared this sentiment.

Of the three projects, Minnie Posey managed only to get some of Posey's poems published with Topeka, Kansas-based publishers Crane & Company in 1910 as *The Poems of Alexander Lawrence Posey*, forsaking the title Minnie intended for the collection, now restored by Sivils. That earlier collection sold very poorly, and Sivils levels much of the blame for this on Minnie Posey, noting that she "selected only those poems she liked—works she found 'pretty'—and omitted scores of his other, often better, verse" (xxiv). To Sivils, this inferior heuristic, as well as her probable desire to expunge from his published work some of his more strident and potentially atheistic writings, as well as her own ghost editing of certain poems, damaged the earlier collection severely. When I first came upon a copy of that very rare volume in the Muskogee Public Library's general stacks, it was my impression that the poems were not of as much interest as his other work, precisely because of the seeming absence of political, philosophical, or Creek subject matter.

But Sivils has created something entirely different, which I hope will help us position Posey and Native American poetry in English in a much broader arc of scholarship and interest. This collection of 196 poems, nearly a fourth of which have never before been published, gives us a different poet, one more coherent across genres as a wit, political satirist, and broad intellectual. To the many poems about birds and nature that his wife collected, such as "Autumn" and "To a Hummingbird," Sivils restores poems such as "To allot, or not to allot," which in hearkening to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and to the Dawes Commission's proposal to divide the tribal land base in severalty and thus extinguish the Five Removed Tribes altogether, dramatizes forcefully the cultural and political intersections routinely crossed by Native American writers long before our own age.

Of these intersections, Sivils writes that Posey's poetic "amalgamation of classical western mythology and Muscogee (Creek) tradition stands as one of his most remarkable, and least recognized, literary accomplishments" (xxx). No doubt this is true, but Posey—like many other tribal people in Indian Territory—was the beneficiary of relative prosperity and educational attainment, and it is of little surprise that in a milieu in which these tribes had the resources to pursue their own goals, part of the marker for being members of the "civilized" tribes was access to, and knowledge of, the classics and tastes of Western literary style. One could argue that such tastes were considered a part of being an elite member of the Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and (to a different extent) Seminole tribes, indicating for that time the fallacy that wealth and education were wasted on savage Indians. Posey was exceptional for his time, but he was also emblematic in many ways of a larger intertribal milieu during a time in which Park Hill, home to the Cherokee Seminary and the *Cherokee Phoenix* newspaper, was referred to by its residents as the "Athens" of Indian Territory. In writing about contemporary colonialism and its resistance both near ("Ye Men of Dawes!") and far ("Cuba Libre"), Creek factionalism ("The Creek Fullblood" and "Alex Posey Is Responsible"), and

racism (“A Freedmen Rhyme”), these poems fulfilled the expectations of that highbrow elite.

For contemporary readers, for whom aesthetic concerns are secondary to political ones, perhaps the other volumes created by Sivils take priority, but within the neglected yet central field of Native American poetry, nothing is lacking from this volume. Complete with an excellent introductory essay, annotations, and source notes, as well as the inclusion of multiple versions of some poems and a chronological presentation, this collection will be invaluable to scholars and students alike and would serve as an excellent example of a Native American artistic voice during the Allotment Era, with sufficient scholarly support provided by the editor in order to lead scholars and students toward further study. Finally, a collection of poems that Creeks, Native American literature readers, and even Posey would be proud of!

*Tol Foster*

University of North Carolina

**Spring Salmon, Hurry to Me! The Seasons of Native California.** Edited by Margaret Dubin and Kim Hogeland. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2008. 118 pages. \$16.95 paper.

*Spring Salmon, Hurry to Me!* is a culturally significant collection that weaves together the stories and poems of contemporary California Indian writers with legends from the past. The collection opens with a foreword by Darryl Wilson, or Sul'ma'ejote (Pit River Nation), in which he suggests that the stories and poems are offered to sustain knowledge about the land for future generations. Editors Margaret Dubin and Kim Hogeland have honored the knowledge Sul'ma'ejote refers to by carefully organizing the legends, stories, and poems to reflect the importance of living in relation to the land and its seasonal rhythm. The collection is divided into four sections and emphasizes the need for a seasonal relationship between individuals and the lands they inhabit.

The first section, “Winter,” opens with a woodcut by Frank LaPena (Nomtipom Wintu). LaPena’s woodcuts provide the reader with a powerful image to frame their readings of the various seasonal sections. The opening woodcut features a hibernating bear in a forested landscape with a snow-capped mountain in the background. This image compliments the Shasta, Maidu, and Yana legends that begin the section and feature the winter adventures of Coyote and Wolf. The section gracefully moves into stories and poems by Stephen Meadows (Ohlone), Janice Gould (Konkow), Sylvia Ross (Chukchansi), Deborah Miranda (Esselen), Georgiana Valoyce-Sanchez (Chumash/Tohono O’odham), Darryl Wilson, and Greg Sarris (Coast Miwok). Miranda’s “Petroglyph” emanates an awareness of how to interpret the tracks made in fresh snow. Signs of human activity are blanketed in white, and a young girl “follows a string / of cloven hearts wandering from woods” (19). The poem redefines the word *petroglyph* by suggesting that the land can also be read in an ancient fashion, but it also connects with the present