We seldom think of American Indians, like my Cherokee people for instance, as world explorers, knowing how settled we were by the 1600s, but in fact some among us knew well that we were possessed of the capacity for widespread investigation, knew that mobility ranked among our liberties, knew that if the urge struck us we could pack up and go exploring, both individually and collectively. Traveling Indians knew they could do this not least because they told themselves they could. Some of the Cherokees’ earliest orature tells of our migration to the Southeast from great distances, offering precedents for the diplomatic trips to England made in the 1700s, for instance. History would soon tell us other things, though, like “this world is not yours; you are not ready for it; you can’t compete in it”—and most perniciously, it would teach us to tell ourselves these things. Before long, negative associations with mobility in terms like removal would come to cloud all potential movements. Considering how many of these issued from colonialist campaigns, it’s small wonder that there would be a reactionary circling of the wagons and in many cases an acceptance of a bounded life, which some might now call an embracing of community.

In the reservation era, the United States created rural ghettos where Indians could be contained, surveilled by the state—kept in reserve with all due legality and beneficence. This is the historical legacy confronted at the end of Sherman Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, when Arnold Spirit’s best friend, Rocky, muses approvingly about “old-time Indians, about how we used to be nomadic . . . people who move around, who keep moving.” Here and throughout his poetry and prose, Alexie’s metaphorical invocation of travel through time, space, and all sorts of in-between, ephemeral moments like flight and dancing reclaim the idea of exploration as resistance against boundaries physical and imaginative. Embedded in exploration, too, is a sense of return. Like exploration, return in and of Alexie’s work offers less a homecoming than a report back, an example of the potential of a challenging curiosity. Critics, too, might profit by considering the benefits, problems, and necessity of forcing interpretation to confront historical and cultural circumstances as we expand, to adapt Edward Said’s phrase, a traveling theory of travel.

American Indians have a long history of coerced control over their movement. Columbus’s earliest journal entries record his optimism that the indigenous people he encountered “ought to be good servants and of good skill, for I see that they repeat very quickly whatever was said to them.” From the first imperial meeting, the linguistic assertion of power over the Native body—its labor, sovereignty, and mobility—has prescribed our imaginations. We might scoff at Columbus’s belief that if he takes pains to make us speak we’ll chirp back like well-trained parrots, but to what extent might he be right? How quickly like Caliban did we learn to curse the world we didn’t understand or have cultural control over, to mimic the fear of the unknown wilds, substituting for the dark forests of the new world the cavernous avenues of the city, making of the bloodthirsty savage the money-hungry capitalist,
the brutalizing teacher, or the faceless institution? These are the new monsters of the next island and the modern cannibals of the other tribe. Too often American Indian communities have taken over the policing of our restrictive borders and have narrated our own imagined reservations. The most frightening part of these ghost stories, of course, is that they’re sometimes true. Folks have vanished, people have failed, and sons and daughters have left their parents.

It’s also true that against such threats, community offers unparalleled support and, because of this, has come to occupy a conceptual place of privilege in Indian critical theory rivaled only by the oral tradition, which is itself after all about community. In American Indian literary criticism, shifting focus from the oral tradition to community corrected tendencies to anchor all readings in ethnology detached from context and to overextend the definition of oral tradition to encompass all the referents, background, and culture involved in the telling. For all its strength, the idea of community runs a similar risk of becoming a catch-all, magic word that when muttered at a text will supposedly unlock all its meanings, without due attention to the specifics of history and context that lend works their richness.
Joshua B. Nelson, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and a native Oklahoman, is Assistant Professor of English and an affiliated faculty member with Native American Studies and Film & Video Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He earned his PhD and MA in English from Cornell and his BA in psychology from Yale. His current project, Progressive Traditions: Cherokee Cultural Studies, looks to dismantle the pervasive assimilated/traditional dichotomy plaguing American Indian literary criticism to explore the adaptive potential of traditional practices. He and his wife divide their time between Norman and Park Hill.

Failure to consider such matters closely is to allow others to do our thinking for us. Said puts it succinctly: “A breakthrough can become a trap, if it is used uncritically, repetitively, limitlessly. . . . Once an idea gains currency because it is clearly effective and powerful, there is every likelihood that during its peregrinations it will be reduced, codified, and institutionalized” (“Traveling Theory”). In American Indian literary theory, we have seen this happen with the major myopias on the oral tradition, mixed-blood anxiety, community, and, I hazard, we can see it now with nationalism couched as a natural political extension of community.

As Alexie’s poetry and prose uncompromisingly demonstrate, communities are far from uncomplicated and are frequently themselves destructive, as with communities of substance abusers. Against such coteries and their cyclic dysfunction, we find a rarely contained desire to go in Alexie’s work. He introduces it in “Traveling,” the first poem of “Distances,” the first section of his first collection, The Business of Fancydancing, which encapsulates several persistent themes. There a vanload of mostly sleeping Spokane is returning from a basketball tournament. The speaker, listening to the joking of the two up front, remarks, “It was hunger made me move then, not a dream, and I reached down and rummaged through the cooler for something to eat, drink.” Hunger of one form or another prompts all sorts of movement. They are pulled over for a DWI—driving while Indian—and a state trooper assesses their sobriety and general acquiescence to American norms. Successfully convincing him of their internal colonization, they’re turned loose, only to run out of gas a short ways on. They wind up pushing the van home, slowed by and struggling against the very thing supposed to get them going. The Indian car, inevitably breaking down because no one can afford anything but emergency maintenance and sometimes not even gas money, stands in for much in the Indian world here. This is the van model in the great rez rider line, from the one-eyed Ford of the 49 song to Philbert Bono’s fine war pony, “Protector,” in Powwow Highway. This new—or more rightly, used—icon of cultural history, even as it signifies shared experience, also crucially proclaims that the preconditions of the Indian car, the setup for the punchline, are Indian poverty and the structures that perpetuate it, and that those are preconditions neither chosen nor acceptable. Even as we laugh at cars that only go in reverse, we should detect something very unfunny behind the lack of movement on this economic front. The speaker of “Traveling” closes the poem, “I turned back to the van, put my shoulder to the cold metal and waited for something to change.”

Time and again Alexie offers metaphorical escapes, as from patterns of substance abuse, cycles of violence, and other received and unexamined ways of understanding the world. In this regard, perhaps the most important departure of all taken in Alexie’s work is that of the writing itself. Departure appears in the stylistic innovations that he brings to form, which he has carried on incessantly from Fancydancing through the recent War Dances and Face, with his mergers of poetry and prose, realism and fantasy, his echoes of quixotic genres like mixtapes and readers’ guides, his criticism of critics, and his stark refusal to write again what Momaday, Silko, or anyone else has already written. We also find it in memorable characters like Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who as the storyteller no one listens to haunts the collection The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven and its film adaptation, Smoke Signals. We might forget, though, why he was ignored and his challenge in getting heard, narrated in his early appearance in Fancydancing’s story “Special Delivery.” We learn there how ingrained in him is the idea that his story must never change, that it must be told the same way time and again, whatever the loss of audience or relevance. This despite the fatalism of his ending: “A long time ago, my vision could come true”; only when he connects with someone to tell me different.” Thomas finally rejects this foregone conclusion, and only when he imagines for himself a new story does he encounter the possibility of having “a dream that could come true”; only when he connects with people, as when he offers up his vulnerability and his resources to Victor, does he earn his listeners’ attention. Even the sanctified storyteller figure has to offer something in return. When he goes off the reservation, he—like other storytellers he stands in for—sees the potential return grow in proportion to the conceptual distance traveled.

Alexie frequently plays with gravity as a limit on movement, as in the closing poem of the same name in Fancydancing, where he intimates that what goes up must come down, and what goes out must come back. If departure takes on meta-
phorical possibilities, so too does return. We see proliferate and clear comings-back in “Gravity,” played out by Seymour Polatkin in the film The Business of Fancydancing, but like the departures in stylistic innovation, the principal return we find in Alexie’s work is of the work itself, the many volumes of poetry and prose becoming epistolary in their public scope. We reencounter leaving and return up through Alexie’s latest poetry collection, Face, in which the speaker of the poem “Wheat” recalls his neighbor’s fields where, “Isolated, / I often felt small and rhymeless, / But I was free to roam, / With all of my neighbors’ blessing, / In any of their fields. / In this way, step by step, row by row, / I learned how to escape.” The rows of grain like the lines of the poem map the terrain, chronicling the means and cause of escape, but also recording the beauty and poignancy of that which is left behind. If the speaker never sees those fields again, there is nevertheless a return, for the poem will away again to readers all around, powerfully modeling the possibility of leaving with attendant benefits and sacrifices, yes, but giving back the very idea of potential, with farther reach and longer endurance than could be accomplished working strictly at home.

To be sure, the more manifest connection between words and movement again figures as escape. “Literacy saved my ass,” Alexie writes in “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers,” pointing to reading and writing as his ticket out of his reservation’s stifling poverty and intellectual entropy, but intentionally or not, it’s a round-trip package. As with gravity and leaving, there are often ambivalences in escape with its implicit parallel gesture at origin, the point of departure that is not so vicious a place that it can simply be dismissed. Rather, it exerts a pull coming from the claim it establishes on the writer’s and readers’ sympathies, a claim repaid not by gratuitously pillorying its failings but by conscientiously identifying its deficiencies toward improving the lives of the people who stay there, or at other places of home.

Having moved through these works, I’ll propose one last departure before we get too settled. Much as Alexie has changed the discourse in American Indian literature and offered innovations in style and structure to literature in general since he took up the possibility of Indians writing, and just as he refashioned it to accord with his own experience and ideas, so must we as readers, teachers, and critics meeting his work in different times and places. Around Oklahoma, several students and others with whom I’ve discussed Alexie’s work have shied from pointed criticism of it. They note that the world of a northwestern reservation differs dramatically from their own and suggest that the lack of resemblance to their own lives poorly positions them to evaluate Alexie’s representations. Others argue that while tribal lands might not exactly be reservations, places like Kenwood, Anadarko, and even Norman can be just as limiting. Whatever the restraints on its universality, Alexie’s work continues to find broad audiences as readers everywhere test what is seen against both what is familiar and unfamiliar. In recognizing anomalies—places where standing interpretations do not account for experiences and ideas (theories of reification and power in Said’s article; in Alexie, ideas about identity, community, and mobility)—we find unique opportunities to move conversations forward with the challenges posed by what is particular and special about our subjective positions. Said urges, “I would go as far as saying that it is the critic’s job to provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests.”

Several hundred area high school students attended the talk Alexie traveled considerable distance to deliver at March’s Puterbaugh Festival; many of them came quite a ways themselves. As fine as Alexie’s writing is and as far as it has come, it hasn’t said all there is to say about the diversity of their human needs and interests. As a teacher, just as I encourage students both to study what has been written before and to push their own thinking to write the best of what’s next, surely they could expect the same of their instructors. That for me means carefully considering anomalies and testing well the theories traveling around trying to make sense of them. Leaving room for innovative ideas in our teaching and research, too, can shape another kind of return, that of intellectual respect, and even if we never depart from Tahlequah, Anadarko, or Norman, this new language of exploration just might write someone else’s ticket.