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"Anarchy on the Rez": The Blues, Popular Culture, and Survival in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

Martin Moling

Scholarship preoccupied with the blues in Sherman Alexie's work has been predominantly focused on how the music functions as a sign of the historical alliances between African American and Native American peoples,[1] as a site for the confluence of nationalist and multiculturalist politics,[2] and as a symbol of hybridization.[3] In contrast, this article concerns the ingenious way in which Alexie appropriates the blues both as a vessel for Native Americans to creatively express their predicament and as a subversive instrument in their struggle to resist colonial cooption. In investigating *Reservation Blues*, his debut novel, I demonstrate how Alexie creates a Native American version of the blues in his writing that appropriates musical staples of the genre such as the AAB stanza form, improvisation, and syncopation. While the author's more encompassing endeavor infuses his narrative with a plethora of pop-cultural references, the blues arguably serves as the music of choice for his principal project: the survival of Native America in the face of colonial othering, oppression, and extinction.

Reservation Blues—a novel about a Native American rock band that attempts to hit the big time in New York City and, after a failed attempt at an audition with Cavalry Records, returns to the Spokane Indian Reservation—is not Sherman Alexie's first work of fiction to feature the blues as a musical form with which Native Americans can identify.[4] In his 1993 short story "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock," Victor Joseph, the narrator, explains: "The first time I heard Robert Johnson sing

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I knew he understood what it means to be Indian on the edge of the twenty-first century, even if he was black at the beginning of the twentieth."[5] What resonates with Victor, presumably, is the sheer anguish and existential tremor that radiates from Johnson's blues. The musician's unrivaled mastery resides in his ability to artistically express the adversity and abuse both Native Americans and African Americans have suffered under white domination and speak to the ensuing insecurities and feelings of alienation with his soaring tenor and choppy acoustic guitar style. While blues lyrics often give voice to a feeling of dejection, the music has been perceived to inspire hope through a sense of rhythmical forward movement. In his seminal work *Stomping the Blues*, African American blues scholar and jazz critic Albert Murray asserts that "blues music regardless of its lyrics almost always induces dance movement that is the direct opposite of resignation, retreat or defeat."[6] For Ralph Ellison, the blues' optimistic rhythms enable oppressed peoples to surpass their condition of injustice: "[The blues] are an art form and thus a transcendence of those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social justice."[7] As such, Ellison continues, they comprise "one of the techniques through which Negroes have survived and kept their courage during that long period when many whites assumed, as some still assume, they were afraid."[8] By extension, the appeal of the blues to Native Americans likely resides in its capacity to induce a sense of hope on Native American reservations in response to the pervasive oppression of settler-colonialism—a paralyzing nostalgia, or the debilitating, stereotypical representation of Indian culture, for instance.

The Blues as a Form of Storytelling

In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie envisions the blues as a powerful form of storytelling. Readers are introduced to the novel's protagonist, Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, as the "misfit storyteller of the Spokane tribe," who "caught some disease in the womb that forced him to tell stories. The weight of those stories bowed his legs and bent his spine a bit." Burdened with this predicament, Thomas wants his stories "to heal the wounds" of his tribe, which is why he constantly repeats them, even though he grudgingly has to acknowledge that "his stories never healed anything" (5-6). Nevertheless, his stories not only creep into his people's dreams, but furthermore

> climbed into your clothes like sand, gave you itches that could not be scratched. If you repeated even a sentence from one of those stories, your throat was never the same again. Those stories hung in your clothes and hair like smoke, and no amount of laundry soap or shampoo washed them out. Victor and Junior often tried to beat those stories out of Thomas, tied him down and taped his mouth shut. They pretended to be friendly and tried to sweet-talk Thomas into temporary silences, made promises about beautiful Indian women and cases of Diet Pepsi. But none of that stopped Thomas, who talked and talked. (15)

Even though Thomas's stories apparently fail as a source of healing, they are still extremely relentless, resilient, and resistant. In exuding the power to invoke permanent changes in listeners' throats, they influence the way people speak, and thus penetrate

their thoughts, which are the preamble to action. Moreover, Thomas's stories cannot be escaped: both tangible and ethereal, they force their way into people's consciousness and, by invading their dreams, into their subconscious. His stories are on a par with the ubiquitous stereotypical representations of Native Americans, which equally function on a subconscious level. In contrast to the settler-colonial simulations of Indianness, however, Thomas's stories represent something genuine, which cannot be corrupted: neither Victor and Junior's effusive promises nor their violence succeed in bribing Thomas to keep silent.

Thomas's stories thus appear as a potentially viable cure for the destructive proliferation of a biased Indian identity. The problem, however, is that the Spokanes refuse to lend him their ears: Thomas has "always shared his stories with a passive audience and complained that nobody actively listened" (212). As a consequence, he needs to find a different medium to reach his tribe and build his eponymous *feu sacré*. Accordingly, when Robert Johnson, who is a character in the novel, leaves his guitar in Thomas's van, Thomas decides to put it to good use: "This isn't my guitar," he explains to Junior and Victor, "but I'm going to change the world with it" (13). Equipped with the instrument of the man who posthumously rose to global fame when, in the course of the British Invasion of the 1960s, guitar heroes such as Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page rediscovered the blues, Thomas hopes to amplify his stories in a way that will make them more accessible to his fellow tribespeople.

Alexie's interpretation of the blues as a form of storytelling is in accordance with the music's pre-slavery, West African roots. African American bluesmen, according to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, share a historical link with an African group of storytellers called *jelli* or griots, who "acted as their tribe's historians and social commentators" and "performed roles not unlike those of the later blues singers."[9] *Reservation Blues*' implication, therefore, is that Thomas-Builds-the-Fire not only continues the rich tradition of Native American storytellers, but also carries on the genealogy of blues storytellers, from the ancient West African coasts to the present-day North American reservations.

The blues' capacity to transcend time and space is more explicitly elucidated in James Baldwin's 1957 short story "Sonny's Blues." In one of its most memorable passages, Baldwin's narrator attends a concert by his brother Sonny and his band in a blues club. Listening to the band's bassist, Creole, the narrator begins to understand that the musicians struggle to "find new ways to make us listen."[10] Baldwin emphasizes the kind of historical arc the blues draws from the past to the present, even though its "tale" is ancient and universal—a musical statement of the human condition, so to speak. The players must work hard to recreate and retell it anew, to find "new aspects" and a "new depth" for the music to retain its relevance for the present moment. If they can reach their audience and successfully make them listen, the experience will be cathartic and wholesome for both performers and spectators, and reward even the "risk of ruin, destruction, madness and death." [11] Many blues and jazz musicians, such as Robert Johnson, Kenny Kirkland, Billie Holiday, and Janis Joplin, lived in constant struggle with these demons and risked their health and sanity in the nightly battle to break through to the people in the audience. In his contempt for such a steep price,

Thomas yearns for the ability to tell a story that will be truly *heard* and thus to begin a healing process for his Native American community. That the blues as an art form is flexible enough to take on new meaning "in every country" and speak to "every generation"[12] means that this music may benefit the Spokane Indians at the beginning of the twenty-first century just as it provided relief for African Americans throughout the history of slavery and beyond. Accordingly, Robert Johnson's guitar, which is endowed with the gift of speech in Alexie's novel, is unequivocal in its opinion about what needs to be done in order to help Native America: "Y'all need to play songs for your people. . . . The music. Y'all need the music" (23).

The Blues as a Form of "Rememory"

The notion that the blues is a music that nourishes, heals, and sustains echoes throughout Lewis A. Nordan's "A Hank of Hair, a Piece of Bone." According to the story's blues pianist Al, one can hear the blues "behind every song ever written, every song that for a lifetime would ever make [one's] toes feel like tap-tap-tapping." It is an "under-music" or a "heartbeat" which can be heard in the "irrigation pumps and rice paddies, . . . in the voice of the preacher in the Baptist church, . . . in the tractors in the fields, . . . in the bray of the mules" and in the "silence of the earthworms."[13] The blues not only emerges as the origin of all dance music—of all music that induces movement and bodily action—but also pervades the landscape of the Mississippi Delta and manifests itself in the sounds and silences of everyday life.

In Alexie's novel, the music Robert Johnson's guitar plays similarly rises "above the reservation, made its way into the clouds, and rained down. The reservation arched its back, opened its mouth, and drank deep because the music tasted so familiar" (26). On the Spokane Indian Reservation, the blues likewise permeates the landscape and soaks the soil. Native Americans, Alexie explains, are all too familiar with the misery and hardship that make up the essence of the blues. The music's powerful impact upon Thomas, consequently, manifests itself in "the movement, the shudder that passed through tree and stone, asphalt and aluminum" as the music "kept falling down" (26). Blues music, therefore, shares an intimate, fruitful, and refreshing connection with the very ground upon which people's lives—and thus, history—unfold, and serves as a constant reminder of the past. As a result, it represents a compelling force to confront memories, no matter how unpleasant they may be.

When Johnson's guitar announces that "the blues always make us remember," it refers to the music's ability to arouse repressed memories as a means to instigate a process of healing (22). Ralph Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man* upholds a similar notion of the blues as a pathway to one's past experiences. Upon hearing Pete Wheatstraw's blues, his memories meander "back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind. There was no escaping such reminders."[14] Analogous to how Thomas's stories crawl into people's clothes and dreams, the blues in both *Reservation Blues* and *Invisible Man* also seems equally relentless in inviting its audience to remember.

In her novel *Beloved,* Toni Morrison expounds upon the ways in which a process of healing can be kindled by revisiting memories, a process she calls "rememory."[15]

Similar to the self-alienation of Alexie's Native American characters, who "run around acting like the Indians in the movies," in Morrison's novel the characters Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and Denver suffer from severe self-fragmentation as a result of the traumatic experience of slavery.[16] Having escaped in the post-Civil War years to Cincinnati from the "Sweet Home" plantation in Kentucky, they come to realize that "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another."[17] The continuous struggle to integrate the freed self, to reclaim one's identity and attain psychic wholeness, according to Lynda Koolish, "requires access to painful memories."[18] For a successful reintegration of the self, these memories must be actively revisited and constituted in language: the process Morrison calls rememory.

The past in *Beloved* appears as indestructible: independent from the person who remembers, what happened remains "out there, in the world."[19] Therefore, the past cannot be escaped and the atrocities of slavery will haunt the present, even if we expend all our psychic energies to repress these memories. Accordingly, "rememory" is a noun, even though Sethe occasionally employs it as a verb: it is a thing, an object, something corporeal which cannot simply be ignored or suppressed. The title character of Beloved herself, who is an allegorical figure representing the African American communities' past—not unlike the recurring motif of the screaming Indian horses in *Reservation Blues* and other works by Alexie—thus emerges as a symbol of the corporeality of history. In order to overcome their psychic fragmentation, therefore, *Beloved*'s African American characters must "rememory" these unspeakable past events rather than "keeping the past at bay."[20]

Alexie's Spokane tribe, however, reacts no differently than Morrison's African American community to this imperative:

> The reservation exhaled. Those blues created memories for the Spokanes, but they refused to claim them. Those blues lit up a new road, but the Spokanes pulled out their old maps. Those blues churned up generations of anger and pain: car wrecks, suicides, murders. Those blues were ancient, aboriginal, indigenous. (174)

In keeping with Baldwin's and Nordan's assessment, Alexie's blues is indigenous to the land and extends into the distant past. The memories it lays bare, however, are so painful and destructive that the novel's Spokane Indians try to ignore them. They seek to dismiss them and continue on their fruitless journey into the future following "old maps." Moreover, rather than confronting the harsh reality of "car wrecks, suicides, murders" inherent in the blues, Alexie's Indian characters prefer to buy into a Hollywood version of their past as "noble savages." Junior Polatkin, the drummer with Coyote Springs, is thus described as "[a] tall, good-looking buck with hair like Indians in the movies, long, purple-black, and straight" (13), Thomas remarks about his band mates that "'All they know about religion they saw in *Dances with Wolves*'" (145) and Victor, the band's belligerent guitarist, lashes out at Thomas exclaiming "'You sound like we're in some goddamn reservation coming-of-age movie. Who the fuck you think you are? Billy Jack? Who's writing your dialogue?'" (211). "Indian men," therefore, "have started to believe their own publicity and run around acting like the Indians in the movies" (208). The destructiveness contained within the metaphor

of "churning up generations of anger and pain" thus resonates with popular culture productions such as Western movies as one of "the many forms of violence perpetrated against contemporary Native people."[21] The Spokanes' refusal to engage in Morrison's rememory notwithstanding, Alexie remains undeterred: If Indians do not consider Robert Johnson's blues "a story to pass on," then perhaps the novel's Indian rock band, Coyote Springs, has to take over as storyteller.[22]

Alexie's Appropriation of the Blues

Simply adopting or borrowing the blues in its original form may not suffice to aid Native America in revisiting its past and embarking on a journey toward psychological healing, so Alexie appropriates the music for his purpose and creates a uniquely Native American version of the blues. Reminiscent of Mvskoke poet and singer Joy Harjo's work asserting that Indians invented jazz music, such as her musical play *We Were There When Jazz Was Invented*, Alexie's storyteller Thomas claims that the blues is a Native American invention: "An Indian woman invented the blues a day before Columbus landed, and rock 'n' roll the next day," explaining in an interview that "we're not . . . stealing the music" (157–158). In an extension of Baldwin's remark about the blues' temporal and spatial malleability, Alexie boldly integrates the music into the history of Native America. Moreover, in claiming female authorship for the blues prior to the Europeans' arrival, he not only slyly mocks the notion of history as the aegis of dead white men, but simultaneously sheds a light on the fact that there exists a history of America before Columbus's "discovery" in 1492. The narrator improvises on this theme during Coyote Springs's sojourn in New York:

> Just before sunrise, Thomas and Chess walked into the lobby of their hotel and discovered America. No. They actually discovered Victor and Junior sleeping on couches in the lobby. No. They actually discovered Victor passed out on the couch while Junior read *USA Today*. (242)

The repeated "No" reads as an ironic reminder of the subjectivity of history and the fact that simply because it has been repeated countless times, the dominant culture's version of the historical encounter between Native peoples and Europeans does not necessarily acquire a higher degree of truthfulness. In terms of Morrison's theory of rememory, Alexie's repetition challenges the reader to critically revisit the history of the discovery of the United States and to question the veracity of the colonizer's version of these past events. The self-conscious verve of the passage likewise points to Alexie's postmodern proclivities: In contemporary America—signified by *USA Today*—the colonizer's claim to a universal historical metanarrative can no longer be sustained. Instead, Alexie rewrites the history of both the United States and American popular music in a way that grants Native Americans creative agency.

We encounter a further example of such reimagining of history at the very beginning of the novel in the scene depicting Robert Johnson's arrival at the Spokane Indian Reservation:

> The black man walked past the Assembly of God Church, the Catholic Church and Cemetery, the Presbyterian Church and Cemetery. He strolled to the crossroads near the softball diamond, with its solitary grave hidden deep in center field. The black man leaned his guitar against a stop sign but stood himself straight and waited. (3)

The listing of all the churches and cemeteries on the reservation ironically signals the missionary zeal with which white Christian denominations have traditionally sought to save the souls of Native America. As Johnson walks on to the "crossroads," Alexie cunningly suggests that the mythical site of the bluesman's infamous encounter with the devil was the Spokane Indian Reservation. In so doing, he not only juxtaposes the various white churches with the prospective arrival of the devil, which de facto renders these sanctuaries useless, but likewise places the mythological birth of the blues inside Native American territory. In concert with the "solitary grave" as a "hidden," blues-inflected reminder of all the violent deaths Native Americans have sustained due to white settler-colonialism, Alexie implicitly conflates Johnson's arrival on the reservation in 1992 ("one hundred and eleven years since the creation of the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1881") with Columbus's landing on the coast of San Salvador five hundred years earlier (3). What Alexie thus achieves is the effective positioning of the Spokane Indian Reservation at the center of the modern era. By reinscribing American Indians both into Western history and the history of popular music, Alexie demands a space for his people in a historical narrative from which they have been absent, making them visible where they have been invisible.

Alexie's Blues Stanza

In conjunction with this historical appropriation of the blues, Alexie adjusts one of the genre's most distinct structural features to his own ends, that of the blues' AAB stanza. That the blues, in essence, is a highly structured and formulaic art form, has been widely acknowledged.[23] This is not to say that since the birth of the genre blues artists have strictly adhered to these patterns; exceptions, idiosyncratic extensions, and changes to these rules abound. In spite of these variations, however, it seems that musicians have found the basic musical and lyrical framework of the blues to provide them with enough freedom, according to Steven C. Tracy, "to accommodate [their] individual temperament, abilities, and creativity."[24] Apart from the classic twelve-bar blues form, the typical chord changes (involving the chords I7, IV7, and V7), and the pentatonic blues scale, the AAB lyrical pattern has emerged as the quintessential stanzaic formula of the blues. In this pattern, the first line is repeated, sometimes with a slight variation, followed by a third line which comments on and thus concludes the stanza in the final four bars of the blues form.

In terms of the semantic content of the lines, blues lyrics deal with a great variety of topics. Most common, however, are lyrics concerned with the hardships of the African American community, movement and travel, the music itself, and the predicament and lifestyle of the bluesman, as well as matters of the heart:

A: I got a kind-hearted woman, do anything in this world for me.

A: I got a kind-hearted woman, do anything in this world for me.

B: But these evil-hearted women, man, they will not let me be.

In repeating the first line, Robert Johnson reinforces and solidifies the main statement of his 1936 composition "Kind-hearted Woman Blues."[25] This seemingly stable and unyielding declaration naturally opens up a space for ironic commentary, bathos, or anticlimax. In this example, Johnson surprises the listener by admitting that despite the obvious qualities of his "kind-hearted woman," it is her sinful competitor to whom he is drawn. In this final comment, Johnson concludes the stanza by exposing his doomed condition: not only does he hint at his infidelity, but by being unable to resist the temptation of the "evil-hearted woman," he establishes himself as a quintessential bluesman whose wandering ways inevitably render him incapable of upholding a lasting relationship with a woman who cares about him.

In Alexie's novel, the lyrics of Johnson's "Crossroad Blues" serve as an epigraph to the narrative. Rather peculiarly, however, Alexie merely cites the first two lines (AA) of the lyric:

A: I went down to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.

A: I went down to the crossroad, fell down on my knees. (iii)

What Alexie deliberately chooses to suppress is the stanza's final line: "Asked the Lord above, 'Have mercy, now save poor Bob, if you please.'"[26] In *Reservation Blues*, therefore, the redemption of the final line, the compensatory closure or absolution, is conspicuously absent. Alexie seems doubtful about the existence of a benevolent God inclined to grant salvation to Native Americans. Instead, the image of a man collapsing at the crossroads without the hope of the Lord's mercy emerges as a fitting metaphor for the Native American condition. The contemporary Indian, according to this interpretation, is stranded at the crossroads between the past and the future, neither able to return to the past (the memories are either too painful to remember or rendered useless by nostalgia) nor capable of facing the future, because there is no future as long as the refusal to rememory thwarts a conciliation with one's history. If no deity can offer deliverance from this dilemma, the only kind of relief available is the "satisfaction" of telling stories and the solace of singing the blues. Fittingly, there are "redemptive" moments, both in *Reservation Blues* and other texts by Alexie, such as "What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" and "The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire," when Thomas finally gets someone to listen to one of his stories.[27] At the same time, in telling the blues-inflected story of his contemporary Native American tribe, Alexie's characters, too, seek to imagine a way of transcending the crossroads in order to begin a process of healing.

The scene in which the drummer and lead guitarist with Coyote Springs, Junior and Victor, speak with an elder Spokane Indian called Simon, reads as a similar reduction of the classic blues stanza. Junior works as the driver of the reservation's water truck, and he and Victor deliver some water to Simon. After pumping water for a few minutes, Victor asks Simon for a beer.

"He don't drink like that," Junior said.
"I don't drink like that," Simon said.
"All he has is Pepsi and coffee," Junior said.
"All I have is Pepsi and coffee," Simon said.
"Enit?" Victor said.
"Enit." (19–20)

Like the blues, which is preoccupied with the travails of the early African American community, the conversation's content deals, in a less-than-obvious way, with alcoholism, one of the primary problems of reservation Indians today, according to Alexie.[28] By not drinking "like that," Simon sets himself apart from Spokanes who do suffer from a problem with alcohol. His status as an outsider is further reinforced by his exact repetition of Junior's lines, which, in tandem with the fact that he only drives his pickup in reverse—a common trope in Alexie's work[29]—renders Simon as a peculiar, clownish character, but nevertheless one who may be able to "reverse" racial stereotypes. Simon's outside status mirrors Alexie's own position as a Native American within the United States intent on challenging the stereotypical representation of American Indians. Due to the monocultural structure of his reservation—about 97 percent of the people living on the Spokane Indian Reservation are Indian, and about 70 percent of those Indians are Spokane—he himself "was always looking at the outside world, not [being] a part of it."[30] In varying the classic AAB stanzaic pattern by providing a triple repetition without closure, Alexie intensifies, even explodes, the form, while simultaneously keeping the content rooted within the blues vein. In thus appropriating the blues to express his Native American agenda, Alexie challenges us to reinterrogate our stereotypical, formulaic conceptions of Native America and simultaneously sheds a light on American Indians' alienation from the larger United States.

Such outsider status notwithstanding, there lies a certain power in consciously asserting one's role as the other. In a scene at the end of a Coyote Springs rehearsal, David WalksAlong, the Spokane Tribal Council chairman and a corrupt member of the reservation's power structure, holds a telling conversation with Thomas:

"Kind of loud, enit?" WalksAlong asked Thomas after a particularly intense set.
"What'd you say?" asked Thomas. His ears were ringing.
"I said you're disturbing the peace!"
"Yeah," Thomas shouted. "We're a three-piece band!"
"No, I said you're too loud!"
"Yeah," Thomas agreed. "It is a pretty good crowd!"
WalksAlong was visibly angry.
"Listen," the Chairman said, "you better quit fucking with me! You're just like your asshole father!"
"Really?" Thomas asked. "You really think we're rocking? You think my father will like us, too?" (37)

Thomas's ironic, altered repetitions of David WalksAlong's accusations poignantly underwrite the subversive power inherent in the blues. In misunderstanding him

due to the ringing in his ears, Thomas repeats WalksAlong's lines with a variation that effectively overturns their intended spite into support for the band. Alexie thus endows the blues with the power to change "too loud" into "a good crowd," the epithet "fucking" into the affirmative "rocking," and the insult "asshole" into a friendly "like us." Consequently, Alexie's extension of the traditional blues stanza cunningly undermines the chairman's aggression toward Coyote Springs even though no conclusions or final lines resolve the issues put forth. The scene's ridicule sufficiently subverts WalksAlong's authority regardless of whether the reader attributes this subversion to Alexie, the narrator, or Thomas. Because this ambiguity of agency requires that readers interpret the source and intent of the scene's humor, they must actively construct the text's provocation, and thus become implicated in the subversion as well, at least momentarily.

Alexie's employment of the AAB blues pattern thus emerges as playfully idiosyncratic. In a sweepingly improvisational gesture—in which he mirrors the early folk blues singers—he adapts, alters, and adjusts the formula to his needs. All the while, he remains true to certain thematic rules of the blues. The striking omission of the closing line thus serves multiple purposes: while in the novel's epigraph the absence of a resolution emphasizes the Native American dilemma (symbolized by the crossroads), and the scene involving Simon functions as a reminder of the alienation of Native Americans within the United States, the final example highlights the subversive potential of Alexie's alteration. Moreover, Alexie's repetitions—often in the form of multiple AA lines—resonate with Morrison's rememory, as a hint that there can be no closure without continuously revisiting the past. Finally, Alexie's refusal to provide us with an AAB resolution serves as a bleak metaphor for the ongoing struggle of Native Americans, despite the often-humorous effect of the AA stanzaic pattern.

Blues Syncope

In concert with his distinctive application of the AAB blues lyric formula, Alexie seeks to disrupt the dominant discourse of the colonizer through a literary adaptation of the blues syncope. *The New Grove Dictionary* defines syncopation as "the regular shifting of each beat in a measured pattern by the same amount ahead of or behind its normal position in that pattern." Syncopation thus surprises the listener by placing the rhythmical accent in a different place from its expected position in the pattern. As a result, "each syncopated musical line can be perceived as contrary to the pulse established by the organization of the music into bars." This capacity for the syncope to disrupt the regular pulse of a piece of music not only invites "conflict with the sense of the prevailing metre," but creates "tension against the established pulse" so that the syncope may "even overcome . . . it."[31] The fundamental function of syncopation, therefore, lies in the creation of rhythmic surprise and the arousal of a desire for the reestablishment of the regular pulse. This practice is one of the defining features of the blues: Muddy Waters' 1957 classic, "Got My Mojo Workin'," for example, accurately exhibits such shifting of the accents from the downbeat to the offbeat, which results in an unsettling forward drive within the music.[32]

Alexie's adaptation of blues syncopation emerges in the form of disruptive interjections into the regular pulse of his narrative. Rather than merely following the conventional flow of his third-person narrative, he relentlessly interposes fictitious newspaper articles, journal entries, letters, faxes, and a police report. Thomas's definition of the words "Coyote" and "Spring" in his journal may serve as an example of Alexie's literary syncopation:

> **Coyote**: A small canid (*Canis latrans*) native to western North America that is closely related to the American wolf and whose cry has often been compared to that of Sippie Wallace and Janis Joplin among others.
>
> . . . .
>
> **Coyote**: A trickster whose bag of tricks contains permutations of love, hate, weather, chance, laughter, and tears, e.g. Lucille Ball.
>
> . . . .
>
> **Spring**: To make a leap or series of leaps, e.g., from stage to waiting arms of Indian and non-Indian fans. (48)

Thomas not only interrupts the flow of the narrative, but equally places a different accent on the familiar form of the encyclopedia entry: In extending the meaning of the word "coyote" with a reference to Sippie Wallace and Janis Joplin, two of the grand ladies of the blues, he undercuts the authority of the colonizer's scholarly definition by juxtaposing it with a low-cultural offbeat.

His second definition paints the coyote as a "trickster," a typical characterization in Native American mythology.[33] The trickster-figure not only uses his cunning intellect and sharp wit to play tricks on his opponents and disobey rules, but equally serves as a conduit to the sacred, to creation, transformation, and birth. The bluesman or -woman, too, has acquired mythical overtones in African American folklore, resembling the Native American (and African) trickster in his or her role as a storyteller as well as in the ability to outwit enemies and a connection to all things supernatural. What is unconventional in Alexie's tale, however, is his mention of Lucille Ball, the star of "the mother of all sitcoms," *I Love Lucy*, to exemplify these trickster qualities.[34] Ball was a remarkable figure who, in the 1950s, in a business completely dominated by men, became the head of her own production company, Desilu. She insisted on performing alongside her Cuban husband Desi Arnaz despite CBS's reluctance to feature a racially mixed couple.[35] Ball's successful opposition to the dominant culture's racist sentiments thus serves as inspiration for Thomas's creative talent and Alexie's own syncopated trickery. Fittingly, therefore, Thomas's definition of "spring," which contains the notion of a leap into the arms of both "Indian and non-Indian fans," reads as a testimony of his desire to transcend racial and ethnical boundaries through his music. The idea of music as a "bag of tricks" that assists Coyote Springs to overcome racial differences thus emerges as the tenor of this particular syncope.

Alexie's literary syncopation also appears in the shape of a Coyote Springs concert review that appears in *The Ellensburg Tri-Weekly*. Again, Alexie displaces the accent of the narrative's regular downbeat to include a fictional newspaper article. Entitled "Indian Musicians Play More Than Drums," the report's first paragraph expresses

mild surprise at the fact that at a concert in a cowboy tavern given by an "all-Indian rock band . . . nobody was injured" (89). In closing, the review quotes Ernie Lively, the tavern's owner, who states, "'I think the highlight of the night was when those Indians sang 'Mommas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys.' Everybody sang along with that one'" (90). Despite its ostensible objectivity as a piece of journalism, the report immediately establishes the concert as a standoff between the Indians on stage and their cowboy audience. Yet nobody gets hurt in this duel; on the contrary, both cowboys and Indians join their voices in the sweet harmony of a classic country and western tune that wistfully warns mothers to prevent their young from the rough life and wayward meanderings of the cowboys.[36] Neither the journalist nor tavern-keeper Eddie Lively realize that for Coyote Springs, the song exposes their audience's mindless "Cowboys-and-Indians" mentality and simultaneously expresses the band's yearning for future generations of white people to discard this prejudiced perspective. Contrary to the audience's maudlin interpretation ("cowboys ain't easy to love, and harder to hold" runs the song's first line), for Coyote Springs the song carries tenebrously existential overtones: the only way for Indians to overcome their status of perpetual subalternity indeed requires "mommas" who refuse to inculcate their children with the detrimental ideology of Indian wars or the frontier, exemplified in the novel by the racist company executives of Cavalry Records.

While in this scene the white audience, the journalist, and the club owner feel vindicated by the ostensible confirmation of their prejudices and the lukewarm camaraderie between the cowboys and the Spokane Indians, the reader will likely realize that Native Americans indeed "Play More than Drums," as the review's title allows. In embedding a settler-colonialist local review into his narrative, Alexie's literary syncopation disrupts the dominant discourse by subtly turning a tear-jerking country ballad into a subversive literary offbeat that unapologetically unmasks the ignorance and Wild-West attitude that still permeates the dominant culture's response to Native America.

Alexie's Ambivalent Appropriation of Popular Culture

Alexie's technique of appropriating for Native Americans a country and western song—the apotheosis of the colonizer's music—must be understood as part of a larger scheme of resistance. This scheme obviously does not shy away from reaching out to the products of a culture as diametrically opposed to Native America as country music. The reason why Alexie incorporates such diverse pop-cultural sources into his narrative—as opposed to having Coyote Springs's repertoire merely consist of classic blues titles or even traditional Native American chants—arguably pertains to his belief that such seemingly purer elements have either been completely assimilated into the dominant culture, or must be protected at all costs. According to James Cox, Alexie therefore refuses to "construct a cultural identity that exposes Spokane traditions and beliefs to tourists, consumers, social scientists, and, perhaps, literary critics."[37]

The New Grove Dictionary corroborates this theory with regard to the blues in stating that in the late twentieth century, due to its appropriation as background

music for commercials, supermarkets, and hotel lounges, blues music has entered a "new phase, being no longer African American, but a part of the currency of global popular culture."[38] The driving force behind the cooption of the authentic core of the blues by the dominant culture, according to Allan F. Moore, consists of a reawakened desire for the "uncontaminated native and the artist-as-hero," both of whom are "characters in the nineteenth-century romantic search for the rediscovery of a golden age, an age before humanity had become alienated from nature." Robert Johnson's posthumous meteoric rise in popularity in the 1960s, therefore, is due in part to the fact that he precisely corresponds to this Romantic ideal, the "archetype of the country bluesman—poor, illiterate, full of anguish, naturally talented, and dead."[39] James Baldwin in turn expresses his exasperation with the colonizer's adaptation of black culture: "I was weary, to tell you the truth. I had tried, in the States, to convey something of what it felt like to be a Negro and nobody had been able to listen: they wanted their romance."[40]

In order to counteract white America's desire for "romance," Alexie refrains from turning Coyote Springs into a pure blues outfit of noble savages and instead infuses his Native American narrative with a plethora of pop-cultural elements. Like the "New-Agers" who arrive at the Spokane Reservation for a Coyote Springs rehearsal "expecting to hear some ancient Indian wisdom and got a good dose of Sex Pistols covers instead" (41), the reader of the novel is denied the comfort of a "bow-and-arrows-Indian" novel. For example, Coyote Springs prefers Hank Williams to The Black Lodge Singers, claiming that "*Hank Williams is a goddamned Spokane Indian!*" (91; italics in original); after hearing the Spokane horses screaming, Big Mom goes "back to her work, to her buckskin and beads, to CNN" (9); and Chess "had fancy-danced when she was a teenager and shook to Three Dog Night on her childhood radio" (55). However, Alexie's disruption of our expectations of a conventional Native American story with pop-culture references not only serves political ends, but also reflects his reality: "The way I lived my life, and the way inside me, and the way I thought . . . is a mix of traditionalism and contemporary culture."[41] According to Alexie, such a catholic blend of traditional Indian lore and popular culture signifies the only authentic base of a contemporary Native American identity as well as the only true representation of the Native Americans of the late twentieth century.

Coyote Springs's music encompasses an eclectic mixture of punk, country, rock and roll, and blues, which Alexie forges into a "tribal music" (79). "We covered great stuff, like Aretha Franklin and Alex Chilton," Thomas offers, "but none of those songs were Indian, you know?" (157). To account for Coyote Springs's emerging desire to express their Indianness, they start to throw a "*way ya hi yo*" into the chorus of a Kiss song and sing "Spokane Indian words in place of the Spanish in Ritchie Valens' version of 'La Bamba'" (45). This appropriation of rock music, however, is only the next step toward writing their own songs, the logical conclusion of their creative journey. Before composing his first piece, Thomas turns on the television and watches *The Sound of Music* in search of inspiration. As he waits for the muses to kiss him, burning hunger penetrates his consciousness. After contemplating "the ninety-seven different ways to say *fry bread*" on the Spokane Reservation, he finally finds what he is looking for: "As

his growling stomach provided the rhythm, Thomas sat again with his bass guitar, wrote the first song, and called it 'Reservation Blues'" (47; italics in original).

Just as the most immediate inspiration for Coyote Springs's first song relates to Indian fry bread, one of *The Sound of Music*'s most outstanding songs, "My Favorite Things," evokes such Austrian culinary pleasures as "crisp apple strudels" and "schnitzel with noodles."[42] In contrast to the blithe reiteration of the list of clichés about Austria in Rodgers and Hammerstein's lyrics, jazz saxophonist John Coltrane's magnificent 1960 instrumental rendition found "his emotional pitch" in its "benign" melody,[43] infusing it with African and Indian elements and transforming the song "into a hypnotic eastern dervish dance."[44] In soloing freely over pianist McCoy Tyner's modal chords during the vamp between verses, Coltrane managed to extract and intensify the blues buried within the song—as expressed in the line, "When I'm feeling sad," and the oblique echo of Morrison's rememory in the phrase, "I simply remember my favorite things"—to create a powerful new version that became a hit affecting listeners within the jazz world and beyond.[45] Arguably, Thomas aspires to a similar reappropriation of Western popular culture into a twenty-first-century Indian variety of the blues. Accordingly, the hunger for both physical and spiritual nourishment that gives birth to "Reservation Blues" draws inspiration from both Indian and pop-cultural traditions, through which "Coyote Springs created a tribal music that scared and excited the white people in the audience. That music might have chased away the pilgrims five hundred years ago" (79–80).

The advantage of such a coalescing of cultures lies in the disruption of the colonial practice of othering: hearing Coyote Springs tear into something like the Sex Pistols's "Anarchy in the U.K." renders it a lot trickier to conceive of Indians exclusively as rain-dancing nature-lovers.[46] At the same time, however, embracing the dominant culture to such a degree contains a considerable risk. Alexie's attempt to fight the system from within sometimes makes it difficult to differentiate between the pop-cultural references that signal instances of colonial oppression and those that represent moments of Native American resistance. Alexie's multiple nods to TV programs thus function both to silence Native Americans, as in the depiction of the naïve victims of the cowboys' cunning (70–71), and to empower them, as in the allusion to Lucille Ball as an embodiment of the trickster Coyote. In a similar vein, *Reservation Blues* criticizes Hollywood's movie industry at the same time as it indulges in "filmic" descriptions, features that critic Gloria Bird describes as "script-minded" writing.[47] From the beginning, we are led to visualize Robert Johnson's frazzled appearance by following Alexie's authorial camera movement: "A small man with very dark skin and huge hands, he wore a brown suit that looked good from a distance but grew more ragged, frayed at the cuffs, *as he came into focus*" (3; my emphasis).

Similarly, Alexie's writerly lens zooms in on the killing of the final Spokane horse in the 1858 massacre: "The colt shivered as the officer put his pistol between its eyes and pulled the trigger. That colt fell to the grass of the clearing, to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern, to the cold, hard coroner's table in a Veterans' Hospital" (10). In a visceral sweep of the "camera," Alexie breathlessly cuts from a close-up of the colt's forehead, to a shot of the falling animal in the clearing in 1858, to an image of a

reservation tavern, and, finally, to the Veterans' Hospital of the late twentieth century. In a rather blunt imitation of the filmic language of popular Hollywood movies, Alexie thus construes the dying horse as a symbol of the modern Indian, whose plight is exemplified by alcoholic excess and death in fighting the colonizers' wars. Content and form, nevertheless, do not seem to align: the graphic rendition of the shooting of the colt seems uncomfortably close to the kind of gory action movies that revel in the cheap thrills of depicting violence at close range to intensify the gravity the scene is intended to project. Moreover, the filmic cuts to the tavern and the hospital similarly invoke a tradition of Hollywood fare, which hardly accords with the all-too-real grievances of contemporary Native America. In sum, such employment of filmic vocabulary and techniques stands in an uneasy contrast not only to the novel's unrestrained indictment of movies such as *Dances with Wolves* (145), but to the cultural-political argument Alexie seems to want to advance.[48]

Moreover, the logic by which Alexie determines which rock stars the novel looks upon favorably and which ones it condemns does not always seem coherent. Musicians such as Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Elvis Presley not only appear as Big Mom's students, but "they all drank so much and self-destructed so successfully that Big Mom made them honorary members of the Spokane Tribe" (201). Presley, in particular, seems to have a close bond to Big Mom, to which his whispering "*Thank you, Big Mom*" at the end of one of his songs bears witness (200; italics in original). By contrast, Jim Morrison, although he is on a par with Hendrix, Presley, and Joplin in terms of heavy drinking and self-destruction, is less welcome on the Spokane Reservation: "[Big Mom] never answered the door when the live Jim Morrison came knocking. She won't even answer the door when the dead Jim Morrison comes knocking now" (201). Moreover, Big Mom "is so tired of that name" that she finds it "irritating how much [she] has to hear that name" (207). The reader never quite learns why Jim Morrison causes such irritation, except for the fact that "white guys obsessed on Jim Morrison" (117). Presumably, however, Alexie's ire is provoked by Morrison's fascination with Native American spirituality, which allegedly sprang from his witnessing a car accident involving an Indian family when he was a child. Morrison alluded to the experience in his spoken-word performance "Dawn's Highway," as well as his songs "Peace Frog" and "Ghost Song."[49] Accordingly, the refrain that recurs in all three songs runs:

> Indians scattered
> On dawn's highway bleeding
> Ghosts crowd the young child's
> Fragile eggshell mind

Such gruesome imagery of dying Indians disseminated by a white rock celebrity not only functions to perpetuate the notion of a culture dying at the hands of the colonizer, but simultaneously transforms the singer into a kind of psychedelic shaman exuding an aura of pseudo-Indian spiritual enlightenment. For Alexie, Jim Morrison thus presents a clear case of settler-colonial silencing; indeed, in "Dawn's Highway," the response to the narrator's question, "Indian, Indian what did you die for?" is, literally, "Indian says nothing at all."

While Jim Morrison's appropriation of Indianness can justifiably be construed as a form of settler-colonial oppression, it is curious that Alexie seems to turn a blind eye on Elvis Presley's highly stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans in his Hollywood movies. His 1968 effort *Stay Away Joe*, in particular, depicts Indians "as brawling, balling, boozing children" according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, and has been perceived as "offensive by many."[50] While Presley stars as Joe Lightfoot, a womanizing, horse-fighting Native American whose greatest achievement is the replenishment of a cowherd by money he has won gambling, the Lightfoot family patriarch, played by Thomas Gomez, delivers such pearls of Native American wisdom as "Scorpion squaw should work more, talk less."[51] *Variety*'s review of *Stay Away Joe* states: "At best, the film is a dim artistic accomplishment; at worst, it caters to outdated prejudice. Custer himself might be embarrassed—for the Indians."[52] Alexie apparently does not mind Presley's blatantly offensive depiction of Native Americans as much as Morrison's misguided poetry. This discrepancy, I would argue, highlights the difficulty in Alexie's project: By saturating his narrative with pop-cultural references, he opens the floodgates of a barely controllable flow of meanings, all of which operate within the dominant discourse in the hyperreal arena of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These circulating simulacra take precedence in the text, thereby decisively complicating Alexie's project of negotiating the Native American condition using popular culture. Ultimately, however, Alexie's sweeping incorporation of popular cultural references is both a strength and weakness of his work because it can be a "tool used for and against American Indians in the struggle to survive in America": whereas some of his pop-cultural references are indeed poignant and unconventional, others lack bite and threaten to unconsciously undermine the very resistance to settler-colonialism *Reservation Blues* seems to advocate.[53]

"This Is the End": Alexie's Vision of Survival

The powerful "tribal music" that Alexie imagines by eclectically fusing pop songs with Native American war cries, fry bread with *The Sound of Music*, and Coyote-as-trickster with *I Love Lucy* risks falling to pieces because in the thick of the pop-cultural haze, the lines between subversion and perpetuation of the dominant ideology start to blur. In his quest for a twenty-first-century version of a Native American identity, Alexie finds himself hurled back to the crossroads by the very strategy with which he sought to escape the Faustian deal. The sheer exuberance and indiscrimination with which he incorporates pop-cultural elements into his prose seems to jeopardize *Reservation Blues*'s own enterprise of establishing an Indian identity outside the dominant culture's simulation. At the same time, however, asking the novel to "accomplish" this supposed goal may be taking things too far: Perhaps Alexie's text is not a neat exercise in establishing a contemporary Indian identity, but rather a fictional commentary on the messiness, or even impossibility, of creating one.

The novel's ending seems to confirm a reading that accounts for the multifarious complications involved in negotiating a late-twentieth-century Indian identity. Rather than resolving the crisis surrounding the fortuitous eclecticism with which Alexie

saturates the narrative, or surrendering to resignation (and thus granting us some form of redemptive, bluesy closure), Alexie's conclusion remains fluid and open-ended. Even though Junior commits suicide and Victor succumbs to his latent alcoholism after the band's return from New York, Thomas and the two Flathead Indian sisters, Chess and Checkers Warm Water, drive off the reservation in their blue van toward an unclear destiny in the city of Spokane (247, 292–293). While in the course of *Reservation Blues* a variety of questions surrounding the negotiation of a contemporary Indian identity are explored, Alexie does not provide any final answers. Instead, he improvises along the lines of the blues stanza, interjects a syncopated riff here and there, playfully rememories the past with and without irony, and ultimately sends his protagonists out of the reservation into an unknown future.

Scott Andrews poses the questions: "How can I use this novel? Does it help me or others imagine solutions to real problems?"[54] *Reservation Blues*'s failure to be useful, according to Andrews, lies in its omission to explore "the exciting opportunities that cross-cultural exchanges can create for individuals and communities" as well as its ending in "a puzzling sense of despair," rather than in "success for its protagonists."[55] I want to counter Andrews's argument by imagining what "success" for Coyote Springs would entail. In successfully passing the audition for Cavalry Records, it is evident that Coyote Springs would have to go through the exploitative transformation Wright and Sheridan envision in their fax to Mr. Armstrong. They would be subjected to embodying the white fantasy of exaggerated Indianness—complete with "war paint, feathers, etc."—and be forced to sing songs about finding a connection with Mother Earth in order to be "lucrative" for the record company (190). Imagining success for Coyote Springs in the way Andrews requires, therefore, means to subjugate them to the dominant culture's simulation of Indianness.

This version of success, however, is the colonizer's: it will only grant Coyote Springs fame and fortune within the ideological and ethical constraints of commodity capitalism. I am skeptical whether this kind of success would provide valuable solutions to the "real problems" Native Americans face today. Moreover, I consider Andrews's claim, "The failure of Thomas's band suggests that dominance and submission are still in place," to be ill-balanced;[56] settler-colonial oppression is not likely to cease anytime soon, irrespective of one Indian band breaking through or not. Thomas himself somewhat melodramatically gives voice to the ambivalence of mainstream success by stating, "'I'm scared to be good. I'm scared to be bad. This band could make us rock stars. It could kill us'" (211). In order to express himself more accurately, Thomas tells Chess a fictitious story about their opening for Aerosmith, winning the crowd over, and then playing the main set because the people keep chanting their names. "'For the rest of our lives, all we can hear are our names, chanted over and over, until we are deaf to everything else'" (211).

The deafness Thomas alludes to, arguably, denotes the band's inability to hear the concerns, the stories—in a word, the blues—of their fellow Native Americans. Imagining success within the celebrity culture on the level of supergroups such as Aerosmith, Thomas seems to say, equals total absorption by that culture. The price for this kind of success entails relinquishing oneself to the order of simulacra,

participating in and merging with a culture constantly on the lookout for the next best thing. As a consequence, Coyote Springs would be discarded as soon as the particular settler-colonial version of Indianness that enabled their success in the first place goes out of fashion. Instead of being an overnight sensation with Cavalry Records, therefore, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers intend to start anew in Spokane. The narrator's comment, "Songs were waiting for them up there in the dark. Songs were waiting for them in the city," suggests that their musical career is not necessarily over (306). On the contrary, it is conceivable for them to start gathering a following outside the mainstream and build their careers from the bottom up, which would give them more artistic control and grant them success on their own terms. Alexie himself, for one, started his career with a book of poems published by Hanging Loose Press in the early 1990s, a "tiny little press in Brooklyn, New York," from which point onward his career has expanded.[57] Even though he has amassed a considerable amount of mainstream success since then, the fact that both in his writing and his social work he has been dedicating himself to the cause of Native Americans shows that this kind of continuous success does not necessarily result in "deafness" to one's cultural roots.

What the novel's ending strives for, then, is not success, but survival. As Thomas, Chess, and Checkers drive off the reservation, they have a dreamlike vision of Big Mom and the three of them sitting around a drum during the powwow: "Big Mom taught them a new song, the shadow horses' song, the slaughtered horses' song, the screaming horses' song, a song of mourning that would become a song of celebration: we have survived, we have survived" (306). Alexie endows the music with the power to bring about transformation: In line with Morrison's concept of rememory, songs allow the novel's protagonists to revisit the past, symbolized by the "shadow horses," and emerge from the experience as survivors. Because the Coyote Springs band members, in their journey from the reservation to New York and back, have experienced the rejection of both the dominant culture and their own, they have engaged in a contemporary version of the Indian wars and have developed from a cover band to tribal artists. The insight their trip has yielded, arguably, is that survival is possible neither in the colonial center nor on the reservation: while the novel's climax in Cavalry Records' studio clearly suggests that there is no room for authentic Indianness (assuming there is such a thing) in mainstream America, Junior's death and Victor's alcoholism express the baneful hopelessness and exasperating despair of a life on Alexie's fictional reservation.

Rather than perpetuating the excess of the settler-colonial binary by staking out a place for Thomas and the Warm Water sisters in either the colonial center or its periphery, Alexie opts for Spokane, a mid-sized town not too far removed from the reservation, yet clearly outside its boundaries. In a somewhat daring gesture, which is echoed in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Alexie thus proposes the exodus from the reservation as the future for Native America.[58] Yet by staking out a middle ground as the destination for his protagonists, Alexie intends to circumvent the dilemma of being either consumed by the nostalgia represented by the reservation as the site designated to preserve Indians' cultural past, or assimilated into the third-order simulation perpetrated by the dominant culture. Alexie thereby "updates the myth of the crossroads," which Gayatri Devi has described as a kind of limbo:

"When the colonized survive and overcome the offer of the crossroads, they are in eternal transit."[59] What he achieves, more than anything, is bursting open the exclusive categories, exemplified by the crossroads, in which Native Americans have so far been perceived. If Alexie succeeds in forcing America to reconceptualize Native Americans as people beyond the simplifying duality of either being disseminated as Hollywood simulacra or shut away on the rez, he has truly advanced the Indian cause.

Just as the city of Spokane is an expedient locale for the novel's ultimate concern for Native Americans' survival, the songs are the second necessity for them to thrive. Alexie's music of survival again draws inspiration from the blues. William Barlow, for instance, maintains that "the essence of the blues [is] that indomitable spirit of an uprooted race of people struggling to survive in an alien and hostile environment."[60] Albert Murray similarly identifies the blues as a means of survival: "Indeed, what with the blues . . . . reaffirmation is precisely the contingency upon which the very survival of man as human being, however normally unsatisfied and abnormally wretched, is predicated." If survival is contingent on the reaffirmation and continuity the blues has to offer, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers's journey toward "new songs" that await them in the city arguably constitutes "the most fundamental of all existential imperatives."[61] The new songs affirm the trio's ability to write and perform music, which will sustain them creatively and testify to their ongoing practice of telling "stories with a new sense of survivance," to use Gerald Vizenor's term.[62] The notion, moreover, that Thomas and Chess plan to get married and raise a family undergirds my reading that the novel's ending cannot be regarded as suffused with Andrews's overriding sense of failure (284). Alexie's appropriation of the blues—his insistence on continuance by omitting closure in his blues stanza as well as the disruption of the settler-colonial narrative by means of his literary syncopation—serves the principal purpose of reasserting his commitment to Native Americans' survival in the form of reaffirmation and continuity.

Ultimately, Alexie's goal for *Reservation Blues* is best described by a comment he made pertaining to the audience of the 1998 movie *Smoke Signals*, for which he wrote the screenplay: "If they can see Indians as nothing else but human beings, it'll be a success."[63] His cast of characters' distinct foibles, their pronounced idiosyncrasies and definitive sense of humor, even in the face of daunting adversity, render them not only deeply human, but also, to recall Langston Hughes' timeless description of the blues feeling, as blueswomen and bluesmen who are "laughing to keep from crying."[64]

Notes

1. Paul Pasquerata, "African-Native American Subjectivity and the Blues Voice in the Writings of Toni Morrison and Sherman Alexie," *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote: African- Native American Literature*, ed. Jonathan Brennan (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 278–91.

2. Sabine N. Meyer, "From Nationalism to Cosmopolitanism? Contemporary Native American Literature and the Transnational Turn," *Transnational American Studies*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2012): 282–303, https://www.winter-verlag.de/en/detail/978-3-8253-6003-0/Hebel_Ed_Transnational_American_Studies/; Christopher Taylor, "North America as Contact Zone: Native American Literary Nationalism and the Cross-Cultural Dilemma," *Studies in American Indian Literature* 22, no. 3 (2010): 26–43, doi 10.1353/ail.2010.0015.

3. Karsten Fitz and Klaus-Dieter Gross, "Native American Literature as a Transcultural and Multimedia Experience: Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*," *American Studies/Amerikastudien* 52, no. 3 (2007): 417–43, doi 10.1353/arq.2007.0007; Douglas Ford, "Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues," *MELUS* 27, no. 3 (2002): 197–215, doi 10.2307/3250662; Jane P. Hafen, "Rock and Roll, Redskins, and Blues in Sherman Alexie's Work," *Sherman Alexie: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jess Berglund and Jan Roush (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010), 62–73.

4. Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Grove Press, 1995). Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

5. Sherman Alexie, "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock," in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 35.

6. Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (London: Quartet Books, 1978), 257.

7. "The blues" can take either a singular or plural verb, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* and *Webster's Dictionary of American English*. *The New Oxford American Dictionary* differentiates between the blues as a *style* of music, in which blues can be "treated as singular or plural," and a "piece of such music," which is only referred to in the singular: "We'll do a blues in C." Because I conceive of the blues as a musical genre, and thus a totality, I treat it as a singular noun that requires a singular verb.

8. Ralph Ellison, "Blues People," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 257–58.

9. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove, 2001), 731.

10. James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," (1957), in *Literature for Life*, ed. X. J. Kennedy, Dana Gioia, and Nina Revoyr (Boston: Pearson, 2013), 307.

11. Ibid., 307.

12. Ibid.

13. Lewis A. Nordan, "A Hank of Hair, a Piece of Bone" (1989), in *Best of the South: From Ten Years of New Stories from the South*, ed. Shannon Ravenel (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1996), 194–95.

14. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Vintage, 1995), 173.

15. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; London: Everyman's Library, 2006), 41.

16. Ibid., 208.

17. Ibid., 112.

18. Lynda Koolish, "'To be Loved and Cry Shame': A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *MELUS* 26, no. 4 (2001): 169, doi 10.2307/3185546.

19. Morrison, *Beloved*, 54.

20. Ibid,, 51.

21. James H. Cox, *Muting White Noise: Native American and European American Novel Traditions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 146.

22. Morrison, *Beloved*, 315.

23. For an encompassing discussion of the formulaic nature of the blues, see David Evan's essay "The Blues Formula," *Journal of American Folklore* 123, no. 488 (2010): 218–23, doi 10.1353/jaf.0.0120; Michael Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Michael Taft, "The Essential Idea of the Blues Formula," *Journal of American Folklore* 122, no. 483 (2009): 75–83, doi 10.1353/jaf.0.0058.

24. Steven C. Tracy, "The Blues Novel," *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 124.

25. Robert Johnson, "Kind-Hearted Woman Blues" (1936), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2oFagb7N8c.

26. Robert Johnson, “Crossroad Blues” (1936), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsB_cGdgPTo.

27. Sherman Alexie, “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona,” in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Grove Press, 2013), 59–75; Sherman Alexie, “The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire,” in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 93–103.

28. Sherman Alexie, “Sherman Alexie—Conversations at KCTS 9,” YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io9vRHYMiFM.

29. See, for example, *Smoke Signals*, dir. Chris Eyre, perf. Adam Beach, Irene Bedard (Echo Bridge Entertainment film, 1998).

30. Sherman Alexie, “UCSD Guestbook: Sherman Alexie” (2002), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWolPAoDk3g.

31. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 850.

32. Muddy Waters, “Got My Mojo Workin’” (1957), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SBmury81Ws.

33. Robert Lake-Thom, *Spirits of the Earth: A Guide to Native American Nature Symbols, Stories, and Ceremonies* (New York: Plume, 1997), 68.

34. Coyne S. Sanders and Tom Gilbert, *Desilu: The Story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz* (1993; San Francisco: itbooks, 2011), ix.

35. Ibid., 28.

36. Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, “Mommas Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys” (1978), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dgh6fDayDTI.

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