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“Old Maps” and “New Roads”:  
Confronting Neocolonial Despair in Sherman Alexie’s  
*Reservation Blues*

by

Matthew R. Burkhart

B.A. University of Colorado, Boulder, 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

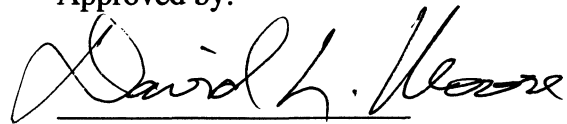
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December 2001

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Burkhart, Matthew R., M.A., December 2001

“Old Maps” and “New Roads”: Confronting Neocolonial Despair in Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*

Director: David L. Moore



Sherman Alexie’s 1995 novel *Reservation Blues* engages the complexities of Native American identity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as he revises and subverts tired stereotypes of Indians. The first chapter of my thesis roughly sketches the critical conversations entered and engaged in the remaining four chapters, describing how writers such as Gerald Vizenor and Simon Ortiz offer dynamic visions of Native identity and “authenticity” that productively supplement less flexible theories offered by recent nationalist critics.

The second chapter draws attention to how and why Alexie masks enduring Spokane cultural practices from potentially exploitative non-Native audiences through both the subversion of stereotypes and the rendering of strategic silences around culturally sensitive material. As in much postmodern “literature of exhaustion,” these stereotypical representations crumble under their own weight, giving rise to comic playfulness that allows the reader and writer alike to move beyond what Alexie calls “the expected idea of the Indian.”

The third chapter addresses Euroamerican attempts to appropriate Native cultural property through forms of violence that become increasingly simulacral—transgressions at the level of representation—but that still inflict dire material consequences. Here, as in chapters two and five, I analyze the continuities Alexie has drawn between 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial incursions upon Natives in the Northwest and late 20<sup>th</sup> century assaults upon indigeneity such as “playing Indian” (which, in its worst expressions, amounts to identity theft)

The fourth chapter draws attention to an insidious aspect of colonization, internalized oppression, which turns community members against themselves and each other. Alexie’s depiction of the workings of internalized oppression on the fictionalized Spokane Reservation is incompletely foreboding, in that his novel also represents the ways that Natives continue to build community despite imposed hardships. The fifth, final chapter offers further depictions of internalized oppression, analyzing how it is channeled through community fears that the rock/blues band Coyote Springs will misrepresent the Spokane people. These fears arise out of a largely static vision of Native community that eventually drives remaining members of the band to seek a more dynamic community as they relocate together to the city of Spokane. Through the band members’ experiences, Alexie invites readers to envision new paths that Native Americans might forge in order to assert the physical and expressive mobility which has been denied to many by Euroamerican colonization’s onset and perpetuation.

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## I. New Topographies and Nationalist Critiques

Gerald Vizenor, wordsmith extraordinaire, offers "Shadow Survivance" as the title of one of his renowned yet rather opaque essays. Vizenor's title and the concept of Native communities and identities evoked in that essay offer ingress into Sherman Alexie's 1995 novel *Reservation Blues*. Like Alexie's novel, Vizenor's 1993 essay engages the complexities of Native identity in the late twentieth century. Just as neocolonial practices bear the shadows of the more violent exertions of imperial power in previous decades and centuries, Native "survivance"—a neologism through which Vizenor links survival and resistance—is similarly imbued with a complex Native counter-history. This vital counter-history links contemporary Indians<sup>1</sup> to predecessors who have not only resisted the onslaughts of colonialism but have done so while preserving and continuing to develop traditions of their own, traditions that need not respond directly to oppressive Euroamerican impositions, but that assert the ongoing creative processes alive in cultures. Vizenor describes how Native stories change over time, as well as how Natives in the late nineteenth century turned the English language back upon the dominant culture, as it was used to transmit what became the pan-tribal Ghost Dance religion. Furthermore, he paints in broad strokes the history of Native resistance and survival (*MM* 104–05),<sup>2</sup> "survivances" that are dependent not on static cultural essentialism, but that instead, in Paula Gunn Allen's words, "move with what moves," in that they are dynamic and incorporative of power that emanates from many sources, sometimes even from colonizing structures ("Ceremonial Motion" 148).

Vizenor's essay calls for and celebrates stories that subvert what he describes as "literatures of dominance," which he defines as the discourse that is maintained by conventional social science, popular culture, and the authors—Native and non—who cater to the projections and desires of audiences that expect depictions of Native Americans as inferior. "Literatures of dominance" pretend first to "know" "the Indian," and second, they conspire to relegate "the known Indian" to whatever status is desired by

the dominant culture, whether it be "noble," "bloodthirsty," "vanishing," "assimilated," or "safely commodified." Nevertheless, Native literature need not write itself into the eager clutches of such discourses. And Vizenor offers several modes of resistance that are found in the most creative Native writing.

I will trace later the ways that Alexie uses two tactics celebrated by Vizenor, anti-realism and reliance upon the comic rather than the tragic mode, but at this point, I will spend a bit more time with Vizenor's concept of "shadow survivance." In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor tells us that "the shadows are the silence in heard stories, the silence that bears a referent of tribal memories and experience. The shadow words are active memories, and the memories of heard stories" (72). I believe that Alexie—who in several interviews expresses the ethical concern that his novels will be read by audiences that are largely non-Indian and that such novels are not the most appropriate format for advancing the cause of cultural specificity, since anything published in a novel avails itself to easy commodification—goes to great lengths to avoid exploiting arcane aspects of Spokane culture. I see Alexie using humor and anti-realism in his depiction of the fictionalized Spokane reservation and the band Coyote Springs; but contrary to much postmodern fiction which has been critiqued for its lack of historical depth, *Reservation Blues* is imbued with shadow silences that "bear. . . referent[s] of tribal memories and experience" without betraying "tribal secrets." That is, Alexie links Natives surviving, resisting, and sometimes falling before neocolonial forces to the histories of those who have gone before in the previous centuries, matching imperial expansion with subversion and survivance. Yet as I describe how Alexie subverts Euroamerican imperialism, I risk running into the trap that Marshall Sahlins has referred to in a 1993 essay as "tristes tropes," which describes how unexamined ethnographic and historiographic practices can reductively represent Native cultures as merely reacting to the incursions of colonialism, rather than affirming and continuing to develop their own cultural practices under (and/or alongside) the sign of expanding global capitalism (379–81, 385). Thus, what I refer to as

Alexie's subversive humor, his "anti-realist" mode, and his crafting of what Vizenor has called "shadow survivance" allows him to write a novel that will be available on the capitalist market but one that deploys trickster-like tactics to avoid the wholesale commodification of Spokane culture.

Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o could very well be describing the progression of imperialism in the Americas as he writes in 1986 of European colonizing practices in Africa: "the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom" (436). Shading Ngugi's pronouncement with Vizenor's troped shadows, it is not hard to consider the history of colonization in the Americas as a course of increasingly subtle and insidious exertions of power. In such exertions, the shadow of bloody violence, threatened or actual, lurks, giving added weight to the tactics of assimilatory programs carried out by missionaries and schoolteachers, and by the executors of federally "suggested" or imposed policies such as the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Many Natives, having realized the white man's proclivity for violence and deception, channeled their own resistances through increasingly subtle expressions, ones that came to match—if not exceed, in their cleverness—the increasingly subtle, neocolonial exertions of power. Anthropologist Thomas Biolsi's study of the 1868 creation of the Great Sioux Reservation offers graphic examples of calculated Native defiance. The first of these is noted as Biolsi relates the ways in which the Rosebud Lakota subverted the US government census-taking attempts by insurgently wielding their language against the government agents. In this situation, many Lakota circulated several times through the census-taking line, exploiting the Euroamerican inability to distinguish Natives from each other as they visually massed the Lakota as a "swarm" of "red others" to be reckoned with bureaucratically (28). Not only did the Lakota successfully "pad the census lists to receive more rations [on neighboring reservations this padding increased tribal rolls by as

much as seventy percent]," but they also linguistically subverted colonial Puritanism as US translators later discovered that names such as "Bad Cunt," "Dirty Prick," and "Shit Head" were reported to unsuspecting agents by the Lakota who were padding the census roles (28). Furthermore, Biolsi delimits the colonizing successes through which the US presence at Rosebud effected elements of "culture change." In this process, "particular kinds of individuals. . . bound to the state and civil society through various cultural and material means. . . were constructed. . . by the discourses and practices of the OIA [Office of Indian Affairs]," but he also states that "an autonomous Lakota culture survived and even thrived" (Biolsi 44). "The language, a rich social and ceremonial life, a native kinship system entailing rights and obligations, and an indigenous form of political process" all stand as evidence of this survivance (44).

Whereas Ngugi's formulation of the shapeshiftings of colonization unmasks the by-now-familiar imperialist subtext of assimilationist schooling, and Biolsi describes several ways that Natives subverted the manipulative efforts of the late 19th-century Office of Indian Affairs, in *Reservation Blues*, Sherman Alexie grapples with more recent incarnations of colonialism, as he reveals the ongoing assaults on indigeneity that are occurring at the level of representation, simulation and identity theft, as well as the ways that pernicious colonizing tactics have been internalized by many people on his fictionalized Spokane Reservation. However, respected Native critics Gloria Bird and Louis Owens have both recently mounted critiques upbraiding Alexie's fiction for "exaggerating the despair" of the Spokane community and for contributing to the discourse of the vanishing Indian.<sup>3</sup> While much of their criticism strikes me as warranted, and their essays attest to the ways that Native authors are increasingly held accountable to Native communities, as a Euroamerican critic I find myself in the awkward position of trying to redeem aspects of Alexie's novel. Such an effort is awkward, not only because of the identity politics that arise, but also because I hope to draw closer attention to how mimetic representation—writing that assumes a one-to-one relationship between on-the-

ground experience and written metaphor—tends to reify "Indianness" for non-Native readers, making a monolithic and simplistic vision of "the Indian" readily available for easy consumption. As I will address in greater detail, I read Alexie's use of over-the-top stereotypes of Natives and reservation life as a subversive gesture that masks the traditional core of the Spokane community from the imperious eyes of a largely non-Native readership. Whereas Gloria Bird excoriates Alexie for omitting the "core of native community," and for focusing instead upon "marginal. . . misfits" (49), in ways that fail "to put the social problems of economic instability, poverty, or cultural oppression into perspective" (51), I offer an alternate reading that analyzes the subversive qualities of Alexie's novel, how his depiction of these "misfits" and how the fictionalized Spokane community can be contextualized within the rubric of neocolonialism.

"Native American authors write new narratives of self-representation that critically question and often radically revise and subvert the dominant culture's conquest narratives and the mass-produced misrepresentations of Native Americans" states critic James Cox in a 1997 essay on Alexie's fiction (52-3). In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie certainly questions, revises and subverts as he explores and exposes the interplay between the ongoing "conquest narrative" expressed through neocolonial exertions of power and the ways that Natives resist and live alongside subtly-expressed, yet nevertheless, oppressive power structures. This first section offers a rough sketch of the critical conversations I will enter and engage in the remaining four chapters. The second will draw attention to how and why Alexie masks enduring Spokane cultural practices, through the use of subversive stereotypes and the rendering of strategic silences, from a potentially exploitative non-Native audience. The third addresses Euroamerican attempts, in the novel, to appropriate Native cultural property through forms of violence that become increasingly simulacral—transgressions at the level of representation—but that still inflect dire material consequence. The fourth draws attention to a particularly insidious aspect of colonization, internalized oppression, which turns community



members against each other. Although Alexie depicts the workings of internalized oppression on the fictionalized Spokane Reservation, he does so in a way that is incompletely foreboding, in that his novel also represents the ways that Natives continue to build community despite imposed hardships. The final chapter attends further to depictions of internalized oppression, analyzing how such oppression is channeled through community fears that the rock/blues band Coyote Springs will misrepresent the Spokane people. These fears arise out of a largely static vision of Native community that eventually drives the remaining members of the band to seek to establish a more dynamic community as they relocate to the city of Spokane. Significantly, the city lies well within the ancestral lands of the Spokane, thus Thomas, Chess, and Checkers' migration can be read as a reclamation of mobility, one that expresses what Vizenor calls "shadow survivance."

However, neocolonial conditions, including internalized oppression, do not historically determine the story of Alexie's Spokane Reservation. When analyzing fictionalized neocolonial conditions and the inherent difficulties that arise for Native writers who attempt to grapple with such conditions, it is not hard to agree with the main point made by Louis Owens (69, 77) and Gloria Bird (51): that it is especially crucial that popular Native fiction avoid exploiting Native communities. Both scholars seem to follow Elizabeth Cook-Lynn in criticizing Native literature that appears to fall short of serving communities, literature that fails to affirm specific aspects of tribal culture, as well as sovereignty and treaty rights. Nevertheless, as Leslie Marmon Silko, who has launched her own vituperative critiques against Louise Erdrich's fiction for similar shortcomings, states of small town life, that too easily community response to creative success can take the form of "the old cat who eats her kittens" (*Nation* "Review" 860). I fear that Alexie's brash public persona and his remarkable commercial success in a market notoriously unreceptive to Native literature may be causing some critics to subject his writing to a scrutiny that few, if any, Native novels could withstand. By this high

standard, I'm referring to Cook-Lynn's call for novels that retributively demand that land be returned, cultural specificity be affirmed, and treaty rights be honored (208–9, 212).

Bird's critique, which descends directly from Cook-Lynn's nationalist criteria, calls for a foregrounding of tribally specific details which firmly ground literary works in the cultures from which they arise. Cook-Lynn's 1993 essay, "The American Indian Fiction Writer: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World and First Nation Sovereignty," introduces a set of critical demands which Native American authors must engage to demonstrate their commitment to decolonization. At several points in this essay, Cook-Lynn acknowledges the potential costs of including tribally specific cultural material in contemporary novels. Noting first the potential for "abound[ing]" "exploitation" of such material (29), Cook-Lynn then argues that the goal of "establishing the myths and metaphors of sovereign nationalism" should outweigh concerns regarding cultural expropriation, as she advances that "[t]he reference body of nationalistic myths, legends, metaphors, [and] symbols . . . must form the basis of [Native] critical discourse" (30). Furthermore, she describes popular contemporary American Indian writers as being unable to take up the cause of "liberation literatures" because they are preoccupied with many emotions, among which are "mournfulness or loss or anger" (30). Throughout the essay, she works toward a definition of "nationalistic/ tribal resistance," which she positions alongside the more hazily defined "liberation literatures" as one of the avenues of resistance clouded over by writing that Cook-Lynn suggests are more emotionally self-indulgent (30). Rather than acknowledge the potentially liberatory process of mourning and coming to terms with loss and anger, of reckoning with the residual (and accruing) damage of the colonial process, Cook-Lynn would have the Native American author attend primarily to "the sovereign rights and obligations of citizens of the First Nations of America" (32).

As I will attempt to establish, Alexie's decisions to grapple with the unfinished mourning process of the fictionalized, colonized Spokane Indians and the retributive

message directed towards non-Native expropriators of traditional spirituality advance a vision of nationalism that differs from Cook-Lynn's. By attending to ongoing processes of mourning and healing in the fictionalized Spokane community, Alexie's fiction can be interpreted as developing a foundation upon which nation-building goals might be pursued by more cohesive communities.<sup>4</sup> To these ends, I see Alexie calling for a greater degree of Euroamerican answerability to charges of theft, specifically the ongoing expropriation of Native cultural property. But I also see him attending to the need for Native communities to mourn and reckon more fully with a legacy of colonization, as one of the less militant components of asserting community strength.

Bird's and Owens's criticisms of *Reservation Blues* are certainly more complex and textually specific than those I have quoted from Cook-Lynn, but like her critique, theirs seem to figure the need to emotionally reckon with the symptoms of colonization as mutually exclusive to attempts to affirm cultural strength and political power. As my later analysis will demonstrate, like Bird and Owens, I see Alexie anatomizing many of the shortcomings of the fictionalized Spokane community. Yet where they see community betrayal and commercial pandering, I see subversion of representational expectations and, in ways that are alternately candid and satirical, an attempt to grapple with problems rooted in colonization. Although I do read the final section of the novel as guardedly positive, offering an ending that bears a certain verisimilitude to the conditions of small rural towns throughout the US, but one that is shaded with specific Spokane history, I readily admit that Alexie spends little time reconstructing the fictionalized Spokane community whose shortcomings he has unflinchingly depicted. Nevertheless, I do see many of Alexie's characters turning to enduring cultural strength that arises out of an ongoing "shadow survivance." Drawing on the fortitude of those who have survived the earlier assaults of colonialism, many characters in *Reservation Blues* even reach beyond Spokane traditions into other forms of American resistance like the blues, as they

adapt old cultural forms to new topographies in order to successfully navigate through challenging neocolonial terrain.

Alexie's text certainly opens itself to critical interpretation by way of Gerald Vizenor's and Louis Owens's retooling of European poststructural theories to Native American literatures, and it invites consideration by way of Jace Weaver's and Robert Warrior's tailoring of postcolonial criticism to assert American Indian Nationalism, but it is Simon Ortiz's inclusive shaping of Native literary nationalism that invites all these voices, together with American "vernacular" theories of blues aesthetics, to the great critical potlatch which helps to elucidate the successes of *Reservation Blues* as a decolonizing text.<sup>5</sup>

Published in 1981, Ortiz's essay "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism," presents an inclusive vision of nationalist criticism. Predating by more than ten years Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's seminal essay on Native aesthetics of cosmopolitanism and nationalism that informs Gloria Bird's critique of Alexie's novel, not to mention the last decade's cosmopolitan gatherings and reconfigurations of poststructural and postcolonial theories by nationalist Native scholars, Ortiz's essay lauds Native authors' bricolages of Native and non-Native aesthetics as a means of subverting colonial efforts that demand unwavering allegiance to Euroamerican cultural practices. In this essay, Ortiz does not simply advance the other side of this binary by stridently driving towards essentialist assertions of tribal identity in which intercultural sharings and appropriations distort cultural purity and tribal specificity. Rather, he establishes the need of colonized cultures to ethically and aesthetically reckon with the colonizing culture, to exercise their "nationalistic impulse to make use of foreign ritual, ideas, and material in their own—Indian—terms" (8). Furthermore, Ortiz states that this appropriative "perception and meaningfulness has to happen; otherwise the hard experience of. . . Euroamerican colonization. . . would be driven into the dark recesses of the indigenous mind and psyche. And this kind of repression is always a poison and

detriment to creative growth and expression" (9). Describing creative responses to forced colonization as nationalistic resistance, Ortiz affirms the ways in which Native Americans have reshaped languages, rituals and cultural expressions of colonizing cultures to subvert apparently totalizing powers: to survive and thrive in defiance of forces which would prefer that they vanish (10). Finally, Ortiz's elaboration of the affinities shared between stories told by Native Americans and those told by struggling southern textile workers, in which the shared themes of "family, community, religion, humor, and rage" recur can be applied to *Reservation Blues*. It becomes clear by the ways in which Alexie appeals to blues aesthetics, and to other cosmopolitan aspects of American culture, that he is deploying cross-cultural tactics of survivance, which appropriate the expressive forms of the colonizing culture, such as the novelistic form, television references, and bureaucratically imposed hardships, as a means of subterfuge. Such subversions affirm an undeniable fact of Native survival: despite the genocidal efforts of a colonizing culture, Native fiction's creative reworking of oppressive representation (sometimes coupled with appropriately invoked cultural strengths) contributes greatly to other acts of resistance and cultural affirmation.

## II. The "Expected Idea" of the Indian and Alexie's Subversive Stereotypes

Alexie has frequently been harsh in his reproaches of non-Indians and American Indians alike. Whereas his novels have been largely well-received by Euroamerican critics, Native American critics have been more exacting in their responses to his work. One example of this criticism arises in the aforementioned essay by Spokane Indian poet and scholar, Gloria Bird. Her 1995 response to *Reservation Blues*, raised several issues which demand the critical attention of those who wish to come to terms with this novel. Illustrating misinterpretations made in an early review of the novel, Bird accuses Alexie of exaggerating and exploiting the despair of his community in a way that many will misinterpret as "accurate representation" (47). She evaluates several points of the novel where Alexie avoids mimesis, which I refer to in the Marxist sense as a direct "reflection of social reality" (Abrams 124), stating that rather than accurately depicting tribally-specific Spokane qualities, Alexie frequently reverts to "pan-Indian, non-specific representation" (51). Where Bird finds fault, I see Alexie purposefully sidestepping the pigeonholing of Indianness as an effort to undermine social science's efforts at owning "the Indian" through positivistic knowledge.

In this effort, Alexie is in the company of Gerald Vizenor, who urges Native writers to indulge in the "the pleasures of language games," forms of creativity that are too often constrained by readings through the lenses of social science realism that perpetuate "the imposition of cultural representation." Such impositions lead "the wild ironies of survivance, transformation, natural reason, and liberation in stories" to be cast aside as unrealistic, as not matching the collected, expected data (*MM* 76). Quoting Terence Des Pres, who has studied expressions of humor in the stories of Holocaust survivors, Vizenor advances his belief that the creative imagination that can story people back toward community health depends more upon the comic mode than mimetic representation: "realism, th[e] compulsion to reproduce exactly, . . . almost necessarily ensures defeat. Comic works, on the contrary, make no attempt to actual representation.

Laughter in this case, is hostile to the world it depicts. It is free as tragedy and lamentation are not" (82–3). And Alexie frequently turns to comedy and anti-realism to temper his harsh depictions of Indians who perpetuate colonization and of Euroamericans who attempt to co-opt and exploit indigeneity, which articulate several of the challenges to survival, development, and expression of Native American identities in the late twentieth century.

It is noteworthy that, as Bird has illustrated, Alexie's narrated reservation does not mimetically denote the "real" Spokane reservation. Although Bird does acknowledge postmodern techniques employed by Alexie, she dismisses the novel as irresponsible—a postmodern creation of the worst kind, which ironically revels in elements of the contemporary aesthetic that Fredric Jameson has referred to as the "waning of affect" and "ahistoricity."<sup>6</sup> Further, her critique advances the idea that Alexie's work of fiction is bound to lure unwitting readers into construing it as a neo-naturalist text, one that exaggerates the baneful conditions of the Spokane Reservation, and depicts inexorable forces at work—even today—vanishing Indians from a hostile neocolonial landscape. To exemplify the cultural confusion she believes that the text engenders, Bird addresses Alexie's peppering of his text with variants upon Native phrases. She argues that the novel's non-Native audience will be incapable of making informed decisions about American Indian language: "Mainstream readers who do not have access to native language usage. . . will not have a way to make an accurate assessment of its appearance in the novel and will rely solely upon what they read as being representationally accurate" (48). These critical shortcomings, she assumes, will extend to all aspects of the reading experience. At several points in her essay, Bird avers that the mainstream reader will come away from *Reservation Blues* having experienced nothing more than a mirroring of their own stereotypes, in which the novel merely "returns an image of a generic 'Indian' back to the original producers of that image" (49). With these claims and others like them throughout her essay, Bird dismisses Alexie's novel and its non-Native

audience as ultimately superficial. My reading of *Reservation Blues* will attempt to unravel this claim, to explore the effects (and causes) of the seeming superficiality of Alexie's aesthetics, and how his writerly choices function as subterfuge, playfully (and not so playfully) jabbing at readerly expectations.

Poststructural theorist Roland Barthes's 1970 book *S/Z*, offers bearings on the expectations of both the literary text and the audience. He declares that "the goal of literary work . . . is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4). Furthermore, Barthes defines "readerly" texts as those which are to be merely consumed, those which leave the reader with "no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text" (4). "Writerly" texts, on the other hand, are those which invite the reader to enter the realm of production, inviting the reader to "gain access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing" (4). Assuming that the "mainstream audience" which Bird refers to is a critically untrained, non-Native readership, in light of Alexie's hyperbolic style and his ironic tone, *Reservation Blues* too frequently opens itself to "writerly" interpretation for me to accept that such an audience would come away from the novel with the sense that Alexie had delivered an exhaustive, realistic representation of life on the Spokane Reservation.

Bird's essay dwells upon the novel's representational shortcomings—its failures as a "readerly" text—without allowing for the subversive power inherent in comedy as she further states that Alexie's novel depicts the "social problems of economic instability, poverty, [and] cultural oppression," yet one of the roots of her critique lies in the problem that "he does not attempt to put [these issues] into perspective"(51). I agree with many of the points that Bird raises, which are crucial to considerations of Native American literature as an aesthetic of decolonization, in which a primary concern before indigenous writers is "to accurately represent our communities without exploiting them" (51). Despite and, to a certain extent, because of several of the narrative elements critiqued by Bird, I believe that Alexie's *Reservation Blues* succeeds as a decolonizing text on



multiple levels. Alexie certainly does not offer an accurate representation of Spokane culture; nevertheless, I read his novel as representing poverty and cultural oppression within a neocolonial context, without selling out Spokane culture.

Based on the aesthetic techniques Alexie employs, and on comments he made in an interview conducted two years after Bird's article was published, I read Alexie's construction of the reservation as a subversive move. Declining to mimetically represent the Spokane Reservation, Alexie masks it within a blues aesthetic. He unflinchingly addresses despair, as blues does in its various contexts, yet he also offers glimpses of enduring strength, imbuing the created landscape with an air of immanent power, while sidestepping expectations that he dwell upon sensitive aspects of traditional Spokane culture.<sup>7</sup> Such expectations are placed upon Native American novelists not only by many "mainstream readers," but also by nationalist critics including Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Gloria Bird. The motives and reading tactics of these two groups are quite different, but both "mainstream audiences" and nationalist critics make constraining demands upon Native authors to confirm what Alexie has called "expected idea[s]" of Indianness (Purdy 8).<sup>8</sup> While Bird humorously trivializes the tastes of mainstreamers, stating that the "smudge sticks, sweatlodges and sweetgrass" fulfill their readerly desires, Cook-Lynn's previously cited passage calling for a "reference body of nationalistic myths, legends, metaphors, [and] symbols" exemplifies nationalist expectations.<sup>9</sup>

However, the expectations of both audiences do not stand unchallenged. In his 1983 essay that explores "the nature(s) of contemporary American Indian Poetry," Kenneth Roemer identifies "recurring patterns" in Native American literature, but he questions the tenability of relying upon such patterns to make "valid generalizations about contemporary American Indian literature" (178). Among the tropes that "signify" works within this field, tropes that begin to illustrate unexamined critical expectations of Native novels, Roemer includes: "the traditional Indian facing non-Indian secular ways, members of 'dead' cultures trying to revitalize empty modern lives, and the power of

words" (Roemer 178), and "the conflicts between cultures, the endurance and revitalization of oral traditions and ancient spiritual views, and the importance of the landscape" (Roemer 180). One of Alexie's poems in *Old Shirts, New Skins* (1993), "Introduction to Native American Literature" further questions the delimiting practices of both the reading experience of critics who impose prescriptive criteria upon literature, as well as that of a "mainstream readership," which might read American Indian literature to confirm stereotypes:

Because you gave something a name  
does not mean your name is important.. . //

Send it a letter: the address will keep changing.  
Give it a phone call: busy signal.  
Knock on its door: you'll hear voices.  
Look in its windows: shadows dance through the blinds. (4-5)

Professional critics and mainstream readers alike may approach Native literature seeking to classify it with familiar labels and to elicit expected responses when engaging it directly, but Alexie's poem illustrates the slipperiness of any such literature. The first stanza undercuts the self-aggrandizement that may accompany the critical process of assuming knowledge through naming. And in each line of the second quoted stanza, we see the ways in which Native American literature declines to offer up its full presence. The final line especially expresses this difference: "shadows," or the literature's elusive vitality, escape the imperious gaze, as they "dance through the blinds" (5).<sup>10</sup>

Although nationalist readings demand more than the predictable commodified trappings of Indianness expected by the generalized "mainstream audiences," they do impose a set of standards which constrain the dynamics of fiction. The stereotypes sought after by mainstreamers are replaced by nationalist expectations of essentialized tribal specificity that similarly fail to engage the richness of contemporary Native stories. Under the rubric of nationalist criticism, Alexie as an author of Spokane descent is apparently beholden to accurately represent a particular vision of Spokane culture. Bird's

critique of Alexie's "representations" and underestimation of the novel's audience continues:

Mainstream readers trust the 'native' novel mistaking it for complete representation. *Reservation Blues* as the representative 'native' novel, in actuality, omits the core of native community, and exists solely in the marginal realm of its characters who are all misfits: social and cultural anomalies. (49)

The nationalist charge "to represent communities without exploiting them" presents a primary focus of indigenous literary decolonization (51); however, Bird's last statement reveals several assumptions about Native American fiction and the reading public it attracts that require further examination. First, she presumes that a generalized "mainstream" audience reads "'native' novels" in a naively totalizing fashion, implying that they assume such texts (and their authors) are not sophisticated enough to (or otherwise choose not to) employ irony, mask-making, and subversion; thus, such readers are only capable of "mistaking [the novels] for complete representation" (49). Second, Bird presumes that this readership will read Alexie's text "as *the* representative 'native' novel" (emphasis added). Third, and most importantly, her essentializing vision of a Spokane cultural metanarrative, which she defines only by its absence in Alexie's novel, is particularly troubling in light of contemporary critical trends noted in Robert Warrior's call for increased Native literary nationalism, *Tribal Secrets*. Warrior notes that, among others: "[Kathryn] Shanley [(Assiniboine)] and Kimberly Blaeser (Ojibwa) have injected contemporary literary discourse with alternatives to forms of criticism that, in the end, stereotype and parochialize American Indian writing" (xviii). While Roemer's previously noted essay identifies and critiques the commonplace characteristics that readers use to identify Native literature, and Cook-Lynn's call for a "nationalist reference body. . . to form the basis of [Native] critical discourse" threatens to reinforce parochial tendencies, Warrior celebrates how Shanley and Blaeser, among other Native critics, attend to the "emergence of the voices of poor and urban Natives extremely alienated from tradition, gay and lesbian Natives who face persecution and discrimination in their own

communities, women with a feminist or woman-centered critical analysis, and other doubly and triply margined voices [as] also of critical importance in the shift of the past twenty years" (5). Many Native authors writing in the postmodern aesthetic, such as Alexie, Gerald Vizenor, and Thomas King, and numerous indigenous critics revel in the exploration of indigenous "ex-centricity,"<sup>11</sup> but Bird's vision would roll back these moves toward liberatory expression and critical response, demanding instead assiduous fidelity to perceiving, representing, and analyzing Native cultures as "parochial" unified entities. In her response to Alexie's "misrepresentations," Bird's call for normative cultural narratives bespeaks, to a certain extent, a form of internalized oppression. Rather than encouraging the dissenting creative energies of a fellow Native writer, she castigates Alexie upon the partially-grounded fear that a colonial audience will misread his novel as accurate representation of the Spokane Reservation.

Bird's reaction to the threatening misreadings of a Euroamerican audience drives her to demand greater cultural specificity, yet Alexie, when faced with the problem of writing to predominantly non-Native audiences chooses a different approach. Despite accusations that he is exploiting his culture (Bird 48-9), Alexie's stance in a 1997 interview bespeak different motives underpinning what I read as deliberate cultural maskings in his fiction:

We shouldn't be writing about our traditions, we shouldn't be writing about our cultural practices. Not in the ways that some people are doing it. Certainly, if you are writing a poem or story about a spiritual experience you had, you can do it. But you also have to be aware that it's going to be taken and used in ways that you never intended for it to be. . . .

I mean it's so funny, people. . . will think of me as being this very contemporary, very non-traditional guy, but I'm a lot more conservative in my take on Indian literature than any of those people are. I think . . . some of the Navajo stuff and some of the traditional chants. . . when rendered into English, mean nothing. . . . Our traditions are all about being, about taking place in a specific time and a specific geography. But when in a book that goes everywhere to anybody, *it's like a traveling road show of Indian spirituality*. (Purdy 15-16, italics added)

The motivations for Alexie's aesthetics are manifold. Based upon the above comments and his own experiences living on the reservation and in Spokane and Seattle, it is safe to

venture that partially in attempts to avoid the wholesale exploitation of Spokane spiritual practices and partially in hopes of giving voice to dislocated "pan-tribal" urban and otherwise "ex-centric" Indians, Alexie avoids representing distinctive aspects of traditional Spokane culture in *Reservation Blues*. Instead, he writes in the postcolonial mode articulated by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin describe how, in postcolonial texts, "the reconstruction of 'pure' cultural value is always conducted within a radically altered dynamic of power relations" (*Empire* 110). As I will later articulate, Alexie's "reconstruction" of Spokane "cultural values" is largely evocative, as he affirms the strength of Spokane culture through textual moments of what David Moore and Gerald Vizenor have respectively called "sacred silence" and "shadow survivance." These quiet moments of cultural affirmation are often overwhelmed by Alexie's masking of Spokane culturally specificity. As I will develop in the following sections of this study, Alexie masks Spokane culture by initially presenting hyperbolic stereotypes such as "*the* drunken Indian," or "*the* mystical storyteller," or "*the* buffalo hunter." These masks draw attention to how conventional history and the mass media have led Euroamericans to misconceive Native cultures and people as monolithic—as when Father Arnold expects to find buffalo on the Spokane Reservation (36).<sup>12</sup> Yet for readers to fixate upon Alexie's stereotypes is to miss that he frequently undermines them, revealing to his audience how these representations are exhausted, and how they cloud Euroamerican vision, preventing them from seeing individual Indians as "multidimensional and fully sentient being[s]" (Alfonso Ortiz 1). Although Alexie may be faulted for overzealously masking the cultural strengths of the Spokane culture, this seems motivated by the political desire to preserve cultural strengths while also trying to bring Euroamerican readers to a greater awareness of neocolonial conditions persisting on many reservations in the United States.

Using Cook-Lynn's criteria as the basis for judging the social responsibility of Native authors, Bird takes Alexie to task, without acknowledging that he may be writing

from a political stance that leads him to mask and conceal, rather than deliver to the commercial market, specific aspects of his cultural background:

It is a partial portrait of a community wherein there is no evidence of Spokane culture or traditions, or anything uniquely Spokane. There are no signs of elders, with the exception of Big Mom whose figure is exalted to mythic disproportions. Pan-Indianism becomes the axiom for *Indianness*, a borrowing from various cultures and traditions that, in the end, misconstrue [*sic*] what is Indian, or specifically what is Spokane, to the general public. (Bird 49)

Bird's analysis not only overlooks the subtle role of other elders in the novel, but it also fails to consider the motivations underlying Alexie's decision to "mis-represent" Spokane culture. We see this masking in Alexie's aesthetic choices; notably, as the narrator introduces Big Mom, we are given passing mention of "a few older Indians [who] still lived out in the deep woods in tipis and shacks, venturing into town for funerals and powwows. . ." (*RB* 7).<sup>13</sup> Elliptically noting the elders' storytelling abilities and explicitly referring to their participation in significant community gatherings—for mourning and for celebration—Alexie affirms their presence while reserving for them a sovereign secrecy, foregrounding instead the "disproportion[ate]," "pan-Indianness" of Big Mom. Mentioning the older Indians and establishing the ultimate hopefulness which Big Mom inspires in Thomas Builds-the-Fire and the Warm Waters sisters, who are members of the band Coyote Springs, Alexie's narrative "attests to the truth of [Edward] Said's repeated theme that there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems, no matter how totally they saturate society, and that it is this part of the oppressed that the oppressor cannot touch that makes change possible: in every situation, no matter how dominated it is there's always an alternative" (Weaver 11-12). Alexie's mention of the elders "in the deep woods" acknowledges the Spokanes who have chosen such an alternative.

The novel's description of the "alternative" exercised by these elders is but one of the situations in which he evokes the "shadow survivance" of Native people. In this passage, Alexie's respect for Spokane cultural practices can be elucidated by way of

David Moore's concept of "sacred silence." Moore, in his similarly subtitled 1997 essay, states that

[s]acred silence becomes linked to writers' choices to leave certain sacred materials unspoken and unrevealed. Textual evocations of cultural context suffice both ethically and aesthetically for certain representations, and indeed they perform cultural silences around sacred materials. This process engenders a different ethics of reading by recognizing a contextual aesthetics and a postcolonial politics of literary criticism. (641)

Read in this light, Alexie's silences surrounding specific Spokane cultural practices (and his playful audacity regarding commodified aspects of "expected idea[s]" of Indianness) can be considered as advancing a "contextual aesthetics and a postcolonial politics." Further, his evocation of the elders demonstrates his capacity for quiet reference to a tribal history of resistance, as this description partakes of what Vizenor refers to as "the silence that bears a referent of tribal memories and experience. The shadow words are active memories, and the memories of heard stories" (72).

The shadows borne by Alexie's reference to these holdouts are pregnant with the power of resistance exercised by Spokane Garry, a late nineteenth century leader of the Spokanes. Garry's story of survivance richly shadows *Reservation Blues*. Not only does his story shadow the mention of the backwoods elders, but as I will later address, when the members of Coyote Springs choose to move to the city of Spokane at the novel's finale, Garry's tenacious assertion of Native identity despite invidious colonial impositions resonates with Thomas, Chess, and Checkers' determination to affirm their aboriginality in challenging surroundings. According to historians Robert Ruby and John Brown, authors of *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun*, an early colonial overseer escorted Garry to an eastern missionary boarding school. Upon Garry's his return in 1855, he had been designated by the reigning territory subagent, A.J. Bolon, as "head chief of the Spokanes and interpreter for Indians on the east side of the Columbia River" (90). Notably, many other chiefs were dubious of Garry's qualifications and frustrated at "the government policy of designating certain chiefs as tribal heads over entire bands" (91). Usurping the sovereignty of the bands by appointing a leader and proposing "one

big reservation" in Nez Perce country which would consolidate Spokanes, Nez Perces, Walla Wallas, Umatillas, and Cayuses, the representatives of the new colonial power achieved partial success, gaining sixty thousand square miles from several tribes through aggressive treaty-making. However, Garry did not prove to be the "yes man" that Agent Bolon desired. In fact, rumors from the Walla Walla Council, the May 1855 meeting that territorial governor Isaac Stevens had convened in hopes of securing more Native lands, place Garry among leaders of four tribes who sought to declare war upon the Euroamericans.

Garry proved a tough, diplomatic negotiator when the Spokanes were beset by the military onslaughts of Colonel Steptoe and General George Wright between August and October 1858. Illustrative of the violence exerted upon the Spokanes, the place where Garry and his fellow holdouts who resisted relocation settled was renamed Hangman Creek. Called Latah Creek until 1858, it earned its nefarious name when General George Wright hanged six Natives there, initiating a two month run of state-sanctioned terrorism, during which a total of sixteen Indians were hanged, and thirty-three Natives were taken hostage for over sixty days to ensure the US troops' safe passage back to Fort Walla Walla. Paradoxically, Hangman Creek, the location of General Wright's most concentrated hegemonic terrorism, became the site of resistance for Garry and other traditional Spokanes unwilling to relocate. While Wright's hostilities with the Spokanes figures into my later analysis of *Reservation Blues*, the historical description of the holdouts' camp at Hangman Creek as well as their relationship with those whom had relocated onto reserved lands, also resonates deeply with Alexie's shadowed descriptions of the elders who still live "out in the deep woods." Furthermore, when one considers maps of the Spokanes' pre-colonial range (Ruby 17), and their twentieth century tribal claims (Ruby 301), comparing them with maps of the land actually reserved to the Spokanes (Ruby 155), Thomas, Chess, and Checkers' move to the city of Spokane takes on deeper significance.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Garry and the other holdouts' staked their claim to



stolen land, Coyote Springs' decision to move off the reservation to Spokane calls attention to the contested nature of Euroamerican claims to the land upon which that city was built. In both gestures, however, Native survivance is affirmed, as "bands" of Natives assert their right to inhabit ancestral lands despite the encroachment of Euroamericans.

After martial hostilities shapeshifted into commercial land-grabbing, Garry had advocated just as firmly for his fellow Spokanes who had resisted relocation onto the pan-tribal Colville and Couer d'Alene Reservations. The remaining Spokanes had been encouraged to abrogate their tribal relations and to turn to the Federal government to seek protection from the encroaching Northern Pacific Railroad. But Garry found legislation like the proposed Indian Homestead Act of 1875, which purportedly extended such "protection," to be just as suspect as the Railroad Act of 1864, "which [had] called for the extinction, 'as rapidly as may be consistent with public policy and the welfare of said Indians, ' of Indian titles to all lands falling under the act" (165), so he suggested that his fellow Spokanes hold out for the local reservation promised by Isaac Stevens in 1865.

But in January of 1881, six months before the railroad reached the town of Spokane Falls, President Rutherford Hayes ordered the creation of the Lower Spokane Reservation. Garry was ultimately unsuccessful in his efforts to reserve the more desirable Upper and Middle Spokane lands, and many of the remaining Spokanes would move onto the new reservation, which the congressional record had deemed, "the most worthless and barren"(179). In July of 1880, prior to the official creation of the reservation, the foundations of the reservation town, Wellpinit (a Nez Perce word meaning, "meadow stream which disappears"—fitting for a dry setting), were established. In March of 1887, a congressional commission eager to appease the desires of Euroamerican citizens of the newly established town of Spokane Falls and the concerns of Indian agents sought to place the remaining non-treaty Indians on the reservations. After eleven days of hearings, Garry was outvoiced and most of the

remaining Spokanes deeded "all right, title and claim" to "all lands lying outside the reservation" to the United States (192).

However, until his death in 1892, Garry successfully avoided departing his ancestral land for one of the reservations. Ruby and Brown's description of Garry echoes Ngugi's previously cited tracing of neocolonial permutations: after having lost several court cases, Garry "tire[d] of battling white men who fought in the courts with legal weapons as potent as the howitzers and improved rifles they had once used to defeat the Indians on the field of battle" (196). Garry eventually resigned himself to the futility of beating Euroamericans in their own courts, so, in 1891, he established residence with a settlement of Spokanes at the previously mentioned Hangman Creek. He had lost faith in attaining justice from US courts, but Garry and his fellow holdouts asserted communal claim to land that was rightfully theirs.

Just as Spokane Garry and the others subverted hegemonic powers as they asserted their claim to unreserved lands, Alexie stakes out his own aesthetic and ethical alternatives, as he works in and against the neocolonial media that shape, for non-Natives as well as for many Natives who came of age in the era of satellite television, popular visions of Native American identity.<sup>15</sup> Bird points out that *Reservation Blues* is rife with televisual and cinematic imagery (47), and at many points the novel defers detailed description of Spokane culture, presenting instead already commodified aspects of Native cultures, "to create a pan-Indian, non-specific representation of an Indian community that is flawed because of its exaggerated 'Indian' qualities" (51).<sup>16</sup> Not to put too fine a point on it, I cannot overlook the fact that, although my reading of *Reservation Blues* primarily traces how Alexie grapples with tragic neocolonial conditions, the novel rarely moves too far from the comic mode as a means of processing despair. So when Bird's close reading yields flaws like Alexie's substitution of "a sweatlodge (instead of the Northwest sweathouse)," as I will further speculate in section three, I wonder whether Alexie masks aspects of Spokane culture on purpose (49).<sup>17</sup>

Masking Indian cultural details that will be subjected to the scrutiny of non-Native audiences is by no means a new practice. Mick Gidley's 1997 study of Edward Curtis's nostalgic photography and filmmaking of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Natives reveals that while Curtis is known to have staged photographs, augmenting his subjects' attire with items from a portmanteau of regalia, in order to make them appear more authentically traditional, the photographed Natives also engaged in the process of "telling the truth, but. . . slant." Gidley notes that "contemporary Navajos knowledgeable about the Yeibichai, when shown the Curtis film footage and still images of the ceremony, have wryly pointed out that their forebears who performed for Curtis did everything backwards, presumably in order not to contravene tribal restrictions on the recording of such sacred rites" (101). Like the ethically motivated dancers who offered Curtis an altered version of the performance he solicited, Alexie proclaims his savvy regarding the primarily non-Native audience that will read his novels and how such audience might expropriate cultural practices that are intended to serve Native communities "in a specific time and a specific geography" (in Purdy 16).

Concealed by pan-tribal masks and cloaked by the deferred presence of traditional Spokane elders and traditions, the social conditions of the reservation are indeed "out of perspective," denying the critical eye that would scrutinize the text to confirm the metanarratives of social science—modes of reading which cast Native Americans as the objects, rather than the subjects of history.<sup>18</sup> In *Narrative Chance*, Gerald Vizenor articulates the power of the "trickster and comic liberator. . .to lessen the power of social science and bourgeois humanism. . . . This comic liberator is a healer in language games, chance and postmodern imagination; the trickster. . . 'denies presence and completion,' . . . and the instrumental language of social science"(192). In addition to the trickster's power to elude the knowing eye of academic objectivism, Vizenor describes the trickster's power to challenge "culture hobbyists enchanted by abstruse emblems and assumed tribal values" (193). Although I do not intend to attempt a formulaic coyote-

tracking of trickster techniques in *Reservation Blues*, it is important to acknowledge the subversiveness of Alexie's novel, as it carves out space for modes of Indian narration and identity that move beyond what Alexie disparages as "adherence to the expected idea [of traditional Indian imagery and spirituality, which is]. . . is dangerous and detrimental" (in Purdy 8).

Bearing metaphoric import for the healing values of community, the characterization of Big Mom sidesteps the "road-show" problematics of attempting to accurately present Spokane elders and their culturally specific teachings. While Bird critiques Alexie's "exaggerated," "pan-Indian, non-specific representation of an Indian community" in which "[i]ntermittently sprinkled throughout the novel like bait are sage-smudging, stickgame, sweetgrass enough to titilate the curiosity of non-Native readers—while simultaneously mishmashing Indian cultures," she fails to consider the utility of his mask-making as a viable aesthetic and ethical tactic (51).<sup>19</sup> Cataloging several of the spurious indicators of Indianness, Bird's critique emphasizes Alexie's resolve to limit his work to treatment of cultural elements that are already thoroughly commodified, reserving a dignified secrecy for the aspects of Spokane culture which, like the elders in the "deep woods," are concealed from the imperious gaze of the reader.

Restricting the reader's gaze to these already fetishized aspects of Native American cultures, while subverting expectations that Native American novelists are compelled to reveal specific aspects of his cultural tradition, Alexie works toward one of the stated goals of his filmmaking efforts: "after the movie, if they can see Indians as *nothing else but human beings*, it'll be a success" (Purdy 17, italics added). This attitude may draw the ire of fellow Spokanes such as Gloria Bird, but it is important to consider the audience which receives Alexie's novels. As Alexie states of Native American writers, "99% of our audience is going to be non-Indian"(Purdy 15). Inclusion of specific traditional aspects of Spokane culture may benefit those in the diaspora of urban Indians, but, given the predominantly non-Native audience, it seems prudent that vital aspects of

Spokane spirituality—cultural practices which make them distinct from Euroamericans and from sweeping pan-tribal Indianness—would be reserved for intratribal oral transmission.

### III. "Who's to say you're not Indian enough?": Commodification, Simulation, and the Vanishing [of the] Indian

*Reservation Blues* astutely draws continuities between the bloody subjugation of the Spokane Indians and the attempted perpetuation of this colonizing project through "the cultural logic of late capital" (Jameson xviii-xx). In the caricatures of two New Age Indian Princess wannabees, Betty and Veronica, and the transfiguration of three nineteenth-century "Indian Haters," George Wright, Phillip Sheridan, and George Armstrong Custer into twentieth century executives at Cavalry Records, we see the extension of Jackson-era vanishing Indian rhetoric into the contemporary tactics of commodification and expropriation. While Andrew Jackson's personal stance was that Indians should be "removed from their lands and segregated from whites," the prevailing discourse during his presidency betrayed the belief "that Indians were destined to die off—to vanish in the face of a superior race" a belief which permuted in the late nineteenth century into "view[ing] them as savages who, if they refused to disappear, deserved extermination" (*Playing Indian* 103-4). This discourse of the vanishing Indian manifests in Alexie's novel and in contemporary cultural practices as Euroamerican hobbyists, New Agers, and wannabee performers try to perfect their Indian simulations, viewing the real, lived experiences of Native Americans as irrelevant hindrances to their profiteering fantasies—if "the primitives" can't do "Indianness" correctly, they should vanish and make way for "the professionals."

This "cultural logic" reveals itself in a postmodern battle for control of representation and identity that bears the "shadow referents" of the earlier, more sanguinary history of colonization.<sup>20</sup> While the colonizing forces of earlier decades primarily targeted Native lands and physically threatened Native lives that prevented expansion, the contemporary struggle for representation reinforces earlier Euroamerican victories by inscribing Native defeat as inevitable. And in these contemporary struggles, the contested terrain is consciousness—both Native and non—as the increased "cultural capital"<sup>21</sup> of Native identity is jealously desired by Euroamerican inheritors of conquest.

In *Reservation Blues*, this trend toward exploiting Native culture for the entertainment of white audiences has roots in the history of Indian and white relations in the Pacific Northwest. In *fin de siecle* Spokane, Native Americans became "a source of entertainment for whites at special occasions, since the latter knew most of them would return to their reservations once the events were over" (Ruby and Brown 208-9),<sup>22</sup> and because by that time "white supremacy [was] assured" ( 258). Though they were initially unpaid for their efforts "to amuse spectators by displaying remnants of their culture," they later contracted through tribal officials for payment from fair organizers (258). At one such fair, Spokane's Northwest Industrial Exposition, the first "Red Man's Day" was held in October 1900, and Indians "were rounded up, with faces daubed with paint, [and] mounted a platform to dance for the crowd" (209).

To illustrate the shifting Euroamerican reception of Native culture, one need only look nine years earlier in the historical record, when, in 1891, similar performances that were neither staged nor managed under the watch of Euroamericans awakened in the minds of the city's residents the latent power of the martially subdued Indian. Less than six months after the Wounded Knee Massacre, whites who may have but faintly apprehended the unjust tentativeness of their own conquest feared that Indians in the vicinity of Fort Spokane and the Colville Reservation were dancing the "Messiah Dance," also known as the Ghost Dance, of Wounded Knee infamy (199). Paranoid Euroamericans had passed on rumors that there were "Sioux emissaries carrying the message of the dance to the west"(199). To their relief, but to the dejection of their paranoid delusions, they learned that the Spokanes were not planning an insurrection, but attending to their own well-being— performing "the mid-winter Chinook dances to implore the Great Spirit to send a mild winter" (199).

Nevertheless, Euroamerican fear of Native uprising undoubtedly inspired aggressive assimilatory programs prosecuted upon the Spokanes. Three years after the "Chinook dancing incident," the first reservation school was established, augmenting the

colonizing matrix of commerce, religion, military, and bureaucracy. Any doubt that aspects of Spokane culture, threatening because of their survival, was the target of such schooling dissolves as Ruby and Brown describe the "pedagogy" of Miss Helen Clark, the school's first teacher who viewed her duties as "teach[ing] school. . . and above all, break[ing] down the customs of generations. . . believ[ing] she had one weapon in her arsenal, the Bible" (211). Although Clark proved a committed advocate, protecting the Indians from encroaching whites, she certainly did her fair share of vanishing their Indianness, dismissing their Chinook dances as "their darling sin. . . the greatest barrier there is to civilization"(212). Her effectiveness in this civilizing mission by educating Spokanes in the fine art of cultural self-loathing is revealed as one of Clark's Spokane friends eulogized her: "she came to us when we were in the depths of superstition, and everything bad, but she stayed by us till we rose"(216).

Manifesting the continuities between military subjugation and cultural assimilation of the Spokanes, and also echoing Michel Foucault's poignant observation that "prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons" (*Discipline and Punish* 228), "the opening of the Fort Spokane boarding school coincided with its abandonment by the army. Barracks that once housed soldiers who were keeping an eye on the Spokanes now sheltered the Spokane children. Drill grounds became playgrounds" (Ruby 216). The 1899 creation of the boarding school coincided with the ongoing federal policy of assimilation, implemented through other schools such as the Carlisle Institute, whose founder Colonel Pratt coined the school's slogan: "Kill the Indian and save the man!" (Warrior 6). While Carlisle's administrators sought "to turn young Natives against the traditions of their communities by any means necessary" (Warrior 7), the techniques of the Spokane Boarding school were more subtle. As the editor of a Wilbur, Washington newspaper remarked: "Instead of being taken away and placed among refined people to be educated and then brought back only to become disgusted with their surroundings, these children. . . are taught how to be civilized,



without losing respect for parents and kindred. . . . They may not be so highly polished. . . but they will take on a finish that is bound to be more lasting" (Ruby 221). Replacing the surveillance of army troops, the Spokane children were inculcated with Euroamerican customs, then encouraged to refine these practices within their own families.<sup>23</sup> Due to waning attendance, the boarding school was closed and replaced by two day schools, and following the patterns of institutional permutation offered by the Foucauldean trajectory, the fort barracks were converted into a sanitorium (Ruby 228). In such transitions, I see the shifting tactics of Euroamericans who have attempted to reconstitute the material and psychic conditions of Spokane Indians in ways that continue well into the twentieth century, where commodified Native culture has acquired substantial "cultural capital" in the eyes of a generalized American popular culture that seeks exotic, but safe, spiritual rejuvenation (or at least baubles like smudgesticks that signify Native revitalization).

Philip Deloria, commenting on 1950s powwows held by Indian hobbyists, who were Euroamerican aficionados of Indian dress and custom, notes that Native Americans were hired as singers, contest judges and champion dancers. In the era of federal termination policy "aimed aggressively to devalue Indian cultures," Deloria postulates that "the high value placed on Indian cultures may have helped to fortify Indian identities in the face of the perceived loss of older traditions. . . . [M]any Indians found it more valuable to imitate their own elders. Mirror-image exchanges between Indians and hobbyists exhibited a new tendency to point Indian people toward native cultures rather than toward non-Indian stereotypes" (146-7). Ironically, this mid-century commodification of Indian authenticity countered the economic incentives to assimilate (via relocation) into Euroamerican culture, inspiring powwow-attending Indians to develop, if not merely affect, deeper connections with the traditions of their elders.

Although Native knowledge and power was occasionally affirmed and materially rewarded, this practice was "confined largely to the powwow grounds. Outside, Indian people still faced racism, poverty, and coercive government policies aimed at destroying

the very qualities hobbyists cherished" (*Playing Indian* 152). Writing of the contradictions found in the asymmetrical flow of power in contemporary culture, Philip Deloria states:

One channel maintains a social hierarchy; the other maintains a contradictory ethic of multicultural egalitarianism. The power to define and exclude, the power to appropriate and co-opt, the power to speak and resist, and the power to build new, hybrid worlds are sometimes one and the same, and that power flows through interlocked social and cultural systems, simultaneously directed and channeled by humans and yet often beyond human control. . . .

Indian people have, for more than one hundred years, lacked military power. Being militarily defeated, they found that social, political, and economic power were often hard to come by as well. Native people have been keenly aware, however, that in their relations to white Americans they do in fact possess some mysterious well of power. (178)

One of the ways of accounting for the “mysterious well of power” possessed by many Natives despite their lack of military or economic power lies in Bourdieu’s articulation of “cultural capital” (See endnote 17).<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the scope of American history examined by Deloria, most Euroamericans who took to “playing Indian” enjoyed material success, but the allure of indigeneity has actually benefitted Native people but scantily. In the period most relevant to *Reservation Blues*—the late twentieth century—the appropriation of Native identities synchronized with countercultural reactions to the banalities of American empire, which Deloria describes as “consumptive excess, alienated individualism, immoral authority, and capitalism red in tooth and claw” (155). For young people disaffected with mainstream Euroamerica in the 1960s and 1970s, Indians signified authentic Americanness, subsistence economy, and legitimate authority—the accessibility of all that bloated and corrupt America had lost. New Agers in the 70s and the decades that followed certainly admired the noble social order ascribed to romanticized Indians, but they placed even greater power on the spiritual power “inherent” to indigenous religions. Less concerned with recovering idyllic social orders than their hippie predecessors, New Agers wrested Native religions from community contexts to cobble together self-serving spiritual paths. Unlike other phases in the American history of “playing Indian,” the late

twentieth century has been marked by a Euroamerican distancing from “real” Natives in favor of texts that detail Indian cultural and spiritual practices. Whereas contact with Natives might force New Agers or Hippies to rethink how they have romanticized and appropriated Indian practices, indigenous customs relegated to the written word can be shamelessly manipulated in ways that are utterly unaccountable to the Native communities from which they have been appropriated. Thus, only the unscrupulous few who are willing to share cultural secrets with Euroamericans cash in on both cultural and the economic capital. As Deloria indicates above, many of those who do not attempt to cash in on their cultural capital are left to bear the burden of romanticized representations of Natives disseminated by plastic shamans.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Euroamerican desires to partake of Native “cultural capital,” or “the mysterious well of power” possessed by Indians, certainly play a role in the tectonics of power, that in the best cases can bring about a greater degree of Euroamerican “answerability” to the claims and concerns of Native people.

While Alexie has come under fire for his depiction of the Spokane Reservation, what Bird has labeled as his “exaggeration of despair” serves as a vehicle for consciousness-raising, for drawing critical attention to the ideological and material costs incurred by hobbyists and New Age appropriators of indigenous practices. Although the two New Age characters Betty and Veronica offer ingress into meaningful analysis of Euroamerican expropriation of Native cultural property, we cannot overlook the comic mode at work, as the white women bear the names of sheltered, affluent teenagers from the popular comic book series, *Archie*, and as their actions reveal a hyperbolic degree of ignorance, coupled with a desire to possess only the desirable aspects of Native cultures, as they perceive them. Betty and Veronica enjoy the privileges afforded by their whiteness, yet they “borrow” the cultural trappings of an ethnic group, unconcerned with the fact that many of the people whose culture they have expropriated experience an excruciatingly less privileged material reality.<sup>26</sup> Their borrowed identities permute into

actual theft of cultural property when they assume simulated Native identities to steal a recording contract that should have been rightfully reserved for a "real" Indian band such as Coyote Springs.

The material and representational poverty of which Betty and Veronica are ignorant is evoked as Thomas Builds-the-Fire "turned on his little black-and-white television to watch white people live. White people owned everything: food, houses, clothes, children. Television constantly reminded Thomas of all he never owned. For hours, Thomas searched the television for evidence of Indians. . ." (70). Doubly disenfranchised, Thomas lives amidst material impoverishment while the television, the great mediator of cultural power, denies him any dynamic vision of Native Americans. This static media representation of American Indians is reinforced as the Catholic priest Father Arnold arrives in Wellpinit, shocked that there were neither buffaloes nor teepees, as TV had led him to expect. He is given a quick history lesson by Bessie, one of the Catholic Spokanes: "there weren't any buffalo here to begin with. We're a salmon tribe. At least, we were a salmon tribe before they put those dams on the river"(36). Here the politics of representation and material history converge. Just as the television disseminates images that would have the unwitting believe bands of Lakota-looking, buffalo-hunting, sage-smudging Indians synecdochically stand for all Native Americans, the aggregate ethnocidal acts—such as the damming of rivers, preventing subsistence—go unreported. Despite the novel's groundings in the cultural geography of Spokane country, it would be a mistake to read the text reductively as a document of realistic reportage. Instead, I read it as a fictional, corrective counter-history in which surviving, unexploited Spokane and Flathead traditions are conserved, while there is a free expenditure of already-commodified aspects of pan-tribal Indianness.<sup>27</sup> The readily available presence of these fetishized cultural elements, as pointed out by Bird—"smudge sticks, sweatlodges and sweetgrass"—masks the enduring tribal distinctiveness. Notably, although Alexie refrains from exposing sensitive cultural material, in passages such as

the preceding, in which the narrative affirms distinct qualities of Spokane culture—they're salmon, not buffalo people—Bird's claim that the novel offers little more than glossy pan-tribalness wears a bit thin. Coupled with this cultural conservation is Alexie's scathing counterrepresentation of insouciant New Agers who are confronted with the unavoidable (perhaps exaggerated) depiction of the material conditions which are occluded when—to return to Alexie's earlier comment—Native spirituality is separated from the "specific time and specific geography" that imparts its significance (in Purdy 16).

Recalling an early sighting at a Coyote Springs concert, Thomas describes Betty and Veronica, the co-owners of a New Age bookstore in Seattle: "[t]hey got more Indian jewelry and junk on than any dozen Indians. The spotlights hit the crystals on their necks and nearly blinded me once. All they talk about is Coyote this and Coyote that, sweatlodge this and sweatlodge that. They think Indians got all the answers"(158). Later, in Betty's own words, "[w]hite people want to be Indians. You all have things we don't have. You live at peace with the Earth. You are so wise"(168). To which Chess, one of the Salish Warm Waters sisters who joins Coyote Springs responds, "[y]ou've never spent a few hours at the Powwow Tavern. I'll show you wise and peaceful"(168). Father Arnold's stereotyping was informed by television and education and it was largely corrected by his experience on the Spokane Reservation, but Betty and Veronica's representational misapprehensions are of the next magnitude: they do not merely *misperceive* Indianness; they ultimately *claim* Indianness as their own. Having consumed mass-media representations of Native Americans, they have very likely sought out and read a number of books on Indian spirituality, and from their talk of sweatlodges, the cynical reader might assume that if they have not done so already, they would snap at the opportunity to pay a "plastic shaman" for an authentic Lakota vision quest.

Betty's and Veronica's misperceptions and their wholesale commodification of indigenous spirituality is problematic on several levels. Unlike proselytizing religions

such as Christianity that structurally depend upon ever-expanding flocks, the vitality of many Native American spiritual practices is not contingent upon converting the masses. While Christianity, as one of the world's largest religions, actively (and often aggressively) seeks out new members and demands little knowledge of them, many Native spiritual practices are shared only with individuals whom practitioners have deemed ready to receive sacred knowledge. Furthermore, many Native practices are believed to diminish in vitality when practiced by people who have neither been acknowledged as ready for specific knowledge, nor have been properly prepared to gain access to sacred Native practices (often by purchasing such access). Atop the actual harmfulness of the uninitiated gaining access to intratribally shared, sacred practices is the observed pattern that many counterculturists and New Agers "preferred a symbolic life of tipis and buckskins to lessons that might be hard won and ideologically distasteful" (P. Deloria 159). Wearing "more Indian jewelry and junk than any dozen Indians" indicates not only Betty's and Veronica's tactlessness, but also their relative material privilege—their unwillingness to acknowledge the vast spectrum of lived Indian experience. Even in the highly unlikely event that any dozen Indians would choose to pile on crystals and other spurious signifiers of aboriginality, many of them probably could not afford the marked-up turquoise available in the Capitol Hill district of Seattle, where we are told these wannabees live. Most of the jewelry would in actuality be available from Indians within their communities, and the prospect of their own jewelry and spirituality being priced beyond the means of Native Americans is cause for concern that reveals another facet of the cultural and economic privilege enjoyed by Betty and Veronica.

Though this distancing proves convenient to New Agers such as Betty and Veronica, when they actually spend time on the Spokane Reservation they are confronted with aspects of Native life that they do not want to acknowledge. When the violent Michael White Hawk beats the sense out of the already drunk Junior and Victor, it is the

"man-who-was-probably-Lakota," known for his litany, "the end of the world is near," who drops his nihilistic, apocalyptic mask to come to their aid, knocking White Hawk upside the head with a two-by-four. One of the onlookers says of the man-who-was-probably-Lakota's action in a line which typifies the novel's dark humor, "the end of the world is upside Michael White Hawk's head" (182). The man-who-was-probably-Lakota's quick transition from resigned, nebulous proclamation into decisive counterviolent action coincides with Betty and Veronica's dark epiphany. Watching the crowd, the New Agers see that "a few rooted openly for White Hawk; most celebrated the general violence of it all," and Betty and Veronica tried to aid their drunken "Indian boys" (182). Shrugging off their attempt to jump into the fray, White Hawk throws Betty against the phone booth, and he breaks Veronica's nose with a backhand blow. Veronica's own litany progresses from "What are we doing?"(168) to "What the hell are we doing here?" (181) to "What the fuck are we doing here?"(183). Until this point, Betty's response has been noncommittal: "I don't know," but this time they decide to return to Seattle. Responding to their observation that "it's nuts here," Chess says "I thought you wanted some of our wisdom?" To which Veronica replies, advancing the following exchange:

"We didn't want it to be like this." "What?" Chess asked. "Can't you handle it? You want the good stuff of being an Indian without all the bad stuff, enit? Well, a concussion is just as traditional as a sweatlodge."<sup>28</sup> "*This isn't what we wanted.*" "What did you New Agers expect? You think magic is so easy to explain? You come running to the reservations, to all these places *you've decided are sacred*"(184, italics added).

In this passage, the despair that Alexie "exaggerates" serves an ideological function. Responding to the romanticization of Native life exemplified by Betty and Veronica, Alexie crafts a scenario which hyperbolically presents the underside of the fictionalized Spokane Reservation, in ways that challenge the Seattle women's sanitized, easily consumable vision of reservation life.

Betty's and Veronica's actions and statements coincide with Philip Deloria's appraisal:

In New Age identity quests, one can see. . . increasing reliance on texts and interpretations, runaway individualism within a rhetoric of community, the distancing of native people, and a gaping disjuncture between a cultural realm of serious play and the power dynamics of social conflict. New Age thinking tends to focus on ultimate individual liberation and engagement with a higher power, having little interest in the social world that lies between self and spirit (170).

Violently confronted with a social world which defies their desired inscription and interpretation of sacredness, a world in which the New Agers can no longer experience Indianness on their own terms, Betty and Veronica arrange their return to Seattle where I can only imagine that they can again ensconce themselves within the protective bubble provided by books authored by “plastic shamans” as the privileged wannabees strive towards personal enlightenment.<sup>29</sup>

Philip Deloria's perspective is essential to considerations of commodified Native American spirituality and convenient distancing from real Indians:

[B]ooks and instruction proved the standard means of gaining access to [Indian spiritual experience]. The hobbyists of the 1950's had used texts, but many had also turned to real Indians. Counterculture spiritualists sought out Indians, to be sure, but. . . the number of people who actually 'studied with' Indian teachers was small relative to the many more who read and interpreted the books and periodicals. . . . Non-Indians began taking up permanent native identities in order to lay claim to the cultural power of Indianness in the white imagination. Likewise, many native people found empowerment in a white-focused, spiritual mediator's role, and they acted accordingly. It became difficult to sort out who was whom along this continuum, and the question of mediators' Indian identity has been fiercely and frequently contested ever since.

. . .[T]his brand of countercultural spiritualism rarely engaged real Indians, for it was not only unnecessary but inconvenient to do so. Ambiguous people like Sun Bear proved acceptable, for they served not to reveal lines between Indian and non-Indian but to blur them even further. (168-9)<sup>30</sup>

Deloria's critique of New Age imaginings of Indianness that arise out of readings of Native-authored books abuts my earlier discussion of reading *Reservation Blues*, in Roland Barthes's words, as a “writerly,” rather than a “readerly” text. Like Bird or Cook-Lynn, Deloria draws our attention to the social conditions of “real” Natives, illustrating how spiritual texts that target white audiences too often unmoor indigenous cultural practices from the real lived conditions of contemporary Natives. *Reservation Blues* can



be productively read as a “writerly” text that invites the reader to engage in the comic and tragic strands, to discern satire and irony amidst hyperbolic depictions of the challenges posed by neocolonialism, and to consider the ways that the survivance of the novel’s characters is shaded by earlier “tribal referents.” Conversely, texts like the *Many Smokes* magazine that Sun Bear published, or the books on Native culture written by Jamake Highwater lack the subtleties of representation and identity found in Alexie’s novel. Instead the “plastic shaman’s” periodical and Highwater’s “authoritative” texts avail themselves to easy consumption, in the spirit of Barthes “readerly text” (Barthes 4).

Thus I see Betty and Veronica exemplifying the demand side of commodified Indianness, as I continue to read Alexie’s engagement of neocolonial questions of identity in *Reservation Blues*. The manipulation of the supply side of this equation is articulated as Alexie depicts Cavalry Records’ attempts to control and repackage “Coyote Springs.” As General George Wright who is resurrected as a recording executive puts it: “Indians are big these days. Way popular, right?” (223). At their second gig on the Flathead Reservation, we learn that “Coyote Springs created a tribal music that scared and excited the white people in the audience” (80). As we have seen in the shifting *fin-de-siecle* attitudes towards Spokane dancing, there are many stopping points on the historical trajectory of the Euroamerican relationship to Native music.

Perceived as posing only a minor threat, Coyote Springs, the band which Cavalry Records attempts to reconstitute, invites interpretation by way of Gerald Vizenor’s reading of Jean Baudrillard: “[W]hen the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning,” wrote Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulations*. “There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity.” Nostalgia, and the melancholia of dominance, are common sources of simulations. . .”(MM 25). In a state of neocolonial ennui—experiencing “the melancholia of dominance”—the white audience members in *Reservation Blues* are revived by the fear and excitement provoked by the subdued threat. “Music [that] might have chased

away the pilgrims five hundred years ago" elicits in the contemporary Euroamerican audience only a nostalgic tingling of fear (*RB* 80).

This excitement is enough for the marketing gurus of the record company who proclaim that "there's been an upswing in the economic popularity of Indians lately. I mean, there's a lot of demographics and audience surveys and that other scientific shit"(272). These words of Philip Sheridan, 19th-century "Indian Hater" turned 20th-century recording executive are but one aspect of the embodiment of nostalgia and the melancholia of dominance. Long miscredited with having coined the more aphoristic phrase "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," Sheridan's actual words were "the only good Indians I ever saw were dead" (Drinnon 539).<sup>31</sup> While he certainly saw plenty of "good Indians" in the campaigns that he executed against numerous bands of Plains Indians, in his 20th-century position as recording executive, his nostalgic role relegates him to the slow bloodletting of commercial exploitation. And his vision of the "good Indian" must shift accordingly.

Initially, it seems, the members of Coyote Springs could prove "good." When Sheridan and his partner, George Wright—another figure familiar from bloodier 19th century assaults upon Indianness—fax their supervisor Mr. Armstrong (no doubt, a comic reference to George Armstrong Custer), their letter bears haunting echoes of various stages of US Indian policy. Referring to Thomas's playing a "competent" bass guitar, and the "ambition" of Checkers who had rejoined the band when the executives showed up, we see the discourse of allotment era evaluations by Indian agents who subjected Native populations to their normalizing gaze and authority, as the agents evaluated how successfully Native Americans could be adapted to the needs of Euroamerica.<sup>32</sup> Colonial US determinations of "authentic" Indianness through blood quantum and appearance are also recapitulated as the letter stereotypes the band: "overall, this band looks and sounds Indian. They all have dark skin. Chess, Checkers and Junior have long hair. Thomas has a big nose, and Victor has many scars"(190). In their stated plan to "fly the band out to

New York. . . to see what they can do outside their home environment," we hear echoes of mid 20th-century relocation discourse. And, in the general preoccupation with their appearance—and how it can be tweaked to draw in bigger audience—the late 20th-century discourse of reconstituting and commodifying Indianness emerges. This is revealed in statements such as

"both [Chess and Checkers] would attract men. . . . Sort of that exotic animalistic woman thing. . . . Junior Polatkin is only average on drums but is a very good-looking man. Very ethnically handsome. He should bring in the teenage girls. . . . [Thomas] is just sort of goofy looking, with Buddy Holly glasses and crooked teeth. Victor Joseph looks like a train ran over him in 1976. Perhaps we can focus on the grunge/punk angle for him. . . . We can really dress this group up, give them war paint, feathers, etc., and really play up the Indian angle. I think this band could prove to be very lucrative for Cavalry Records" (190).

Notably, the smug (cavalier) tone of the letter, replete with curt fragments and breezy asides simultaneously evokes the mannerisms of 19th-century army field reports and 20th-century corporate memos.

The suggestion to repackage Victor as “grunge/punk” illustrates but one of the points in the novel where the reconstituting, hegemonic Euroamerican narrative—which monologically mediates representation—attempts to cover over the poverty of Victor's experience of reservation life, to sanitize his image so that it is marketable to consumers such as Betty and Veronica. Recall that Victor's peculiar wardrobe has a specific history: "Victor was the reservation John Travolta because he still wore clothes from the disco era. He had won a few thousand dollars in Reno back in 1979, just after he graduated from high school. He bought a closet full of silk shirts and polyester pants and had never had any money since then to buy anything new. . . . His wardrobe made him an angry man"(12).

The final two sentences of the faxed letter further articulate the tentacular grasp of "the cultural logic of late capitalism"(Jameson xviii), which wrenches subjects loose from history and substantial context, reifying them into the service of commerce. Basically, what is being proposed is to recreate the band as a harmless self-parody. As Sheridan and

Wright speculate about costuming Coyote Springs in "war paint and feathers," one can envision a band comprised of five variations upon the theme of "the Indian" from the denizens of early 1980s camp, the Village People.

When the band travels to their studio session in New York, things fall apart, and the Indians prove "good" in the sense that they disappear back to the reservation. Again, the disparity is vast between the privileged world of the hegemonic representors of America and that of the Indian performers. Recalling the passage in which Coyote Springs coaxes their ancient blue van to Seattle, only to find that they have been misled by a letter that seemingly guaranteed a \$1000 gig, rather than the actual all-or-nothing, one-in-thirty shot at winning a battle of bands (125, 135), Sheridan's response to the band's New York failure underscores this rift, highlighting his cavalier disregard for them.<sup>33</sup> "My ass is on the line here. I brought you little shits here. You screwed me over. Now, I'm going to try and fix this. . . . Why don't you head over to your hotel and wait this out. We'll fly you back to the reservation in the morning. . . . We'll give Mr. Armstrong a couple months, and then we'll try it again." To which Thomas replies, "We don't have a couple months"(228–29). Sheridan persists in his arrogance: "'Jesus . . . it isn't that bad. You got a free trip to New York. You aren't leaving until tomorrow. You've got a whole night in Manhattan to yourselves. I'll even treat you to a nice evening. Some dinner, dancing, the sights.' Sheridan pulled out his wallet and dropped a few bills on the floor near Victor. Chess and Checkers quickly picked up the money and threw it in Sheridan's face" (228). Ignorant of the community expectations Coyote Springs left behind in Wellpinit, and working upon the narcissistic class- and culture-based assumption that the bandmembers were fulfilling some sort of dream by spending half a day flying into the chaos of New York City, Sheridan makes it sound as if they should be grateful that they got a free vacation out of the deal.

Chess and Checkers's dignifying response resonates with Gerald Vizenor's recounting of Luther Standing Bear's story of his journey to the Carlisle School in

Pennsylvania. Standing on the platform with other Dakota children, waiting for the Eastbound train, Standing Bear was pelted by coins thrown at them by Euroamerican boys in a passing train car. The older Indian boys coached the younger ones to deflect the haughty, mean-spirited gesture by hurling the coins back into the open windows (*MM* 93). While their fathers had hurled lead back and forth, the children did the same with copper and silver. And in Sheridan's gesture, he drops bills bearing symbolic import similar to lead or copper or silver. Falling from bullets or falling for money, the desired effect is hardly different: vanish, disappear—either by dying or being remade into entities unthreatening to Euroamericans. Here Sheridan provides them with a teasing taste of the debasement that stardom under him would prove. Although they face hostility in Wellpinit, they save themselves the soul-stealing indignity of recapitulating the bluesman Robert Johnson's own deal with "the gentleman."<sup>34</sup>

Before Coyote Springs can leave New York City, Sheridan visits Checkers in a harrowing dream that is illustrative of the colonizer's continued exertions of psychic and material power upon the colonized. He accuses her and the rest of Coyote Springs of "[blowing] it by acting like a bunch of goddamn wild Indians. . ." and "caus[ing] a lot of damage." To which she retorts "We didn't start it" (236). This throws the spectral Sheridan into a serious temporal wobble. A 19th-century figure transfigured into a 20th-century role, Sheridan, like the informed reader, is conscious of his grisly history, but he is still convinced that his actions, past and ongoing, are justified. "That's what you Indians always say. The white men did this to us, the white men did that to us. When are you ever going to take responsibility for yourselves?. . . . You had a choice. . . . We gave you every chance. All you had to do was move to the reservation. We would've protected you. The US Army was the best friend the Indians ever had." To which Checkers responds "What are you talking about?. . . We're not in the army. We're a rock band.". . . "This is just like you Indians, Sheridan shouted in her face. *You could never stay where we put you.* Always fighting. You never quit fighting. Do you understand

how tired I am of fighting you? When will you ever give up?" (236-7, italics added) Persisting in his delusion that some day Native populations will give up, availing themselves to the exercise of total domination by Euroamerican power structures, Sheridan, as a representative of military-become-capitalist conquest, projects his own responsibility onto Checkers as a representative of the (neo)colonized population.

Since the US Army forcefully and deceitfully subdued Native Americans, Sheridan assumes the history-telling entitlement of the conqueror. In his double-speak, he would "allow" the Indians to move from their circumscribed role as the acted-upon objects of history, to the role of subjects—able to accept responsibility for the actions which led to "inevitable" colonization—only long enough to absolve his own moral burden. Their responsibility acknowledged and his burden absolved, Checkers (and Natives in general) would be quickly relegated back to objecthood. Locked into the historical metanarrative of manifest destiny, Sheridan is unable to imagine a course of events in which he could coexist with Native Americans. His desire for total authority threatened, he grants them subjecthood in his need for a complete surrender; in so doing, he acknowledges them as more than conquerable objects of history. Yet, for Native populations to surrender would sanction the justness of land-grabbing and culture-effacing, allowing the United States to recast expansionist terrorism as a war-waging effort in which an aggressive force was defeated. Furthermore, the demand for such surrender effaces the treaty relationships and sovereign nation status held by most Native populations.

Sheridan continues conflating terminology and temporality, as he states,

"Listen. . . I don't want to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt anybody. *But it was war. This is war.* We won. Don't you understand? We won the war. *We keep winning the war.* But you won't surrender. . . . You Indians always knew how to play dumb. But you were never dumb. You talked like Tonto but you had brains like fucking Einstein. Had us whites all figured out. But we still kept trying to change you. Tried to make you white. It never worked.( 237, italics added)

Checkers follows up: "Mr. Sheridan, what are you going to do to me?" "*I don't know. . . . I never know what to do with you*" (236-7, italics added). Here again, Vizenor's "melancholia of dominance" arises (MM 25). Sheridan, a fattened, greying, alcoholic dissipation of his previous cavalry general persona—a decivilized civilizer—acknowledges that beneath the patina of military dominance, there is the nagging, ongoing resistance of subjugated populations. The Indians, who, according to Sheridan, would "never stay where we put you," are subjected to the contemporary phase of "war," which for Sheridan takes place on the level of commodified representation. Unable to overpower, outwit, or reshape them into marketable images, he sees to it that they are contained on the reservation, and he seeks out performers who will do a better job of playing Indian.

Though this entire scene transpires in a dream sequence, the very real, ongoing psychic terrorism of the colonizer is revealed in the closing exchange. While it appears to Checkers that the nightmare will end in rape, she confronts the leering Sheridan: "I don't believe in you. I'm just dreaming. You're a ghost, a dream, a piece of dust, a foul-smelling wind. Go away.' Sheridan reached across the years and took Checkers's face in his hands. He squeezed until she cried out and saw white flashes of light. 'Do you believe in me now?'" (238) While decolonization certainly demands the reclamation of colonized selves, this scene depicts another crucial component of this process—that the colonizer abdicate the tactics of material and psychic domination. Frantz Fanon articulates the tandem tasks of "bring[ing] about the end of domination" and "equally pay[ing] attention to the liquidation of all untruths implanted in [the colonized's] being by oppression":

Under a colonial regime such as existed in Algeria, the ideas put forward by colonialism not only influenced the European minority but also the Algerians. Total liberation is that which concerns all sectors of the personality. . . . Independence is not a word which can be used as an exorcism, but an indispensable condition for the existence of men and women who are truly liberated. . . . (*Wretched* 310)

So long as figures like Sheridan exert exploitative, domineering influence over colonized populations, they impede the colonized's path to "total liberation." While Checkers tries to negate Sheridan's dominance from her psyche, the physical pain she experiences bespeaks the socioeconomic power that Euroamerican culture wields over subjugated populations. For Natives whose desire and right to exercise cultural and political sovereignty is still impeded by oppressive colonial structures and individuals, the path to psychic liberation, in Fanon's terms, is rocky at best. Without belaboring vulgar materialist relations between culture and political economy, I do see Alexie, in passages such as this, drawing his audience's attention to privileged non-Natives "imagining" themselves as Indian, to other Euroamericans who perpetuate material and cultural dominance, and to the gap that exists between those groups and others whose identity arises out of mixtures of ancestry and lived experience.

The reach of this material dominance in neocolonial markets is revealed as Cavalry Records, which "has an economic need for a viable Indian band" moves to replace Coyote Springs with "a more reliable kind of Indian" (272). When the recording executives' attempts fail to culturally vanish Coyote Springs through reconstitution—by watering down and increasing the fluidity demanded by the marketplace, Coyote Springs is physically vanished from Euroamerican spaces back to the reservation. As Vizenor has pointed already toward Baudrillard, Sheridan and Armstrong's next step bears consideration in light of the French scholar's theory of simulation:

[T]he age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials—worse: by their artificial resurrection in a system of signs, a more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence. . . . It is no longer a question of imitation, nor reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself. . . . Never again will the real have to be produced. . . . A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from. . . any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for. . . the simulated generation of difference. (Baudrillard 254)

While Sheridan's frustrated rape is manifest in Checker's dream, in the following progression it is sublimated into a violence of representation—or rather—one of



simulation. Claiming that the New Age wannabees, Betty and Veronica are "part Indian,"

Sheridan tells Armstrong that

they had *some grandmothers or something* that were Indian. . . . We can still sell that Indian idea. We don't need any goddam just-off-the-reservation Indians. We can use these women. They've been on the reservations. . . . These women have got the Indian *experience* down. They really understand what it means to be Indian. They've been there. . . . Can't you see the possibilities? We dress them up a little. Get them into the tanning booth. Darken them up a bit. Maybe a little plastic surgery on those cheekbones. Get them a little higher, you know? Dye their hair black. Then we'd have Indians. People want to hear Indians. (269, italics added)<sup>35</sup>

Recalling the stereotyped features of the members of Coyote Springs which Sheridan wishes to accentuate, here we see his greedy Indian-hating driving him beyond exploitation of campy, parodied "Village People" Indians, to an attempted simulation of Indianness. Whereas, as Checkers pointed out, the band members were Indian because—among more obvious reasons—"at some point in their life they didn't want to be"(98), Betty and Veronica are attributed with the familiar spurious claim to having Indian grandmothers "or something."<sup>36</sup>

Betty and Veronica are quite aware that they are complicit in a process of ethnic and gendered exploitation. Flattered that someone is literally buying their wannabee act and is willing to amplify and mass-market it, they accede in bad faith to Sheridan's proposition. In doing so, they exemplify Phillip Deloria's previously mentioned observation regarding late 20th appropriation of indigeneity: "Non-Indians began taking up native identities in order to lay claim to the cultural power of Indianness in the white imagination" (168). As they watch Armstrong and Sheridan conversing in the soundproof control booth, Veronica guesses that "the assholes are probably wondering how our asses will look on MTV" (271). Thus, we know that they have a certain degree of sophistication regarding their prospective exploiters. However, the appalling depths of this complicity are revealed when Betty and Veronica agree to simulate their heritage. Sheridan proposes that: "[b]asically we need Indians such as yourselves." To which

Veronica weakly counters, "but we ain't that much Indian." "You're Indian enough, right? I mean, all it takes is a little bit, right? Who's to say you're not Indian enough?" (272). After minimal resistance and Sheridan's transparent attempts at mesmerizing smooth talk, "Betty and Veronica looked at each other. They could hear drums" (273). Eager to embody their consequence-free New Age Indianness, they too easily agree to their own reification. And, as consumers themselves of all things Indian, they know they will be a hot commodity.

Yet, in their simulation, Betty and Veronica objectify not only themselves. They send Thomas a demo tape, which starts with "a vaguely Indian drum, then a cedar flute, and a warrior trill, all the standard Indian soundtrack stuff" (295). Over the "vaguely Indian drum" the not-even-vaguely-Indian women sing:

And your hair is blonde  
But you're Indian in your bones  
And your skin is white  
But you're Indian in your bones  
And it don't matter who I am  
I am Indian in my bones  
I don't listen to what they say  
I am Indian in my bones. (296)

Particularly troubling in these particularly troubling lyrics are the final two lines: "I don't listen to what they say/ I am Indian in my bones." It is hard to construe "they" as anyone other than Indians who would contest the wannabees' claim to Indianness, particularly those who rightfully resent either having been passed over for being "too Indian" or having been exploited, stereotyped, and commodified as Native. "Eagles crying, buffalo dying, the four directions, Mother Earth, tobacco, sweetgrass, Father Sky, smoking the pipe": the rest of the song reads like a cataloguing pastiche, cribbed together by a peyote-nibbling New Ager who has read Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan* nine times too many. Unsurprisingly, Thomas destroys the tape, "then he ran around his house, grabbing photos and souvenirs, afraid that somebody was going to steal them next" (296). Among the items that he protects are "photographs of his mother and father," an action that is significant in light of the wannabees' expropriation of Native

heritage, as Sheridan recounts that they disrespectfully claimed "some Grandmothers or something that were Indian" (269). The shruggingly dismissive qualification, "or something," coupled with dehumanizing diction—"that" rather than *who* "were Indian"—indicates Betty's and Veronica's flippant disregard for, as well as their inclination to reify, other people's ancestry.<sup>37</sup>

Alexie's depiction of figures like Betty and Veronica, Phillip Sheridan, George Wright, and Mr. Armstrong implicates the ways that Native identity continues to be threatened well after the blatantly bloody tactics of colonization have been traded in for insidiously nuanced attempts to simulate and otherwise steal indigeneity. Contrary to nationalist critiques that tend to underestimate the retributive message of Alexie's novel, I read passages such as the one in which George Wright admits his culpability in the murderous oppression of Natives, as demanding that those who enjoy privilege from the ongoing subjugation of Native America admit their complicity. Recalling the previously cited passage in which Sheridan attempts to rape Checkers, we are told that Wright has interrupted the attack and that when the rest of the band returned to the hotel room, he attempts to apologize and tells them that he has chosen to help them because he "owes" them. While the retreat from direct dialogue into third person narrative sidesteps direct confession, the narrative offers his admission of complicity: "Wright looked at Coyote Springs. He saw their Indian faces. He saw the faces of millions of Indians, beaten, scarred by smallpox and frostbite, split open by bayonets and bullets. He looked down at his own white hands and saw the blood stains there" (244).

Some critics may read this admission as confirming a narrative of defeated, vanishing Indians, but the fact of Coyote Springs' survival, coupled with Wright's willingness to confess his role and the help that he offers Checkers as he defends her from his former partner indicates to me that Alexie is calling non-Native readers to acknowledge the small parts they play in perpetuating conquest. Eduardo and Bonnie Duran, in their 1995 text *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*, identify one of the

important paths “perpetrators” against Natives, who are willing to move beyond denial, might embark upon, a path applicable to all of the aforementioned characters in *Reservation Blues* who prey on Indian identity:

Presently there is a lot of healing in the Native American community; [but] who is beginning to lurk around the periphery and want some of the healing from the Native Americans? The perpetrators, tired of living with a mythology that is no longer applicable, appear thirsty for these indigenous forms of healing and are willing to pay money for them. Little do they know that the only price that will purchase healing for them is historical honesty. (53)

Wright’s full confession, his reckoning with “historical honesty” is reserved for his wife, Margaret, but his willingness to help Coyote Springs reveals an earlier change of heart. We last see him taking a taxi back to his grave, where he joins his wife. He tells her: “I was the one who killed them all [the horses]. I gave the orders. . . . Oh God. I’m a killer. I’m a killer” (271). The forgiveness and real exchange that is missing in the earlier encounter with Coyote Springs is here extended by Margaret, who tells Wright: “You’ve come home. . . . You’re home now” (271). Whereas such dialogue between Wright and the bandmembers may have come across as contrived if inserted into the earlier passage, the gravity of Wright’s confession and forgiveness is attenuated in that it comes not directly from the people against whom he has transgressed, but from his wife instead. Nevertheless, Wright’s redemptive action, his confession, and Margaret’s assurance that “you’ve come home,” models a path towards the “historical honesty” called for by the Durans, and it sidesteps the easy answers frequently sought in the spiritual quick-fixes purchased from “plastic shamans.”

Sherman Alexie embellishes *Reservation Blues* with historical references to the early phases of Euroamerican colonial oppression of the Spokane Indians, crafting contemporary refigurations of the long-standing exploitative (and often genocidal) stance of Euroamerican culture in ways that force readers, particularly non-Native ones, to consider their culpability in the hoarding of cultural privilege which is predicated on the suffering and death of oppressed, colonized people. Although this is a challenging

message that Alexie develops and expresses compellingly through his fiction, it is not the most astonishing point for one who has read other novels which convey similar retributive messages. Instead, as critiques by Gloria Bird and Louis Owens indicate, what strikes me as most challenging to reconcile about Alexie's novel is how his depiction of internalized oppression in the fictionalized Spokane community can be read as perpetuating a vision of Natives as terminally dysfunctional, rather than as indicative of a community surviving and in some ways transcending more than a century of colonization.

#### IV. "These Little Wars Were Intimate Affairs": Internalized Oppression and Intra-community Violence

Although I have previously illustrated some of the ways in which the novel's protagonists have survived the colonial onslaught, it is unquestionable that most contemporary Native Americans have inherited the ongoing effects of a genocidal colonial presence. To delimit Native identities to victimhood would overlook their victories of survivance and the flourishing aspects of Native culture celebrated by the most recent wave of indigenous nationalist critics.<sup>38</sup> Alexie inscribes this survivance into the text, and as I have previously argued, his concerns regarding theft of cultural property and identity justify his masking of tribally specific elements of Spokane culture. In these ways, he acknowledges the positive aspects of Spokane culture, which he astutely conceals from a predominantly non-Native commercial audience.

As Gloria Bird has pointed out, how Alexie runs the risk of exploiting his culture is not by serving up the positive aspects of Spokane culture to be misused by non-Native readers, but by what she calls his "exaggeration of despair" (47). However, Alexie addresses this despair in the spirit of Simon Ortiz's syncretic nationalist ethic by employing a blues aesthetic. By describing this aesthetic, I do not wish to overlook the particular historical circumstances that distinguish the African-American experience of American imperialism from the unique encounters of innumerable Native American tribes with different manifestations of this same force. Nonetheless, Alexie's borrowing of this aesthetic serves as an example of what Ortiz refers to as a "creative response to forced colonization" which serves an ethic of "resistance" (10). Blues scholar and critic James Cone describes the blues as "secular spirituals" which "confine their attention to the immediate [while] searching for the truth of black experience" (100), a description that resonates in particular ways throughout the Native American experiences of *Reservation Blues*.

One can profitably consider the hopeful blues Alexie presents within the novel by way of Cone's following description that establish the aesthetic's poignancy for

addressing oppression. The Spokane author creatively reshapes the aesthetic to his experience, indicting oppression while celebrating survivance. Responding to interpretations of the blues as representing "complete despair and utter hopelessness,"

Cone states:

It is true that hopelessness is an authentic aspect of the blues' experience, and despair is a central theme in the blues. It was not possible for black people to experience the disappointment of post-Civil War America and not know the meaning of despair. Like the spirituals, the blues are not romantic; they do not camouflage the reality of social oppression. Oppression is real, and it often appears to the black community that there is little that can be done about it. It is this feeling of helplessness that produces the blues. . . . But it is important to point out that despair is not the whole picture. For underneath that despair there is also a firm hope in the possibility of black people's survival despite their extreme situation of oppression. (123-4)

This aesthetic affirmation of survival encoded within the blues harmonizes with Alexie's purposes in this novel. As with other ambivalently affirmative—or incompletely foreboding—statements in *Reservation Blues*, the blues tunes (which Alexie co-wrote with Colville Indian songwriting partner, Jim Boyd) used as epigraphs for each chapter frequently affirm survival in the face of what seem insurmountable woes. For example, the novel's final chapter begins with a song which mourns car wrecks, suicides, and other effects of alcoholism, poetically addressing these tragedies in a way that contradicts Gloria Bird's charge that endemic to the novel "is a leveling of values and weakening of emotional investment" (50). Excerpted lyrics from this blues read:

I can't bury my grief  
Unless I bury my fear  
I can't bury my fear  
Before I bury my friend  
/ . . .

Sweetheart, I know we have to travel to the reservation  
For the wake and wake and wake and wake  
And sweetheart, all these wakes for the dead  
Are putting the living to sleep

And I think it's time for us to find a way  
Yeah, I think it's time for us to find a way  
And I think it's time for us to find a way  
Yeah I think it's time for us to find a way

To wake alive, to wake alive, to wake alive, to wake alive (275-6)

The first excerpted stanza addresses the very real processes of grief, which are accompanied in this situation of apparently endless loss by a fear for whomever might fall next. To come to terms with this fear, one must acknowledge losses and hardships. Yet this seemingly unceasing cycle of early deaths casts the living, who are not otherwise numbed, into a constant state of grief and fear. Paradoxically, when one is compelled to unflinchingly (and continuously) experience such emotions, rather than broadening one's emotional capacities, excessive fear and grief sear the heartstrings, "putting the living to sleep." The song does not encourage abandoning the important process of grieving; rather, it homonymically encourages "waking alive." By this, I infer not only a call for collective revitalization in the sense of awakening, but I also see in this a need for collective reawakening cast in the terms of continued growth towards a healthy community, in which a "wake" for a fallen person serves to reinforce shared bonds, rather than to exacerbate fears.<sup>39</sup>

While Bird might argue that such sentiments exaggerate and exploit the despair of the Spokane community (which is unnamed in this particular song), perhaps inaccurately implying a lack in the contemporary community, Alexie is forthright about the sources of his experience. Although he is certainly inclined toward hyperbolic exaggeration, he shares with interviewer, Timothy Egan, that: "most of that stuff I write about happened to me or somebody I knew" (18). And he further qualifies his "ex-centric" perspective by talking freely about his experience as both a practicing and a recovering alcoholic.<sup>40</sup> Bird cedes that although Alexie's representation of alcoholism is largely accurate, he unduly "capitalizes upon the stereotype of the 'drunken Indian'" (51). Although her call for a more balanced portrayal of Spokane Indians is warranted at points, Bird's censuring of the ways which Alexie fictionally expresses his experience, and how he depicts and calls for needed cultural revitalization stands as another example of the way in which her critique could



affect a recessive rollback of the expanding critical perspectives, which draw attention to marginalized Native groups, previously celebrated by Robert Warrior (*Tribal Secrets* 5). Because alcoholism "is a sore subject for Indians," and out of concern that depiction of alcoholism is not the kind of "portrayal of colonial impact that non-native people want to accept," Bird believes that Alexie should soften his prose (51).

Bird's belief that non-Native audiences are unprepared to accept alcoholism as part of the ongoing colonial impact is troubling. The perpetrators of colonial military abuses, resurrected as the recording agents, who exploit and destroy Coyote Springs, considered alongside the ubiquitous bureaucratic presence on the Spokane Reservation, exemplified in the HUD houses, commodity foods, and spiteful tribal government agents, offer explicit examples of Alexie's indictment of the unrelinquished business of American colonialism. When Checkers is assaulted by Sheridan (233-8), when Victor's fantasy about winning for a change terminates in his desire to get drunk directly after Coyote Springs is harshly rejected by Cavalry Records (230), when Junior commits suicide after the band's economic failure in New York and their violent reception in Wellpinit (247, 277, 290), and when Victor starts drinking again after David WalksAlong callously rejects his overtures to take on Junior's job (291-3), direct or indirect links to ongoing colonial oppression are quite clear. In this way, alcoholism and other forms of internalized oppression thus can be historicized within the context of what Bird refers to as "the colonial impact" (51).

Self-abusive acts and Sheridan's violence towards Checkers fit into a long history of Indians who are represented as harmless or self-defeating or as mere victims of Euroamerican transgressions. But I find it more difficult to account for the numerous instances in which many Native Americans in the novel oppress each other in ways that are less apparently linked to "the colonial impact." Gerald Vizenor critiques the power of hegemonic social science as he celebrates "the resistance of the tribes to colonial inventions and representations" and "the postmodern [as] the discourse of histories over

metanarratives"(MM 167). And in Eduardo and Bonnie Duran's work in the field of postcolonial ethnopsychiatry, I see one of the practical applications of Vizenor's statement. Rather than march in lockstep with the conventional scientific modes of diagnosing emotional disturbance, which many psychiatrists have misbegottenly applied to Native populations, the Durans have looked to the historical colonial context in which such problems arise.

The Durans' articulation of "internalized oppression" offers insight into the despair Alexie's characters grapple with in this novel (27-8), and it contextualizes their actions within the insidious effects of colonialism:

Once a group of people has been assaulted in a genocidal fashion, there are psychological ramifications. With the victim's complete loss of power comes despair, and the psyche reacts by internalizing what appears to be genuine power—the power of the oppressor. The internalizing process begins when Native American people internalize the oppressor, which is merely a caricature of the power actually taken from Native American people. At this point, the self-worth of the individual and/or group has sunk to a level of despair tantamount to self-hatred. This self-hatred can either be internalized or externalized. (29)

The Durans' definition of internalized oppression neatly presents this phenomenon, distinguishing it from cultural analyses which would merely blame the victim. In their estimation, Native Americans do not merely fall victim to the oppressor's power. The Durans specify that Natives internalize "what *appears* to be [the] genuine power" (italics added) of the oppressor, but, in fact, the oppressor's strength is largely comprised of the very power that has been stolen from the oppressed. Thus, when faced with the oppressor's "caricature" of their own stolen power, the frequent inability to reclaim that power leads Native Americans to desperation and varied expressions of self-hatred. Rather than being represented and perceived as perpetually hapless, inferior, politically powerless people—chronic victims—many American Indians, in light of the Durans' definition, are affirmed as people who have been temporarily dispossessed of their power. Failing to see this dispossession as temporary and predicated upon the theft of their own cultural

strength, just as they were circumscribed to reservations which are but a fraction of their precontact homelands, the cultural power of many Native Americans has been radically diminished, grotesquely distorted, and turned back upon them in the form of oppressive power, breech-birthed through the internalization and externalization of self-hatred.

Analyzing the alcoholic tragedies and the preponderance of violence and hatred on the fictionalized Spokane Reservation through the Durans' lens of internalized oppression contextualizes such events and phenomena within the ongoing history of colonial power exerted upon Native people. Through Alexie's depiction of alcoholism, we see the novel's characters trading transitory moments of courage for ultimate self-destruction. Initially appearing as an effective means of externalizing self-hatred by lubricating the floodgates that repress self-hatred, drinking and the violence it often fuels in *Reservation Blues* never prove truly cathartic. Michael White-Hawk, the fetal alcohol syndrome-afflicted nephew of Tribal Chairman David WalksAlong, ends up in a near-vegetative state as a result of a drunken melee and habitual Sterno-drinking. WalksAlong is embarrassed by his nephew's continued drinking which he judges as a painfully slow suicide. He wonders whether "he should just shoot his nephew in the head and end his misery, just like that Junior Polatkin ended his own misery" (291). Similarly Victor Joseph's resignation to slow suicide by drinking bears the inscription of Junior's more dramatic suicide: "the little explosion of the beer can opening sounded exactly like a smaller, slower version of the explosion that Junior's rifle made on the water tower" (293). In Michael, Victor, David, and Junior, I see the futility of attempting to relieve this self-hatred through violence and alcoholic drinking.

Working backwards from these near-fatal effects of internalized self-hatred, I will trace the ways that Michael's, Victor's and David's attempts to externalize this anger take the shape of oppression internalized within a community. The Durans, noting the inclusiveness of kinship within many Native American cultures, posit that intracommunity violence can be viewed under the rubric of domestic abuse (29). Further noting the high

rates of incarceration for Indian crimes against whites, they illustrate the futility of acting out against the actual oppressor (29-30). Rather than channeling anger towards the source of colonial oppression, the oppressed individual finds a safe target, such as "a helpless family member who represents the hated part of him/herself" (30). Thus, the individual violently vents his anger while also finding an outlet for self-hatred by inflicting pain upon someone (s)he despises for the perceived powerlessness that (s)he and the victim share under a persisting colonial power. In this way, even when this anger appears to be externalized upon other individuals, it is contained within communities, and the blows intended for oppressors are most likely to fall on kin.

I will return to analyze the ways that David WalksAlong channels his anger by wielding oppressive bureaucratic power, but first I will examine how Alexie's depiction of Michael and Victor as "twentieth-century warriors, alternating between blind rage and feigned disinterest" (*RB* 4) corresponds with the Durans' gendered analysis of Indian men as colonized warriors. The Durans posit that in communities which have suffered political and military defeat, and which have suffered "the destruction of men's role[s] in the traditional economy," Native American males are divested of "meaningful cultural roles" (35). They state that the "warriors are supposed to repel the enemy and insure the safety of the community; when this is not possible, defeat has deep psychological ramifications," which are exacerbated if the colonizing force imposes a fundamentally contrary worldview upon the community of land and people "that the warriors are supposed to keep safe and alive within the traditional tribal lifeworld" (35). Elaborating upon their previously stated definition of internalized oppression, the Durans offer the generalized desires of the contemporary warrior as an example of that process: "at a deep level the acquisition of the aggressor's power has the ultimate goal of destroying the aggressor and restoring the community to a precolonization lifeworld. Because removal of the colonial forces is not realized, the repressed rage has no place for [expression] except to turn on itself" (37). They further posit that as men direct this frustrated rage towards members of

their communities, "it is almost as if women and families have been sacrificing themselves in order to preserve the tattered remains of the warrior tradition," and that "it is the women who have been carrying the traditions in order to ensure that they continue living" (37). Although, it is now expected that women preserve and nurture "the psychological and spiritual well-being of the community," the Durans emphasize that community concern needs to be "shared by men and women."<sup>41</sup> Rather than brutalizing their kin and community through domestic violence, Indian men must once again "undertake the responsibility of providing a life-giving vessel for the well-being of the community" (38). Crucially, the Durans identify the futility of quick-fix thinking in which individuals solipsistically seek miraculous cures for their spiritual ills without regard for the well-being of the greater community, accentuating that "what gives medicine its effectiveness is the cohesive community" (39-41).

Just as the strict gender divisions of the Durans analysis is problematic, such claims about warriors are perhaps unjustifiably pantribal in nature. But looking to Alexie's depiction of Big Mom's interaction with Michael White Hawk, I see many aspects of the warrior dynamic exemplified, especially as she confronts Michael, telling him to stop posing and truly start caring for his fellow community members. Big Mom tries to help Michael develop his prodigious saxophone talents, explaining that "the musical instrument is not to be used in the same way that a bow and arrow is. Music is supposed to heal." To which he responds, "But, Big Ma. . . I'm a warrior. I'm 'posed to fight. . . I hate white men. . . I smash my sax'phone on their heads" (208). Throughout the novel, White Hawk is violent towards whites and fellow Indians alike, and Big Mom points this out, couching her observation in language familiar from the Durans: "Michael, . . . you run around playing like you're a warrior. You're the first one to tell an Indian he's not being Indian enough. How do you know what that means? *You need to take care of your people.* Smashing your [saxophone] over the head of a white man is just violence. And the white man has always been better at violence anyway" (208, italics added). Consistent with the

beginning of the passage, which describes how Michael, like Victor and many other Indian men questioned the abilities of Big Mom, Michael responds to her proclamation: "You don't know what you're talking about. . . You jus' a woman" (208). Exemplifying Big Mom's admonition regarding the futility of violence and the Durans' description of differential ethnic justice and rates of Native incarceration, Michael proceeds to attempt to wrap his saxophone around a supermarket cashier's head. Although we are not privy to the cashier's ethnicity, since Michael ends up serving several years in prison, we might presume that the assaulted cashier was white. Failing to take Big Mom seriously because she is a woman, Michael is incapable of hearing the important message she attempts to convey: the stereotyped image of the Indian warrior needs to be cast out or reworked to include the important tasks of caring for one's community and contributing to its healing.

Although Michael victimized his fellow Indians well before being sent to prison for assaulting the cashier, the heightened violence of his assaults upon community members bespeaks how he has learned that Indians, rather than whites, are the only acceptable objects for his unbridled anger. This cycle starts early in his life as we are told that "he once shoved a pencil up a seventh grader's nose" (39). For this he was sent to a boys' school. But after Michael assaulted several white boys at the school, the system, unable to escalate punishment on a juvenile, unleashes the rage-driven Michael back upon the reservation where he could refine his violence upon fellow Indians. Despite the fact that Victor is unquestionably arrogant after Coyote Springs returns to the reservation with the prize money from the battle of the bands, neither he nor Junior earns the beating Michael gives them. After knocking them to the ground, Michael kicks and stomps upon the band members, who, being "too drunk to fight back," simply "curled into fetal balls" to hide from the blows (182-3). In this case, White Hawk despises them not only for their short-lived financial success and fame, but also for their involvement with Betty and Veronica, the white "wannabees." As Big Mom had pointed out, Michael demonstrates his

eagerness to upbraid fellow Indians, but in no way does he seek to contribute to a positive vision for the Spokane community.

As the final section of this study will address, the near-universal vehemence with which the Spokane people chastise Coyote Springs is loaded with self-hatred and fear. Like the arrogant Indian warriors who underestimated Big Mom's powers, many of the tribal residents "have started to believe their own publicity and run around acting like the Indians in movies" (*RB* 208). Since the band members do not conform to an essentialized version of what Spokane Indians should look and act like (which is determined by different visions of Indianness, partially influenced by media representations and other aspects of Euroamerican indoctrination), their fellow tribal members first jump to the conclusion that Coyote Springs actually aspires to represent the Spokane Reservation, and second that they are unfit to do so and that they would inaccurately represent the population.

The community's disdain for Coyote Springs builds throughout the text, but as Michael assaults Victor and Junior, this contempt is manifested alongside a disturbing venting of violent desires: "a few rooted openly for White Hawk; most celebrated the general violence of it all" (182). Alexie contextualizes this underlying brutality as he introduces Victor at the beginning of the novel, describing how his incessant adolescent bullying of Thomas has continued as both of them reached their thirties: "Thomas was not surprised by Victor's sudden violence. These little wars were intimate affairs for those who dreamed in childhood of fishing for salmon but woke up as adults to shop at the Trading Post and stand in line for USDA commodity food. . . . Indian men like Victor roared from place to place, set fires, broke windows, and picked on the weaker members of the Tribe" (14). Although we see Thomas, through his storytelling and his belief in the salvific power of music (4, 15-16), refusing to accept these social forces as an ultimate determinant of his life as a Spokane Indian, this passage further exemplifies the linked process of internalizing and externalizing self-hatred articulated by the Durans. Described

as "little wars," Victor's acts of violence against other Indians take on meaning within the context of the greater ongoing war, in which political power is distributed through networks charted by Euroamerican bureaucrats. And the Spokane people have been relegated to a patch of land so distant from the Spokane River and substantial water sources that a notable reservation job is driving the B.I.A. water truck so that remote residents can fill their cisterns. What the Durans referred to as "genuine power," is seen here as the freedom to determine political structures, the liberty to move freely across a vast range, interacting with the land and other cultures to meet basic needs, a sovereignty that has been replaced by the "caricature of power," in which arid reservations, callous Tribal Councils, water trucks, and commodity food distance the Spokane people from their ability to determine how they will provide for basic human needs.

In the previous passage we see Victor directing his anger towards Thomas and other "weaker members of the Tribe," yet after Cavalry Records rejects the band, we see a retracing of the warrior's path towards self-hatred which, in this instance, results in internalized anger and the desire to dissipate this anger through drinking. Like White Hawk, Victor begins his rant by disparaging Big Mom's ability to heal—"she's just an old woman. . . She ain't magic. And even if she was she's a million miles away"—reserving for himself the warrior's power of vengeance:

Victor roared against his whole life. If he could have been hooked up to a power line, he would have lit up Times Square. He had enough anger inside to guide every salmon over Grand Coulee Dam. He wanted to steal a New York cop's horse and go on the warpath. He wanted to scalp stockbrokers and kidnap supermodels. He wanted to shoot flaming arrows into the Museum of Modern Art. He wanted to lay siege to Radio City Music Hall. Victor wanted to win. Victor wanted to get drunk. (230)

In this fantastic vision, Victor returns to the salmon-fishing motif. Not only are the Spokane people distanced from the river, but the river itself has been dammed; its energy is diverted to feed the Euroamerican power grid, and the salmon can no longer freely migrate. Like the Columbia River, Victor is charged with power that he dreams about using to guide the salmon over the immense Grand Coulee dam. His fantasy of warrior



liberation continues as he quixotically takes on captains of industry and the faces and institutions that mediate hegemonic popular culture: supermodels, M.O.M.A., and Radio City Music Hall. "Wanting to win," he realizes the more immediately attainable option is "to get drunk." Rather than exerting his anger against despised power structures or fellow Indians, Victor douses it by self-destructively drinking all night as he barhops his way throughout New York City with Junior.

Yet as he does at many points throughout the novel, in his depiction of Victor's one night binge Alexie steers the narrative away from utter despair. When Chess and Thomas find the two men in the predawn hotel lobby, they discover that unlike the other times when Junior had joined Victor in bouts of drinking, Polatkin had stayed sober all night to protect Victor during his big city binge. Although Junior certainly acts in character since he is "always saving Victor from something" (243), his abstention marks an affirmation of community concern. Rather than drowning his emotions along with Victor, he joins him as they get hurried out of four consecutive bars (but not quickly enough to prevent Victor from getting extremely intoxicated).

Contrasted to earlier scenes in which Junior frequently cosigns Victor's rageful nonsense, over the course of their bar-hopping, I see in Junior a deepened sense of self-awareness, which unfortunately leads to a deeper sense of self-loathing.<sup>42</sup> Myopically focusing upon the band's failure and Lynn's rejection, Junior is overwhelmed by despair. When he realizes that the plane is not actually going to crash, he sees that Victor is crying. Unable to mourn for his own losses and increasingly depressed by his life's hopelessness, Junior desires to short-circuit Victor's grieving by "point[ing] out the exits" (253).

As we see, the exit Junior chooses takes the form of a rifleshot to the forehead. When his ghost visits Victor at Turtle Lake, we learn more of Junior's suicidal motivations. One of his reasons, that he "didn't want to be drunk no more," reveals the futility of one of the "exits" he and Victor turned to frequently (290). However, his choice to commit suicide, rather than continue drinking, or seeking a path of renewal

demonstrates Junior's fatalistic near-sightedness. Despite Junior's myopic despair, Gloria Bird's generalization that "alcoholism and drinking are sensationalized" in the novel seems a bit hasty as she overlooks the important choices that Thomas and the Warm Waters sisters make in the face of this symptom of internalized oppression (51). In these members of Coyote Springs, we see but three of the Native Americans in the novel who conscientiously choose not to drink. Poignantly, Checkers, who has stolen Father Arnold's Communion wine and has planned to drink it to express her resentment over her unrequited affections for the priest, learns from Junior's death and returns the unopened bottle (286).

Furthermore, as with other statements which Alexie proceeds to subvert, he presents alcoholic characters with one hand while unraveling and rewriting the stereotype with the other. When in Seattle, the members of Coyote Springs run into a community of old Indian alcoholics, living on the streets near the Pike Street Market. Victor stays to talk with many of the old men, and the narrator notes that Victor was usually frightened by drunks. Like the other band members, he "had run from drunks. . . . All Indians grow up with drunks. So many drunks on the reservation, so many. *But most Indians never drink. Nobody notices the sober Indians.* On television, the drunk Indians emote. In books, the drunk Indians philosophize" (151, italics added). Just as he points out through Big Mom, many Indians end up "believing their own publicity" (208), acting out the stereotypes presented on the screen or on the page. Through this previous passage and the choices made by Thomas, Chess, and Checkers, Alexie illustrates that the self-destructive "exits" that Junior envisions are not the only ways of responding to desperation.

While Alexie's narrative does not determine the path towards suicide or alcoholism, it also avoids romanticizing the lives of those who choose to enter or stay in, rather than "exit" life. Trying to explain the reasons for his suicide to Victor, Junior adds that "because when I closed my eyes like Thomas, I didn't see a damn thing. Nothing. Zilch. No stories, no songs. Nothing" (290). As we see in his relations with Victor, and in

his willingness to marry his white girlfriend Lynn after he discovers that she is pregnant, Junior wants to act compassionately and honorably. His actions and intentions reveal that he cares about more than just himself, that he is aware of his part within a community. Yet by comparing himself with his unrealistic impression of Hollywood Indians and more immediately with Thomas, Junior sells himself short (13).

Although he sees Thomas as physically weaker, Junior is torn between contempt and envy for his imaginative storytelling, which he jealously views as a marker of what Theresa O’Neill, author of a study of Native identity on the Flathead Reservation, calls “real Indianness” (56).<sup>43</sup> Intimidated by the stories' creative power and annoyed by their repetition, "Victor and Junior often tried to beat those stories out of Thomas, tied him down and taped his mouth shut" (15). But Junior does not realize that Thomas is not immune from losses of vision, from doubting his own creativity and his identity as a neo-traditional storyteller. After the band is booted from the Cavalry studios, Thomas succumbs to despair and is described as "truly frightened. . .", "totally out of control. . .", "a reservation storyteller without answers or stories. . .", "Thomas touched his body and felt the absence, like some unnamed part of him had been cut away" (231).

Both Thomas’s confounding experience of loss and Junior's belief in an essential and real Indianness from which he is excluded exemplify Theresa O’Neill's theory regarding the "empty center" of "real Indianness." In her study of Native identity on the Flathead Reservation, the home of the Warm Waters sisters in *Reservation Blues*, O’Neill finds that for her subjects, ". . .being Indian is a complicated and high-stakes venture. Indian identity on the Flathead Reservation is not simply given—by formal enrollment, by birth, by degree of blood, by language or by cultural practice. Nor is it consistent for individuals across all contexts. No set of core characteristics defines an essence of Indianness that remains valid at all times, for all people, in all places" (47). Having laid out the slipperiness of defining Indian identity, O’Neill complicates questions of authenticity by introducing "the rhetoric of the empty center [which] is used primarily to

frame the identities of individuals. . . , [which] emphasizes degrees of being Indian. . . , [which] culminates in a message that contemporary Flathead Indian identity is, in essence, inauthentic" (55). Mapping Indian identity onto a series of concentric circles, O'Neill defines the center circle as the realm of the "really Indians," and from her experience with Flathead Indians, she states that "there is a generally shared sense that there is no one alive today who can unambiguously be assigned to the center circle, hence the designation 'empty center'" (56). Between the "empty center" of real Indianness and the non-Indians who are excluded from the outermost edges of the circle are rings which mark the communally-defined locations of "people who are 'more' Indian [closer to the center] and people who are 'less' Indian [closer to the non-Indian periphery]" (56).

In *Reservation Blues*, we see Junior, sarcastically deemed the "president of the Native American Hair Club" (15), developing his sense of Indianness through media representations, yet we also see him covertly idealizing Thomas's experience, and leaving an endearing, respectful note for Big Mom, in which he reveals aspects of his own Indianness. Both bereft of fathers, Junior describes how he and Victor "took turns being the dad" (215). This description of their "paternal" relationship offers a partial account of their lack of initiation into traditional Spokane culture, while also offering insight into the strong kinship bonds they developed—which arguably stands as another example of Junior's unwitting "Indianness." In such instances, Junior enacts values that are consistent with communal Spokane values, while they are also informed by mediated visions of Native identity, which demand that in certain ways he must live up to what Alexie's aforementioned critique of "the expected idea" of the Indian (Purdy 8). By comparing himself with figures such as Thomas, who seem more traditional, Junior sells himself short as one who perceives himself as terminally "inauthentic."

Whereas Junior was perhaps more Indian than he may have thought, he was also unaware of the ways that Thomas doubted his own authenticity. In addition to Thomas's loss of voice in New York, we see him similarly dumbfounded after his drunken father

arrives at his house in Wellpinit. Overwhelmed and humiliated, Thomas walks outside, cries, and "want[s] to say the first word of a prayer or a joke. . . . He sang the same Indian songs continuously but never sang them correctly. He wanted to make his guitar sound like a waterfall, like a spear striking salmon, but his guitar only sounded like a guitar. He wanted the songs, the stories to save everybody" (101).<sup>44</sup> Although Thomas doesn't claim to be a medicine man, the sorrow caused by his inability to enter into the old idyllic ways resonates with O'Neil's recollections of

the mournful stories of elders about how life used to be, how the Indians used to visit each other regularly, and how, unlike the medicine men of today who are only 'mocking' the real ways, medicine men of the past used to have real power to bring game, cure illness, and change the weather. . . , [and in her memories of] . . . the widespread lament about the loss of the traditional language, both by those who could still speak Salish and by those who knew only a few words, . . . [and in] the private revelations of individuals who suffered with the feeling that they did not know how to be really Indian. (57)

While Thomas is acutely aware of the limits of his salvific powers and of his distance from "real Indianness"—an endlessly deferred presence which he cannot attain—Junior idealizes him as being worthy of a ring close to the empty center, while he sees himself as cast to the nearly-non-Indian periphery. Although many of his actions reveal his compassion, respect, and value for kinship, Junior fails to "imagine himself richly"; he fails to summon the power by which he could create a story big enough to revitalize his life (Vecsey xi).<sup>45</sup>

After his encounter with Junior's ghost, Victor is able to imagine the courage to approach David WalksAlong for a job. Setting aside his trademark cynicism, Victor presents his resume to the spiteful tribal chairman who gruffly shoots down his request. Victor's uncharacteristic optimism and vulnerability is apparent as he responds to WalksAlong's rejection: "I thought this was the way it worked" (292). Embedded in this statement, we can perceive Victor's naiveté of both the band members' status as recent scapegoats for the reservation's ills as well as his innocence of the practice of patronage in some contemporary tribal governments.<sup>46</sup> Victor's undeveloped storytelling proves no

match for the power WalksAlong wields; Victor fibs, stretching the spectral Junior's suggestion to "go get yourself a goddamn job," into the more melodramatic statement: "I want to drive the water truck, . . . Just like Junior used to. I want to be like Junior. It was his last wish" (292). Walks Along is unmoved by Victor's fiction. Like the internal blankness experienced by both Junior and Thomas, Victor's failed attempt at storytelling leads him to "feel something slip inside him" (292). As I will later address in greater detail, Thomas's imagination perseveres, but like Junior, Victor surrenders to his failed vision, embarking upon a suicidal path which follows that of his best friend.

David WalksAlong, head of the Spokane Tribal Council, embodies the channeling of internalized oppression through bureaucratic structures. In *Reservation Blues*, many characters, including David, Thomas, and Victor from Alexie's 1993 short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* reappear with only minor discontinuities. In one of those stories "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire," Alexie offers a preview of the tribal chairman's character: "WalksAlong walked along with BIA policy so willingly that he took to calling his wife *a savage in polyester pants*" (94). In his attitude towards his wife in this story, and in his countless contemptible actions in *Reservation Blues*, we see that David is preoccupied with living up to what Dennis McPherson and Douglas Rabb refer to as the "outside view predicate." In their co-authored 1993 text, *Indian from the Inside*, McPherson and Rabb elaborate this term:

It [means] allowing [others] to tell you who you are. It is in a sense giving up your freedom, your self-determination to others; becoming what they want you to become. To accept an outside view predicate . . . is to fit into the plans and projects of others, to make it easy for them to manipulate you for their own ends, their own purposes. (qtd. in Weaver 5)

Inordinately concerned with how his wife appears in "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire," and how "Coyote Springs" (among other entities) supposedly tarnishes the reputation of the Spokane Reservation in *Reservation Blues*, WalksAlong is inordinately concerned with keeping up appearances at the expense of caring for the members of his community.<sup>47</sup>

Although David provides bureaucratic cover for Michael when he faces more legal trouble, comments which he makes in an earlier encounter betray WalksAlong's limited emotional commitment to the nephew whom he raised. As White Hawk returns from two years in prison, David notes "how much pain his nephew must have gone through" (39). Nonetheless, WalksAlong's self absorption had prevented him from visiting his nephew at the Walla Walla Penitentiary. We learn that every time he had driven to the prison, he was only able to sit "in his car in the prison parking lot and smoke cigarettes" because, as he tells his nephew "I didn't want to see you in there. . . You didn't belong in there" (40). While there is a certain romantic, but stereotypically filmic ruggedness to David's stance, any such defense is overwhelmed by the gesture's ultimate narcissism. He does not concern himself with his nephew's pain, nor with any pleasure his visits might bring to the incarcerated White Hawk. Instead he is preoccupied with his inability to bring himself to see his nephew imprisoned.

David's lack of compassion for other members of the Spokane tribal community is much less ambivalent. As we will see in his reactions to Coyote Springs, WalksAlong is depicted as a callous bureaucratic Indian, who is more concerned with the way his people are perceived than with their actual well-being. This stock characterization resonates with Ward Churchill's biting description of "Hang Around the Fort Indians," who are

broken, disempowered and intimidated by their conquerors, the sellouts who undermined the integrity of their own cultures. . . who fill the ranks of the colonial police to enforce an illegitimate and alien order against their own. . . [who are] the craven puppets who to this day cling to and promote the 'lawful authority' of federal force as a means of protecting their positions of petty privilege, imagined prestige, and often their very identities as native people. (*Struggle* 406-7)

Although WalksAlong does feign concern for the good of the community, when that claim is brushed against the grain it becomes apparent that he is more interested in protecting his "very identity as [a] native [person]." Significantly, WalkAlong's vision of his own [and the tribe's] identity appears more fixed than dynamic, an angle that reveals itself in consideration of his later proclamations regarding Coyote Springs. These castigations,

which I will later address in greater detail, accuse the bandmembers of presuming to represent the Spokane people and failing to do so accurately.

Churchill's observations regarding "Hang Around the Fort Indians" apply to WalksAlong and his cronies at yet another level. Samuel Builds-the-Fire's and Lester FallsApart's basketball game against the tribal police offers a glimpse of David in one of his earlier roles: Chief of Tribal Police. In a quasi-Derridean interlude, Alexie presents WalksAlong as chief over the Heavy Burden Brothers, officers Plato (Phil), Socrates (Scott), and Aristotle (Art), who are depicted along with WalksAlong and Wilson as perpetuating colonial, bureaucratized rule over the fictionalized Spokane Reservation. In the Heavy Burden brothers' names, I see an adulation of the pillars of Greek thought and perhaps even of the fixed reasoning of western philosophy. Yet, it is noteworthy that the reservation vernacular absorbs the pomp of these names as they are comically nicknamed: "everybody. . . [simply] called them Phil, Scott, and Art" (103). In his foreword to Keith Basso's study of Western Apache humor, ethnographer Dell Hymes elucidates a variety of the deflationary humor that is likely at work in these nick-names, which can be read as "parod[ies] of pretension," satirical subversions that exemplify the "resistance of caricature and the imaginative righting of scales that in reality remain unfairly weighted . . . [, which] at least testifies that the writ of an alien presentation does not run unchallenged, that the hegemony of a bureaucratic order is actively mocked" (xii, xvi).

Continuing to read this basketball game and its participants through the lens of internalized oppression, it is difficult not to interpret the name of Wilson, another of the tribal cops under WalksAlong's command in light of the history of former Pine Ridge Tribal President, Dick Wilson. The historical Wilson, according to Ward Churchill, "formed a cabal of gun-thugs known as the GOONs to act as surrogates for the FBI" (*Struggle* 386). Alexie's Wilson is described as "a white man who hated to live on the reservation. He claimed a little bit of Indian blood and had used it to get the job but seemed to forget that whenever he handcuffed another Indian" (102). By some accounts,



both the fictional and historical Wilsons qualify for the label of "apple," a disparaging term used to identify Indians who are red on the outside and white on the inside, in that rather than serving the expressed needs of Native communities, they attempt to live up to the "outside view predicate" that is imposed upon many reservation bureaucrats. Churchill elaborates the threats arising when such individuals hold power over Native populations:

At every level, rather than serving as models for the resumption and development of American Indian self-governance, the present IRA 'governments' represent the exact opposite: institutionalized capitulation on virtually every significant issue of Indian rights. By and large, [the individuals which comprise such governments] are, in simplest terms, problems to be overcome as part of any decolonization struggle and—if examples such as Wilson are any indication—they may be predicted to exact a nasty toll from their own ostensible constituents in a counter-struggle to avert any real dismantling of the colonial structure upon which they have come to depend for income and 'prestige.' (*Struggle* 386-7)

Wilson, WalksAlong and the other tribal cops exact a "nasty toll" from their "own ostensible constituents" as they play a crooked game of basketball against Samuel Builds-the-Fire and Lester FallsApart. In this game, comical mockery of the bureaucratized elements of internalized oppression presents a form of resistance to ongoing colonial practices that bear tragic, historical weight. Any illusion that Samuel or Lester may have entertained about playing a fair game is quickly shattered as the cops abuse their power. This power manifests first as WalksAlong makes a bad traveling call, proclaiming that "I can make any call I want. I'm Chief" (106). This exertion of power soon becomes physical as Wilson breaks Lester's nose with a strategically thrown elbow, which the cops refuse to acknowledge as a foul (110). As WalksAlong makes his first shot, we see the extent to which he tries to protect his prestige and his claims to Indianness as he resentfully pronounces "that shot was for every time one of you drunk ass Indians told me I wasn't real" (113). Any delusions Samuel and Lester still suffer regarding the power dynamics of the game are destroyed as Samuel retaliates against the cops' flagrant fouls and WalksAlong makes clear that such fouls are considered "assaulting an officer. . . good for a year in tribal jail"(116). Furthermore Samuel's retort that "this is a game. . .it don't count" is quickly met with the Chiefs' rejoinder that "everything counts" (116).

These two words—"everything counts"—mordantly summarize the aggregate effect of internalized oppression. Those who enforce the colonizer's laws vigilantly surveil their own populations to sustain their own "caricature of power," while those who endure this oppression internalize small acts of linguistic and physical violence, sometimes redirecting this persecution towards weaker tribal members, other times turning this violence upon themselves, and on yet other occasions performing small acts of subversion that transgress the exertion of unjust power. Such a transgression occurs as Samuel celebrates scoring a crucial point against the Tribal Cops: "That was for every one of you Indians like you Tribal Cops. . . that was for all those Indian scouts who helped the US Cavalry. That was for Wounded Knee I and II. For Sand Creek" (116-17). Samuel's comic taunts make clear that the officers are viewed as part of the ongoing exertion of colonial force upon Native populations. Echoing the earlier quoted passage from Churchill, Samuel groups the Tribal Cops along with the long history of underhanded Euroamerican victories abetted by Indian betrayals.

Just as Samuel's proclamation offers a direct affront to the Tribal Cops' compradorial authority, in an earlier scene his son Thomas unwittingly and comically reveals the tenuous insecurity of WalksAlong's power. The Spokane Tribal Council Chairman has shown up at Coyote Springs' rehearsal, after which he accosts Thomas, whose ringing ears partially deafen him to WalksAlong's questions. The resulting dialogue falls slightly short of slapstick as David's paranoid arrogance<sup>48</sup> is revealed:

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 thing we're rocking? You think my father will like us, too?

WalksAlong jabbed Thomas's chest with a thick finger.

You might think you're funny! he shouted loud enough for Thomas to understand him, but I can shut you down anytime I want to! I just have to give the word! He stormed off, but Thomas just shrugged his shoulders. (37-8)

Like the previously quoted dialogue from the basketball game, in this exchange we also see WalksAlong's absolute need to flex his power. In his humorlessness and in his authoritative drive, the Tribal Council Chairman better reflects what Basso notes as "Whiteman" rather than Native values. Working from conversations with many Cibeqe Apaches and from his study of Apache humor, Basso presents observations of the impressions Euroamericans make upon that population. Although the Apaches' humorous responses to Whites do not correspond directly with the Spokane experiences of Whites, at a general level, we can consider WalksAlong's demeanor in light of several of Basso's observations, thus seeing how he wields his bureaucratic power in a way that leaves him open to charges of being an "apple."

The following list of qualities, gleaned from Basso's more exhaustive observations, sheds light on WalksAlong's hardened lack of concern for his community members: "Whitemen lack circumspection and restraint, a shortcoming that leads them to behave with a kind of reckless self-centeredness that implies a basic disregard for the worth of other people"; "Whitemen lack tolerance and equanimity, a deficiency that causes them to make harsh and precipitate judgments of other people"; "Whitemen lack modesty and humility, a characteristic that causes them to adopt an attitude of imperiousness and condescension when dealing with other people"; and "Whitemen pretend to knowledge and status they do not possess" (57-9). WalksAlong's brashness and self-centeredness are apparent, and "imperiousness" and pretensions towards unearned status are also manifest throughout his actions. In his exchange with Thomas, he presumes that Builds-the-Fire can clearly understand everything that he is saying. And when Thomas does not quickly fall in line with WalksAlong's reasoning, the chairman's anger builds and his tone becomes more imperious. As in the basketball game, when he threatened his opponents with jail time, here WalksAlong grotesquely affirms his authority, threatening to "shut

[the band] down anytime [he] want[s] to, [by] just giv[ing] the word" (38). This line, which reads like stock gangster film footage, attests to the caricatured nature of the power WalksAlong tries to exert over the Spokane Reservation. Unlike smaller pre-reservation bands arranged by kinship and headed by people whose merit earned them respect, David, through questionable polling first won his berth on the colonially constructed reservation's tribal council. (We are told that "Walksalong was elected Councilman by a single vote because he'd paid Lester FallsApart a dollar to vote for him" [46]). Owing to the dubious integrity of WalksAlong's rise to power, his attempts to assert this power are frequently over-emphatic. In his short-fused coercive threats towards Thomas and Samuel, the dubious nature of David's power becomes manifest.

This "arrogant paranoia" and fear arising out of illegitimate, caricatured power also recurs in virtually all of WalksAlong's other encounters with Coyote Springs (Davis 240). Half-jokingly, we are told that David and the rest of the Tribal Council resent the band because they are "more famous" than the politicians (179). More seriously, however, WalksAlong later suggests that the council "excommunicate" the band members because "they are creating an aura of violence" (186). In this proclamation, David overlooks the extreme violence instigated by his own nephew Michael, projecting instead the source of this problem onto Coyote Springs. Rather than closely examine the phenomenon of internalized oppression rooted in ongoing colonization (with which he, as a government agent, is complicit), WalksAlong sets up the band members as the community scapegoats, the illusory source of the reservation's problems. Embodying the spiteful, imperious qualities earlier critiqued by Basso, David repeatedly celebrates the demise of Coyote Springs. First as the band prepares to go to New York for a "demo" session, he states "those Skins ain't got a chance in New York City. . . Coyote Springs is done for. I'm happy about that" (227). Then, when Thomas, Chess, and Checkers prepare to leave the reservation for the city of Spokane, David encourages the rest of the community at the Longhouse feast to contribute to help them get rid of them: "Think of them getting off the

goddamn reservation. . . We'll never have to see their faces again. We won't have to listen to any of their stink music" (304).

Alexie's own brash comments about other writers, Native and non, his early commercial and critical success, and the exposure given to elements of his fiction that can be read as unwittingly perpetuating stereotypes of Indians makes him, like Coyote Springs, a target for the harsh censure of other Natives. Ironically, much of this criticism comes not from reservation bureaucrats but from Native authors and scholars who are invested so deeply in realistic representation or nationalist causes that their critiques do not account for the ways that Alexie's novel might be read as a decolonizing text.<sup>49</sup> *Reservation Blues* deploys comically hyperbolic stereotypes and masks of specific cultural traditions, while advancing challenging statements that implicate both the Euroamerican violence towards Native cultures and the conversant need to practice "historical honesty," as well as the ways that oppression has been internalized and circulates destructively through many Native communities (Duran & Duran 53). I read all of these tactics as affirming a novel path towards decolonization. Humor and hyperbolic anti-realism work to undermine readerly stereotypes of "the expected idea" of the Indian (Purdy 8), an aesthetic and ethical choice that preserves cultural "sacred silences" (Moore 641), while countering the neocolonial war waged on Indian identity through misrepresentation and simulation. Alexie's echo of the Durans' call for "historical honesty," rather than the pandering to a colonial audience that Bird accuses him of committing, demand that the Euroamerican reader consider how her or his privilege is predicated upon the historical and ongoing oppression of Native Americans. Finally, attention to internalized oppression and alcoholism as a means to numb the pain of a continued colonial situation—depictions of despair which are cushioned by the comic mode—call attention to some of the challenges that may stand in the way of healthy nation-building.

Contrary to the admonitions of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, which present contemporary Native authors' willingness to write about ". . .mournfulness or loss or anger" as mutually

exclusive to the cause of “liberation literatures, [as of] little use for nationalistic/tribal resistance,” Alexie’s novel illuminates creative “new roads” toward liberation. The Spokane Reservation, fictionally depicted by Alexie, illustrates how some communities’ inability to come together in mourning and to truly acknowledge despair and identify its sources can hinder decolonization (30). While such communities may rush to claim treaty rights and affirm sovereignty, if the patterns of the Durans’ “quick-fix warrior,” or static, sometimes repressive, visions of Native identity inform the reshaping of Native nations, or if alcoholism and the practice of internalizing anger within Native communities persists into decolonization, the foundation for new nations may be shaky. By saying this, I do not suggest that the development of sovereignty and the full exercise (or the litigation to do so) of treaty rights should be forestalled until all Native communities have smoothed out rough terrain that is common to many colonized (or otherwise oppressed) groups. Rather, I intend that critics continue to expand their vision of decolonizing texts to account for the diverse ways that nation-building can be coded into contemporary Native novels.

## V. "Songs of Mourning that Would Become Songs of Celebration": Shadow Survivance in the Native Diaspora

In previous sections of this study I have examined how the exertion of colonial power persists well into the late twentieth century, transmuting into insidiously nuanced forms of cultural control, and how this oppressive power has, in many ways, been internalized by colonized populations depicted in *Reservation Blues*. In this final section, I will explore how the violence of internalized oppression permutes into cultural suppression, how a colonized culture can become so preoccupied with maintaining an idealized, static, represented image that it threatens to quash the creativity of those who deviate from this vision. In so doing, I will employ critical methods and observations advanced by contemporary Native scholars such as Philip Deloria, Vine Deloria Jr., Jace Weaver, Robert Warrior, Kathryn Shanley, and Gerald Vizenor. All of these scholars engage crucial questions of community identity: Are Native communities rooted in a static essence, and to what extent is that static essence a constructed response to the exertion of colonial power? And why are movements toward dynamic expression challenged in some Native communities? Through the models offered by these critics, I will consider the largely hostile Spokane Tribe's reaction to Coyote Springs in *Reservation Blues*, and the degrees to which Big Mom's and the band members' creative actions can be read as gestures of survivance through which they endure (and sometimes subvert) the exertion of colonizing power.

The inadequacy of static cultural perceptions and representations is apparent in the maps that serve as recurring metaphors in Alexie's narrative. When Coyote Springs searches for the "Tipi Pole Tavern" on the Flathead Reservation, Junior proclaims: "This goddamn map is useless. . . There are all sorts of roads ain't even on it. This road we're on now ain't on the map" (49). Toying with the distinctions between written and oral traditions, Alexie stages the following dialogue when the lost band stops (significantly for the blues theme) at a crossroads on the Flathead Reservation:

"Let's decide it [our path] the old Indian way," Thomas said because he tried to be as traditional as the twentieth century allowed.

"What's that?" Victor and Junior asked because they were as contemporary as cable television.

"We'll drive straight," Thomas said and pointed with his lips. "Then we find a house and ask somebody for directions." (49)

Having driven straight in from Spokane, the band is most likely using a mass-produced gas station map, which is suited to guide tourists to National Parks, Bison Ranges, and perhaps the occasional powwow or trading post. Since Indian bars and the backroads residences conveniently "vanished" by Euroamerica, unlike the aforementioned tourist destinations, hold little commercial value, they do not appear on the map. In this instance, it is the dominant culture which produces the map. And since the reservation roads are insignificant to that culture, they go unrepresented. This has the partial effect of "vanishing" many Natives, but it is also freeing in that the imperious gaze of Euroamerican tourists is denied total surveil of the territory, exemplified by the Coyote Springs' navigation via vernacular directions when on the Flathead Indian Reservation (50).<sup>50</sup>

The preceding instances offer examples where vernacular knowledge supplements the representations of the colonizing culture. Like the "shadows danc[ing] through the blinds" in Alexie's previously quoted poem, shadows which have an elusive vitality that escapes attempts to exert control through naming, the vernacular directions offered by Natives bespeak a knowledge that eludes Euroamerican presumption (but a knowledge that is sometimes shared when requested).<sup>51</sup> However, Alexie also explores the ways in which his fictionalized Spokane culture, rather than developing creative, appropriate ways of responding to oppressive circumstances, buys into the road maps issued by the colonizer. Robert Johnson's singing resonates deeply with Thomas Builds-the-Fire's imagination as Thomas hears not only Johnson's voice, but also the voice of the aging bluesman's enslaved grandmother echoing in her grandson's blues. Noting that "those black people sang for their God; they sang with joy and sorrow," Thomas also envisions the white slave-owners confounded by the "nonsensical" nature of the music. They



dismiss the power of such songs: "*those niggers singing and dancing again*, those white men thought. *Damn music don't make sense*" (175). In this instance, African-American spirituals and blues offer expressions of survivance, a function that is overlooked by the hyper-rational white oppressors who fail to perceive the supplementary power of this music. Through the blues, the enslaved and oppressed can give voice to the full range of their joys and sorrows.

Although the Euroamericans are depicted as largely deaf to this power, *Reservation Blues* portrays many of the Spokanes as unable to allow themselves to hear and feel the blues, as caught in a rut of internalized oppression in which they are afraid to envision a path through which the destructive powers of the colonizer, rather than being internalized, can be experienced, harnessed, then redirected back to their source:

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. . . . Thomas listened closely, but the other Spokanes slowly stretched their arms and legs and walked outside, and would not speak about any of it. They buried all of their pain and anger deep inside, and it festered, then blossomed, and the bloom grew quickly. (174-5)

The "anger and pain" of a colonized culture, coupled with several symptoms arising from internalized oppression—"car wrecks, suicides, murders"—situates this passage as an extension of my previous reading of how Alexie historicizes the effects of colonization. Creatively engaging pain through art, in this instance through the blues, offers a viable outlet for grappling with oppressive forces. Fearing the unknown effects of this liberatory process and the foreign aesthetic of the blues, the Spokanes revert to the familiar terrain of complicitly perpetuating familiar colonial relations. This fear has the immediate effect of the community's scapegoating and ostracization of Coyote Springs.

Stopping far short of the ideal of blues as an outlet for "joy and sorrow" (*RB* 175), the Spokane people cannot even embrace Coyote Springs' music at the level of what blues scholar Paul Oliver describes as "an emotional safety-valve, canalizing feeling of anger and resentment" (273). At the band's early rehearsals the potential energy and the threat

that it posed to colonizing institutions of church and state is articulated. We learn that "the crowds [at the rehearsals] kept growing and converted the rehearsal into a semi-religious ceremony that made the Assemblies of God, Catholics and Presbyterians very nervous. United in their outrage, a few of those reservation Indian Christians showed up at rehearsals just to protest the band" (33). It is hard to read this attempted suppression, coupled with the arrival of "undercover CIA and FBI agents," apart from the assimilationist discursive trajectory which would eradicate Native cultural practices (33). The neocolonial government presence bears ominous shadows of earlier, overt, fear-based suppressions of Native cultural vitality such as the Wounded Knee Massacre, in which concern about the Ghost Dance movement factored heavily into US desires to thoroughly subjugate Lakota populations (Mooney 847).<sup>52</sup>

That the band's repertoire is primarily their own blues tunes complemented by soulful songs of Aretha Franklin, and the Sex Pistols anthems of punk rebellion is significant to considerations of the reservation's largely reactionary stance. While it is unsurprising that the brash insurgency of the Sex Pistols might upset tribal members, more troubling yet is the previously-quoted passage in which many of the Spokanes turn their backs on the "road map" offered by the blues. This rejection, indicative not only of prejudice but also of a denial of the need to grieve and mourn, stands in the way of the community's ability to honestly come to terms with the ongoing colonial conditions. Without candidly identifying the causes and effects of such oppression, the tribal members are largely powerless to effect an appropriate path of resistance to these insidious forces. Thomas Builds-the-Fire offers a vision of such an effort as he sings a "Patsy Cline song about falling to pieces" for "the little country he was trying to save, this reservation hidden away in the corner of the world" (16). Later in this passage, when Victor and Junior have left Thomas alone with the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota, "Thomas started to cry. That was the worst thing an Indian man could do if he were sober. A drunk Indian can cry and sing into his beer all night long, and the rest of the drunk Indians will sing backup" (17).

This broad generalization again illustrates the role that alcohol plays in internalizing oppression. Only when one is properly anesthetized is it acceptable to emote over the losses incurred by the ongoing colonialism. Although this example offers an instance in which sorrow is expressed, throughout the novel, anger and aggression overpower the need to grieve.

The value of drunken tears to the mourning process is certainly disputable, yet Thomas's sober tears and his embrace of the blues aesthetic suggest the importance of grieving to the health of Native communities. Theresa O'Neil illustrates the crucial nature of mourning as she cites a pamphlet distributed by the Flathead Culture Committee: "If you hold back your tears, this may cause a sickness. By releasing your tears, this relieves your heart" (87). Responding to that quote, O'Neil states that, "the undisputed reality that death begets death through unexpressed grief energizes the ritual messages of the wake with a vitality born of the urgency to preserve lives" (87-8). O'Neil relates these values of grieving back to the community level:

Flathead death rituals assert a vision of the individual in the world in which the painful emotions of grief, loneliness, and pity are constructed as natural motivators for social responsibility. Flathead death rituals draw on culturally grounded conventions and disciplines to transform the dangerous emotions of grief, fear, and anger—emotions that threaten to take individuals from the living community through self-imposed isolation, sickness, or death—into proper emotions of compassion and gratitude—emotions that bind individuals to the group. (92)

Despite the importance of wakes to the nearby Salish community described by O'Neil, Alexie's Spokane Reservation does little to mourn Junior's death. We are told that "Coyote Springs didn't have the energy to sing or mourn properly, and the rest of the reservation didn't really care" (277). Yet, as with Alexie's incompletely foreboding pronouncements about Indian drinking and the spiritual emptiness of the reservation, we learn that several Spokanes gestured toward honoring Junior. "The flowers and condolences" sent by "a few anonymous Indians" hardly serve to improve the group cohesiveness described by O'Neil as one of the goals of Salish "death rituals." However,

though noted as “an usual gift at a wake,” the dogs Lester FallsApart gives to Coyote Springs, and his presence at Junior’s funeral, stand as more substantial gestures. As such, they are more in line with Native mourning practices in the Northwest. Yet, Alexie’s ethnographic elisions and his peculiar reworking of the tradition of exchanging gifts at wakes is consistent with his stated desire to avoid turning his novels into “traveling road show[s] of Indian spirituality” (Purdy 16). But at another level, the fictionalized community’s callous response to Coyote Springs and its general lack of concern over Junior’s suicide, coupled with the preponderance of alcohol-fueled anger, portrays a community lacking in the ability to grieve properly, a community unable to come to terms with manifold oppression, a community unable to process “grief, fear and anger” and to transform such emotions into unifying principles of “compassion and gratitude.”

“Grief, fear, and anger” certainly conspire in the Spokane community’s rejection of Coyote Springs. Stunted by such emotions, the community isolates itself from the paths of “creat[ive] respon[ses] to forced colonization” offered by the band’s music (Ortiz 10). Denying this avenue of expression and release, many of the tribal members indulge in the “repression [which] is always a poison and a detriment to creative growth” (Ortiz 9). Big Mom’s and Robert Johnson’s interpretations of Michael WalksAlong’s “performance art” attest to the toxicity of such stuckness. WalksAlong, who is now head-injured as a result of the melee with Victor and Junior and from his new habit of Sterno-drinking, has been reduced to trudging around the bases of the reservation softball diamond. Big Mom’s diagnosis that what is wrong with Michael is the “same thing that’s wrong with most people. . . he’s living his life doing the same thing all day long. He’s just more obvious about it” (262). But Johnson’s reading is more mundane: “maybe he just got hisself knocked too hard on the head. Like a fighter. I seen how fighters end up gettin’ slugged too much” (262). Big Mom’s ambivalent response, “maybe,” reflects the extent to which they are both correct. Like the fictionalized Spokane community, Michael has survived many heavy blows, and he has been lulled into a comfortable, static holding pattern. Also

like the colonized Spokane community, Michael seems resistant to adapting readily to new paths, to “creatively responding to forced colonization” (Ortiz 10).

The aforementioned responses of WalksAlong and the varied church members bespeak the anger and fear which suppress Coyote Springs' attempts to offer new paths to reckon with grief and the destructive emotions to which it gives rise when unexpressed. Later in the novel, the traditional Spokanes join the reactionary progressives in protest against Coyote Springs' "white man's music" (179, 263). The objections of all of these groups deny the importance of what Ortiz calls "the nationalistic impulse to make use of foreign ritual, ideas and material in their own—Indian—terms" (8). These acts of suppression, in many ways, attest to an adoption of the Euroamerican valorization of fixed histories and essential natures. As Vine Deloria Jr. notes in a 1974 essay entitled “Religion and Revolution Among American Indians,” "truth is in the ever changing experiences of the community. For the traditional Indian to fail to appreciate this aspect of his own heritage is the saddest of heresies. It means the Indian has unwittingly fallen into the trap of Western religion, which seeks to freeze history in an unchanging and authoritative past" (15). Deloria expands upon these principles in a 1976 interview,

Everyone doesn't have to do everything that the old Indians did in order to have a modern Indian identity . . . . We need a larger variety of cultural expression today. . . . I don't see why we can't depart from traditional art forms and do new things. Yet both Indians and whites are horrified when they learn that an Indian is not following the rigid forms and styles of the old days. That is nonsense to me but it has great meaning to a lot of people who have never considered the real meaning of cultural change and national development. (quoted in Warrior 94)

Stultified by a tribal structure that bears little resemblance to the healthy traditionalism that the older Indians seek to protect, Thomas Builds-the-Fire attempts to forge a path of individual expression, through his songwriting and his attempts to emote freely, a path through which he acknowledges the futility of reconciling himself to a largely stagnating community. Confronted with his father's inability to otherwise cope with colonial conditions, Thomas cannot repress the sorrow caused by Samuel's seemingly hopeless drunkenness. Unlike the anesthetized, conditioned tears cried over and into

glasses of beer, Thomas "just wanted his tears to be individual, not tribal. Those tribal tears collected and fermented in huge BIA barrels. Then the BIA poured those tears into beer and Pepsi cans and distributed them back onto the reservation. Thomas wanted his tears to be selfish and fresh" (101). This observation, acknowledging the tragic figure of the Indian as serving the desires of neocolonialism in the BIA, articulates Thomas's desire to grieve as genuinely as he can for the loss that surrounds him without getting sucked into its depths. Furthermore, this observation emphasizes Thomas's awareness of the ways in which neocolonial conditions, in the form of "puppet" tribal governments and cultivated consumer markets, grotesquely exploit colonized populations, impeding personal expression that affirms the colonized individual's status as a "multidimensional and fully sentient being" (Alfonso Ortiz 1). For Thomas and the other reservation Indians, when so much of their daily existence is circumscribed by government bureaus and is shaded by the canyon-like parameters of deep loss, it appears easier to cover over such vital expression by buying into the lifestyles constructed for them.

In these distinctions made through Thomas's insights, we hear echoes of one of Alexie's interview comments on the state of many contemporary reservations: "It's a two-way street. The system sets you up to fail, and then, somehow you choose it" (Marx 40). Through this quotation and Thomas's actions, we see both the deck that is stacked against contemporary reservation Indians and the individual's ability to choose whether to act into the clutches of an oppressive system. Rather than resigning himself to foreordained tragic outcomes, Thomas can imagine a path other than that circumscribed by the institutions and what Vizenor calls "literatures of dominance" that would escort Natives to the vanishing point.

Alexie's cultural landscape is one in which fictionalized Native communities are in need of revitalization, and concerned individuals such as Thomas, the Warm Waters sisters, and Big Mom must create their own communities. The small band that we see these "misfits" forming throughout the novel is consistent with a description of healthy

Native community offered by Vine Deloria in 1990: "the clans and kinship systems were built upon the idea that individuals owed each other certain kinds of behaviors and that if each individual performed his or her task properly, society as a whole would function" (qtd. in Warrior 110). While we see the band members looking out for each other (with the exception of Victor's substantial shortcomings), those who hold power in the community at large, namely David WalksAlong do not seem to act out of any sense of deeply felt community obligation. This dissipated sense of community is apparent not only in Alexie's description of WalksAlong and his spiteful cronies but also in the description of the reservation itself. When Thomas, Chess and Checkers are discussing the figurative and literal disappearances of their fathers,

the word *gone* echoed all over the reservation. The reservation was gone itself, just a shell of its former self, just a fragment of the whole. But the reservation still possessed power and rage, magic and loss, joys and jealousy. The reservation tugged at the lives of Indians, stole from them in the middle of the night, watched impassively as the horses and salmon disappeared. But the reservation forgave, too (96-7).

A fragment of the original lands lived upon by the Spokanes, and developed (and depleted) largely according to the whims of various government agencies, the reservation itself offers limited spiritual comfort to its occupants. Rather than just signifying the land itself, for Alexie, the word reservation accounts for the colonial containment of the Spokanes, a political construct that bears little relief for circumscribed populations.

Nonetheless, as with many of Alexie's seemingly ominous statements, this one also is ambivalent. Along with being complicit in the legacy of loss, the reservation also "watched impassively" and even "forgave." Imbuing the reservation with such agency, Alexie suggests a reconciliatory power possessed by the land, which, like the elders in the hills, is latent throughout the novel. Rather than lean back upon the conventional trappings of Native American literature, Alexie foregrounds the challenges to these ways of being, hinting at redemptive qualities but stopping short of exploiting them in print. We see this power playfully invoked as Victor and Junior disrespectfully dismiss using Coyote as part of their band name:

"That's too damn Indian," Junior said. "It's always Coyote this, Coyote that. I'm sick of Coyote."

"Fuck Coyote," Victor said.

Lightning fell on the reservation right then, and a small fire started down near the Midnight Uranium Mine. Coyote stole Junior's water truck and hid it in the abandoned dance hall at the powwow grounds. The truck was too big for the doors, so nobody was sure how that truck fit in there. Junior lost his job, but he had to take that truck apart piece by piece and reassemble it outside first. (45)

This parodic nod to Coyote stories affirms the land's powers. Abandoning the adulating descriptions of noumenal landscapes found in Momaday's writings, which Bird celebrates, Alexie's description uses humor to depict the reservation's vestigial powers.

Assertions of the landscape's positive capacities are overshadowed by Alexie's portrayal of the reservation's repressive social environment. It is from within this withering social context that Thomas chooses to affirm his individuality as a survival tactic. WalksAlong's vision of communal consensus, as we have seen, reeks of fascism. The good of the community is extolled while its members (Coyote Springs) are denigrated as scapegoats to bear the brunt of the reservation's shortcomings. WalksAlong also gives lip service to community values, but his actions reveal a patronage system in which his family receives special favors at the cost of fellow Spokanes. Thus I read the individualism practiced by WalksAlong as what Vine Deloria Jr. calls "economic individualism," whereas Thomas's actions more accurately represent "social" or Indian individualism" (*We Talk* 170-6).<sup>53</sup>

According to Deloria, Euroamerican, or "economic individualism" is wedded to notions of private property and "social norms of behavior and set up strata for social recognition, [whereas] Indians have a free-flowing concept of social prestige that acts as a leveling device against the building of social pyramids" (*We Talk* 170). WalksAlong's corrupt governing tactics bespeak the IRA government's internalization of Euroamerican values. Consolidating small scale leadership of bands and sublating the slow process of consensus-based governance, IRA government rule allows for the rise of leaders such as WalksAlong, who value material wealth over community health. These governments



freeze up the dynamic relations that once counteracted tendencies towards entrenched power. Rather than celebrate the bands' creative expression and its qualities that are potentially subversive to neocolonial conditions, those who hold governmental power and those whose religious beliefs are tenuous enough to be threatened by Coyote Springs' music seek to scapegoat and ostracize the band members for challenging an oppressive perspective that has been largely internalized.

Woven into the novel's storyline after Coyote Springs' success at the battle of the bands in Seattle is an "Open Letter to the Spokane Tribe," which David WalksAlong has penned. This letter reveals the repressive atmosphere WalksAlong foments amongst the tribal members as he sets up a straw man argument in which he attacks Coyote Springs' attempts to "represent" the Spokane people. His concerns are manifold:

the two Indian women in the band are not Spokanes. They are Flathead. [Although David] has always liked [the tribes'] Flathead cousins, . . . Coyote Springs is supposedly a Spokane Indian band. . .

We have to remember that Coyote Springs travels to a lot of places as a representative of the Spokane Tribe. Do we really want other people to think we are like this band? Do we really want people to think that the Spokanes are a crazy storyteller, a couple of irresponsible drunks, a pair of Flathead Indians, and two white women? I don't think so.

Rumor has it that Checkers Warm Water has quit the band and joined the Catholic Church Choir. We can only hope the rest of the band follows her. They could all use God. (176)

If WalksAlong's belief that finding the Christian God (rather than traditional Spokane spirituality, or a syncretic blending of the two) is the correct path for the fallen band members is not indicative enough of his internalization of colonizing institutions, his fears regarding representation certainly are. Recalling earlier discussion of "outside view predicate[s]," we can see WalksAlong's preoccupation with how Coyote Springs will affect the Euroamerican perception of the Spokane Tribe. Through this concern, he would have the tribe surrender its "self-determination to others. . . to fit into the plans and projects of others, to make it easy for them to manipulate you for their own ends, their own purposes" (qtd. in Weaver 5). Important considerations of how Coyote Springs serves its own needs of artistic expression, or potentially the needs of the community, are

drowned out by fearful concerns about how the band will make the whole reservation look.

At different points we hear or glimpse tidbits of the diverse opposition to the band. For example, we hear the opinion of the converted Catholic woman who is pleased that Checkers has decided not to join the rest of the band on their hell-bound journey. And we see the signs borne by the picketers outside of the Tribal Community Center: "COYOTE SPRINGS NEEDS TO BE SAVED. . . [and] REPENT, COYOTE SPRINGS, REPENT! . . . [and] COYOTE SPRINGS CAN KISS MY BIG RED ASS" (263). These objections support David WalksAlong's previously-quoted castigations of Coyote Springs, because unlike Thomas, he assumes spokespersonship for the tribe, and unlike the other objectors, his criticisms are aired through the community newspaper (as are those of his nephew Michael). Assuming such a voice and having disproportionate access to the means of mediation, David's vision emerges as the hegemonic critique of the band. Thus, attempts made by other groups to achieve a traditionally-based tribal stability are corrupted by WalksAlong's vision which is deeply colored by his preoccupations with a "outside view predicate" and with "economic stability" that coincides with the B.I.A.'s manipulative plans for the reservation.

Coyote Springs nearly falls prey to extensive manipulation at the hands of Cavalry Records (and they choose to place themselves in a situation of economic dependence when they accept the invitation to New York City), but in Thomas's responses to the KROK D.J. after winning the Battle of the Bands in Seattle, he successfully fends off the imperious attempts of dominant culture to circumscribe Natives through representation. Contrary to WalksAlong's fears of misrepresentation, Thomas firmly asserts that they are not all "a bunch of Spokane Indians from the Spokane Reservation" (156). Affirming his own Spokane identity, he describes how the white women, Betty and Veronica, became involved with the band, and he clearly states that Chess is "a Flathead Indian from Montana, not Spokane" (156). Arguably, as Gloria Bird has done, I could dwell upon the

inability of "mainstream audiences" to register such distinctions, leaning instead upon harsh censure to prevent possible misinterpretations. While that path might ensure a acceptable nationalist program for Native representation, it would also silence voices such as Alexie's, stifling exploration of uncomfortable neocolonial issues such as internalized oppression.

Kathryn Shanley engages the tensions between individual creativity and community responsibility in ways that illuminates Coyote Springs' quandary. She affirms that the "artistic imagination [should not] be censored or narrowly constrained and categorized." Simultaneously, Shanley advances the importance of community values: "American Indian tribes' right to exist in their own self-determined ways and their right to define themselves is recognized through their arts as well as their politics" (681). Likening this dilemma of representation to the questions explored through Negritude, an essentialist theory of modern African writing, Shanley explores Native representation in a situation inverse to that of Coyote Springs.<sup>54</sup> She analyzes the popular and academic milieus which unthinkingly accepted Jamake Highwater's spurious claims to Indian identity. While Alexie, through Thomas Builds-the-Fire, attempts to subvert monolithic groupings and stereotypes of natives, Highwater, trying to enter into a romanticized essential "Indianness," propagates a feel-good, sacred journey that, like those critiqued by Philip Deloria, leans heavily upon the flexible identity politics of the late sixties and early seventies. Rather than tracing kinship and community ties, Highwater leans upon the colonial construct of blood quantum—again spurious in his case—and upon the bold statement that "I am Indian only because I say I am Indian" (quoted in Shanley 682). At various points in his life, Highwater staked claims to Blackfeet and Cherokee heritage (680). However, unlike Builds-the-Fire, who is diffident about his role as lead singer and who adroitly sidesteps the dominant culture's attempt to misidentify him as a spokesman for the "all-Spokane band," Jamake Highwater has thoroughly exploited his claims to Indian ethnicity. Assuming the role of spokesman, Highwater effectively advances the

colonizing project as he embodies stereotyped Indianness, reflecting such images back to Euroamericans at the cost of Natives who lose out on grant funding (stolen by the fraudulent Highwater) and who indirectly suffer the effects of the stereotypes that he perpetuates (Shanley 695-7).

Thomas Builds-the-Fire's stance on the issue of spokespersonship harmonizes with that of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. In a 1987 autobiographical essay, Cook-Lynn delineates her views regarding the role and responsibility of the writer. Unlike Highwater, she explicitly states: "I do not speak for my people. . . The frank truth is that I don't know very many poets who say, 'I speak for my people.' It is not only unwise; it is probably impossible, and it is very surely arrogant, for *We Are Self-Appointed* and the self-appointedness of what we do indicates that the responsibility is ours and ours alone" (58, qtd. in Shanley 694). Responding to the KROK D.J.'s question "how do you think other Indians look at [Betty and Veronica singing backup]?", Thomas states, "I don't know what Indian people will think about those white women" (157). Though not as strong an example as that provided by Cook-Lynn, Thomas's sentiment is similar. He does not exploit his moment in the limelight to presume the role of spokesman for the other Indians. Instead, he earnestly offers his opinion of Betty and Veronica's involvement with the band and with Victor and Junior, couching his comments as just that—his personal opinion.

Unlike the charlatans Jamake Highwater and David WalksAlong, Thomas exhibits a level of integrity that resonates with the values admired in traditional leaders. His creative role as songwriter, his gift of Robert Johnson's guitar to Victor, his invitation to Junior and Victor to join the band, and his role as lead singer establish Thomas as the leader of the band. Contrary to the political manipulations of WalksAlong, Thomas's leadership is radically democratic, to the extent that when Checkers chooses not to join the band on its trip to Seattle, it is agreed that she will still receive her portion of the prize money (125-6). In a very human moment, we see Thomas egotistically entertaining the fruits of stardom, and his imperfection is also apparent in the earlier noted passage in

which Thomas is at an imaginative loss; nonetheless, these shortcomings are outweighed by the many ways in which Thomas successfully "tries to be as traditional as the twentieth century would allow" (49).

The novel's depiction of the reservation is firmly grounded in the neocolonial era of IRA governments, commodity dependence, and the twilight of extractive resource industries, yet inscribed within Thomas's actions and the band's circumstances are shadows and echoes of pre-treaty Native experience. Certainly at a disadvantage in their negotiations with the organizers of the Battle of the Bands in Seattle and with the executives at Cavalry Records, Coyote Springs is nonetheless freed of the corrupting influence of WalksAlong who conspires to "manufacture consent" on the reservation in ways that better serve his needs and those of the colonizing culture than those of the Spokane people.<sup>55</sup> The recapitulation of the treaty era is obvious in the band's relations with Wright, Sheridan and Armstrong, yet subtle details in other encounters reveal similar shadows. In the Federal Express agent's many visits, we see the comic recapitulation of historical envoys between the military and Indian clans they sought to "pacify." Their invitation to play at the Backboard in Seattle offers but one instance in which the connections to treaty history are clear. Like the ultimatums presented by the land-hungry US government to Native communities over the last several centuries, commercial offers extended to the band unfold along the time frame of the colonizing culture. The Seattle bar gives Coyote Springs less than a day's notice before their engagement, leading Chess to remark: "this ain't enough time to decide anything. . . That's not fair. How could they do that to us?" (125) After having decided in favor of going to Seattle, the band realizes the true nature of the "treaty" they have entered. Rather than a lucrative gig, they have signed on for a one in thirty chance of winning the thousand-dollar prize. The band, having sunk their savings into traveling to Seattle, is forced to compete. Most likely, Thomas's comment that "I guess I didn't understand the invitation too well" reflects the invitation's obfuscatory, dishonest, treaty-like language rather than any real lack of understanding on

his part (135). Such instances reflect the band's status in opposition to the colonial culture. And it is this ongoing confrontation to which the band loses Junior and Victor. Yet strictly oppositional stories of the band's relation to the dominant US culture fail to account for the previously noted moments of cohesion and the small victories the band experiences, such as Junior and Victor's mutual fathering and the democratic principles that unite Coyote Springs.

The decision of Thomas, Chess, and Checkers to leave the reservation for Spokane stands as one the novel's many ambivalent statements regarding cultural survival. It is hard to cheer their decision to enter the urban New Western economy exemplified by Chess's decision to take an entry-level operator job at Western Communication. But in light of depressed reservation economies, betokened on Alexie's fictionalized Spokane Reservation by the lack of work, the dilapidated HUD housing, the preponderance of commodity foods, and a job distribution network that amounts to patronage controlled by the Tribal Chairman, it is hard to fault the three Indians for choosing to try their luck in Spokane. Of course, their decision to leave is also heavily influenced by the community's rejection of the band members.

As Gloria Bird's critique implies, Alexie exaggerates the despair arising from community disintegration and hostility, underrepresenting the strengths of the communities within the actual Spokane Reservation. Without reversing my claim that Alexie's Spokane Reservation is fictionalized, I do believe that his creation is not without grounding in the economic conditions on many contemporary reservations. Although I might be accused of trying to "have it both ways," by claiming that Alexie masks or otherwise elides culturally sensitive, "affirmative" material while his "negative" depiction of reservation economies is largely accurate, my reading is consistent with respect to Alexie's stated realization that his novels are read by audiences comprised largely of non-Natives (Purdy 15). Whereas Bird and Cook-Lynn prefer cultural specificity and "accurate representation" in fiction as a means toward nation-building (Bird 51), Alexie writes with

acute awareness of how such “accurate representation” abets cultural appropriation. I see decolonization as one of his primary goals; however, rather than engaging foremost in a project of nation-building that calls for celebration of cultural practices in print, Alexie pragmatically engages his predominantly Euroamerican audience, urging them toward the “historical honesty” described by the Durans. As previously quoted, the Durans note that “presently there is a lot of healing in the Native American community” and that Euroamericans inheritors of privilege and conquest “are willing to pay money” for it (53). Whether they are hiring “plastic shamans” or buying books—including novels—and trying to cobble together spiritual paths based upon traditional spirituality, Euroamerican consumers are confronted by Alexie’s expression of the Durans’ message: “the only price that will purchase healing for them is historical honesty” (Duran and Duran 53). As I have illustrated, *Reservation Blues* invites Euroamerican readers to consider how the despair fictionalized in Alexie’s novel bears links not only to the ongoing processes of colonization but to material conditions endured on a number of contemporary reservations.

The desire to protect Spokane cultural property and to inspire “historical honesty,” begins to explain why Alexie masks specific cultural practices but represents economic despair somewhat accurately. David Moore’s previously cited essay sheds further light on the ethics underlying aesthetic masking in ways that might elucidate the ethics underlying Alexie’s choices. Moore writes of “centuries of American Indian history, in which a dialogical indigenous worldview has so often met a dialectical colonizing one” (656). By way of brief theoretical definition, unlike dialectics, in which thesis and antithesis are ultimately resolved in a synthesis, which “seeks to fix certainty or truth” (650), dialogics “is a multiple, four-dimensional, more complex system, seeking not truth or certainty but mobile relationality” (651). Dialectics seek to sublimate that which is different and threatening, to neutralize challenging voices and beliefs by incorporating them—or “co-opting” them—into existing power structures. Dialogics is not possessed of the same drive

to subjugate difference to serve the *telos* of power and “truth”; instead, it models how difference exists in conversation with power, which is itself a form of difference. Or, put another way, dialogics values “truth as relationality rather than as accuracy” (651).

A brief return to the final lines from Alexie’s poem “Introduction to Native American Literature” further illustrates the distinction between dialectic and dialogic ethics. The poem’s reader is told: “Knock on its door: you’ll hear voices./ Look in its windows: shadows dance through the blinds” (4–5). In Alexie’s lines we see what Moore describes as the dilemma of the Native writer who tries “to control dialogical materials in dialectical colonial situation” (656). Behind the door and between the blinds is a dynamic conversation of voices and interplay of shadows. Yet the Native author, wary of a colonial history in which imperious scholars have too often pounded open the door or pried wide the blinds, chooses to either keep the door closed or the blinds partially shut. The author alludes to dialogic experience that occurs behind the doors or the blinds, while choosing, based on lessons learned from a history of exploitation and dialectical ethics, to exclude the presumably non-Native reader so as to prevent co-optation of concealed, vital cultural practices. However, Moore advances that the choices need not take the simple binary form of closing or opening a door; instead, choices made by Native authors might be exercised dialogically: the image of “shadows danc[ing] through the blinds,” blinds which may be progressively opened, blinds through which a hand may reach to open a storm window to make conversation possible, an open window through which a visitor might be invited inside, but blinds which might be closed at other times, blinds, which, when closed, insist that the visitor respect needed privacy. By dialogically engaging a potentially colonizing audience, Native authors affirm the vibrant resilience of their cultures and their confidence that their writing can engage readers in provocative transcultural conversations without fearing that they (and their cultures) will be subsumed by powerful interlocutors.

Despite my previous defense of mainstream audiences, through which I aver that critically untrained readers will not mistake *Reservation Blues* for a complete and accurate



representation of Spokane culture as Gloria Bird has claimed, I am not sure that I can extend the same faith in readers with respect to the strategic silences that Alexie crafts. By definition they are not as pronounced as his hyperbolic stereotypes. Thus, in his desire to preserve Native cultural property from expropriation and to confront readers with Euroamerican complicity in neocolonialism, Alexie crafts muted strategic silences that may not even register with many readers. These silences include the briefly-mentioned presence of elders who still live “out in the woods,” the muted mourning practices of Coyote Springs and several other community members when Junior dies, and the shadowed survivance of the ghost horses which my conclusion will address. Unlike the balanced and subtle “sacred silences” that David Moore respectfully interprets in the work of Luci Tapahonso, Adrian Louis, and Larry Evers and Felipe Molina, Alexie’s strategic silences might lead readers to overlook enduring cultural strength, especially when they are outvoiced by the high volume of hyperbolic attention to dire material conditions in his novels. Referring to the work of Tapahonso, Louis, Evers and Molina, and a larger body of Native literature which they provisionally represent, Moore states “there is an aesthetic logic of the sacred which informs a sufficient number of Native American writers to build an ethical approach for the outside reader to follow” (657). Thus, through essays like Moore’s and mine, careful readers of Native fiction might cultivate and exercise an ethics of contemplative reading of texts like Alexie’s. In novels like *Reservation Blues*, the affirmation of cultural strengths, much less the sacred, is difficult to discern as attention to another expression of the sacred—decolonization—is foregrounded in unpredictable ways.

Kathryn Shanley’s insights into material conditions on many contemporary reservations, establish the need for Native decolonization as more pressing than the celebration of Indian’s spiritual connections with reservation landscapes:

on some reservations [unemployment] runs as high as seventy percent in the winter and less in the summer because of firefighting crews and other dangerous day labor job opportunities . . . thus it is disturbing that some people go around spouting platitudes about 'the Indian's connection with

'nature,' while actual Indian parents are unable to put decent food on the table for their children or experience much pride in having a meaningful work through which to earn a living. (699, n 31)

Debunking a romanticized vision of Native perceptions of reservations as bountiful natural wonderlands, Shanley makes the link between Euroamerican racism and the creation of reservation boundaries to partition Indians from the encroaching Euroamericans, partitions that have frequently relegated Natives to resource-poor fragments of their earlier land bases. In the case of many Native Americans, such exclusionary geographies "amount to incarceration on reservations" (Shanley 688). In this context, Coyote Springs' decision to leave the Reservation makes more sense.

Vine Deloria Jr. further historicizes the economically depressed, carceral situation in *The Nations Within*, co-authored with political scientist, Clifford Lytle. Deloria and Lytle's formulation traces the diminished status of reservation lands to the influences of bureaucratic structures that opened the door to exploitation of Native lands by "non-Indian corporations." The attitudes arising from this perspective strive for "economic stability," and they lead to viewing only the land's instrumental, exploitable value as "simply another form of corporate property," while the more traditional stance seeks "tribal stability," and it considers the reservation's value as a "homeland, in which case it assumes a . . . focal point for other activities that support the economic stability of the reservation society" (258). As Deloria and Lytle note, those who put "tribal stability" before "economic stability" bear the burden of unraveling the discourse disseminated by the B.I.A. which "sees the reservation as valuable property and encourages Indians to view it in the same manner" (258). Contributing to this discourse is federal funding earmarked primarily for "development and use purposes" and grants available from private foundations which "also see the reservation as property to be used primarily for economic gain" (258). Having been transplanted from familiar lands and having "been removed from intimate and subsistence use of their lands and force[d] to become recipients of public largess"(258), the needs of many Native Americans are inadequately met by "massive tribal bureaucracies [that don't] realize that

many of these needs have been generated by the leasing of lands for mineral exploitation purposes" (257). These efforts by the tribal governments, taken with the ineffectual "development programs of the sixties . . . in most instances created a rural slum that was as dependent upon its connections to the outside world as any suburban or urban area in the country" (257). And Alexie's fictionalized reservation appears to be lacking the economic and tribal stability to prove itself a welcoming home to Coyote Springs.

Although different groups on the Spokane Reservation have varied visions of how to achieve a stable community, for example, nearly universal is the belief that the remaining members of Coyote Springs have no place in this vision. Thomas, Chess and Checkers's decision to light out for the city of Spokane can be read positively through what Kathleen Kane has referred to as a "powwow highway ethic."<sup>56</sup> When the band is killing time before their gig in Seattle they encounter a number of Indians who have settled in the city. Victor comes alive, spontaneously trading stories and playing music with his adopted elders. The narrator remarks that "the Indian world is tiny, every other Indian dancing just a powwow away. Every Indian is a potential lover, friend or relative dancing over the horizon, only a little beyond sight. Indians need each other that much; they need to be that close, tying themselves to each other and closing their eyes against the storms" (151). In such passages a "powwow highway ethic" is fleshed out, in which Native cultural strength can be renewed and affirmed through diasporic gatherings that emphasize not so much the fixed signifiers of tribal affiliation or reservation residence, as the provisional gatherings of Natives in urban settings.

The nature of such provisional, fluid gatherings is further articulated as Gerald Vizenor weighs in on the spurious nature of employing reservation residence as a determinant of "authentic" Native identity. Riffing on Jean Baudrillard's theoretical model of simulations, Vizenor states that "postindian simulations are the absence not the presence of the real, and neither simulations of survivance nor dominance resemble the pleasurable vagueness of consciousness" (*MM* 53). By way of partially unpacking

Vizenor's dense statement, simulations are but a stand-in, a spurious, if not altogether misleading, fabricated signifier whose referent cannot be fully known. These simulations preponderate in what he calls "the literature of dominance," which would have the audience believe that such signifiers can fix, can make static and known, what he terms "the pleasurable vagueness of consciousness," in which identities exist dynamically and are revealed through one's relationships, actions and choices (56). Vizenor views the unquestioned establishing of authentic ideas as rooted in ties to the reservation as being one of the many delusions valorized by the "literatures of dominance": "the reservation simulations are the notion that reservation experiences determine obvious tribal identities. Thousands of tribal people have moved from reservations to cities in the past century to avoid poverty, sexual abuse, and the absence of services, education, and employment" (60). Thus, like Deloria and Shanley, Vizenor refutes those who would romanticize reservation life, further underscoring how residence on a reservation is an unreliable signifier of Native authenticity.<sup>57</sup> Thus, while it may be appropriate to read Thomas, Chess and Checkers's move to Spokane as passing undeserving, disparaging judgment upon the cultural vitality of the Spokane Reservation that Gloria Bird defends, their decision to leave Wellpinit should be freed from the baggage of perceptions of dominance that would read their move away from the reservation as an abnegation of Native identity.

As the narrator of *Reservation Blues* states, "Songs were waiting for them in the city" (306). Not only do songs await the trio, but we are told that other Natives await them as well. Most likely the small band of the Salish Warm Waters sisters, and the Spokane Builds-the-Fire will grow as they meet Colvilles, Lummis, Coeur D'Alenes and the former residents of uncounted reservations that populate the city of Spokane and the urban spaces of Sherman Alexie's other fictional works. In a move that would raise the ire of Gloria Bird and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, novelist Thomas King is quoted by Gerald Vizenor as saying that, in his next novel,

he is "trying to move away from a culturally specific area completely."  
The Indians "aren't identified by tribe, for instance, and as a matter of fact,

they're not even much identified by geographic area." That his characters are pantribal would be more obvious to some readers than others; those who search for authentic tribal representations would be concerned that the author has not served the literature of dominance. "I really don't care about white audiences. They don't have an understanding of the intricacies of Native life, and I don't think they're much interested in it, quite frankly." (in *MM* 174)

Vizenor's interpretation of King's stance reveals ethical and aesthetic choices at work, which are motivated more out of a general lack of concern for Euroamerican readers than out of the well-founded fear that Alexie has regarding non-Native expropriation of culturally specific materials that appear in commercial literature. Furthermore, in this analysis, Vizenor posits that "those who search for authentic tribal representations" perpetuate the reading habits of "the literature of dominance." Thus reading for such genre-defining qualifications, and critiquing their absence, furthers the practice of seeking the "the expected idea" of traditional Indian imagery and spirituality demanded by the literature of dominance (Purdy 8). Dwelling upon the pantribalness of his novel's protagonists, King avoids writing himself into the essentializing corners that circumscribe readings through the lenses of cultural and geographical determinism.

Just as urban Indians in *Reservation Blues* bond together and hang tight "against the storms," the blues aesthetic, like the "powwow highway ethic" offers respite through mobility, a means of reckoning with thoroughgoing adversity. As James Cone explains,

despair is not the whole picture. For underneath the despair there is also a firm hope in the possibility of black people's survival despite their extreme situation of oppression. . . .

The hope of the blues is grounded in the historical reality of the black experience. The blues express a belief that one day things will not always be like they are today. This is why buses, railways, and trains are important images in the blues. Each symbolizes motion and the possibility of leaving the harsh realities of an oppressive environment. . . . The blues emphasize movement, the possibility of changing the present reality of suffering. (124)

Resonating with the scene in which "blues lit up a new road, but the Spokanes pulled out their old maps" (174), the above passage underscores the viability of the blues as a dynamic alternative to the fixed status of many of the tribal members. As a result of the penetration of the ideology-bearers of Euroamerican capitalism into Native American

lives through the long history of colonization, the cultural and physical landscape of the fictionalized Spokane reservation has changed in many ways, and it has become (for the time being) unlivable for the former band members.

As the three Indians head to the city of Spokane, in one respect they are reinhabiting part of their pre-treaty homeland, a move that is not without precedent in Native fiction. In Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, we see Betonie, the mixed-blood medicine man assertively inhabiting the outskirts of largely Euroamerican Gallup. Explaining his occupancy, Betonie states: "it strikes me funny. . . people wondering why I live so close to this filthy town. But see, this hogan was here first. Built long before the white people ever came. It is that town down there that is out of place. Not this old medicine man" (118). To simply overlay this affirmative passage from Silko's mythopoetic novel onto Alexie postmodern rendering of similar themes might imbue Thomas, Chess and Checkers's move with too much rosy romanticism. They are, in fact, leaving the reservation to find work and housing in a place from which the Spokane Indians have been dispossessed, a place in which they will be racial minorities and will, most likely suffer discrimination as a result of their ethnicity. And the threesome is not oblivious to the challenges they may encounter in the city.

In spite of a nation-making history that continues in its attempts to vanish Indianness—now through commodification and simulation—the novel's closing scene is hopeful. Thomas, Chess and Checkers are escorted by shadow horses which they can reach out and touch—horses which both follow and lead the "Indians toward the city"(306). While they are driving to Spokane, Big Mom remains at the feast, sitting "in her rocking chair, measuring time with her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth there on the Spokane Reservation. She sang a protection song, so none of the Indians, not one would forget who they are"(306). Big Mom's "back and forth" movement could be read as symbolic of the dispersion and return seen as Spokanes move between vast ancestral ranges to a token range of reserved dry lands, to cities, to other reservations and

back to the reservation and potentially back to vast ancestral ranges. Along these lines, like the relation of Betonie's hogan to Gallup, it is notable that the city of Spokane, "named after the tribe that had been forcibly removed from the river," originally lay well within the range of pre-treaty Spokanes (RB 258). A visual corroboration of this dispossession appears in appendix one of this thesis. Beginning with a map reproduced from the Smithsonian's *Handbook of North American Indians* which is followed by two maps from Ruby and Brown's *The Spokane Indians*, this series illustrates early 19th century Spokane territory, late 19th century reservations to which the Spokane and other Salish tribes were relocated, and mid-20th century Spokane Tribal land claims. While the second map represents the political boundaries of the reservation fictionalized in *Reservation Blues*, the first and third illustrate earlier and contemporary claims that stake claim not only to both sides of the Spokane River, but to the city of Spokane as well. Just as the novel traces continuities between earlier and contemporary exertions of colonizing force, in passages such as the one depicting the citybound trio's migration, continuities 19th and 20th century cultural vitality are expressed.

Simultaneous to the assertion of survivance by Thomas, Chess and Checkers in driving towards Spokane, we see those who stayed on the reservation asserting cultural strength through paths viable for them: "other Indians were traditional dancing in the Longhouse after the feast, while drunk Indians stood outside of the Trading Post, drinking and laughing. Robert Johnson and the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota played a duet" (306). Crafting the ending thus, it appears that rather than advancing the message that reservations are hopelessly corrupted, and Native Americans are fated to either find the quickest path off of them or to wither in a dissipated cultural landscape, Alexie is emphasizing the importance of coming to terms, in the present moment, with personal and cultural histories. In an extended quote from his previously cited 1974 essay, Vine Deloria Jr. comments on this need to reconcile tribal "experiences" as perceived by

outsider (and insiders) seeking to freeze "Indianness," with the "real conditions under which Indians live:"<sup>58</sup>

This means traditionalists will have to recognize the historical nature of their beliefs. Customs and beliefs were shaped by particular times and places. The revelations received by the tribes in 'olden days' shaped the religious forms and served the needs of distinct communities of another time. . . . Religious forms must, in order to be meaningful, relate to a dramatically changed community in a dramatically changed environment.

I believe that, when the traditionalists realize that the basis of Indian tribal religions is not preserving social forms and ceremonies but creating new forms and ceremonies to confront new situations, they will have an extremely promising future. Many tribal religious traditions have their roots in the distant past but took on their present forms little more than a century before the coming of the white man. The religious traditions of many tribes have been transformed in very recent times through revelations encountered in new environments. Such is the genius of Indian religion. [Its many traditions] have not been authoritatively set 'once and for always.' ("Religion and Revolution" 15)

In addition to the Native traditions which thrive into the twenty-first century, Big Mom and the remaining members of Coyote Springs acknowledge the importance of cultivating new ceremonies and traditions that take into account both the vitality of inherited practices and the need to reckon with the strengths and challenges of contemporary Native American life.

In the protection song that Big Mom sings for all of the Indians, and in the dream sequence in which Big Mom teaches everyone a "new song. . . of mourning that would become a song of celebration," we witness the creation of new ceremony that affirms their survival (306). We see those who remain on the reservation engaging in vital cultural activities: dancing, joking, and playing music. And we see the affirmation of this new ceremony in the former band members' act of singing together a song which is shared with the spectral horses who escort them towards the city, and in the narrative pronouncement that "they were alive; they'd keep living" (306).

Consistent with Vine Deloria Jr.'s observation that ceremonies must change, the new song that Big Mom creates (and Thomas Builds-the-Fire's creative storytelling) also resonates with the beliefs of Betonie, who concedes that it is crucial that medicine people, singers, and dancers perform their roles appropriately to restore balance on both the small



and grand scale of community; however, he also notes that despite attention to the minutest details, even "long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing" (126). Noting the nearly immeasurable changes in the performance of ceremonies, Betonie implicitly affirms that ritual power dwells in the essence of the ceremony, rather than in compulsory attention to static details. Echoing Vine Deloria, Betonie states the historically conditioned nature of the old ceremonies and the arising need to amend them to new situations and to create new rituals: "at one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong" (126).

Big Mom's tutelage of Coyote Springs and her role in revitalizing Robert Johnson, along with the songs she sings for the departing band members, attest to her ability to adapt ceremony to contemporary situations. Her recognition that the Spokanes could benefit from opening themselves to the blues (along with the tribal members' refusal to embrace the potentially healing power of the blues aesthetic) resonates with another of Betonie's observations: "things that don't shift and grow are dead things. . . . [Such] witchery works to scare people to make them fear growth" (126). Silko associates stagnation and rigidity with witchery for the Laguna people; whereas Alexie contextualizes similarly static behavior and unhealthy methods of responding to the effects of neocolonialism with symptoms of internalized oppression: violence, alcoholism, and repressive community standards that cater to an "outside view predicate," in that they exclude syncretic, potentially subversive gestures toward incorporating new

and traditional forms and practices. The trio's decision to forge a new path in the city is blessed by Big Mom's songs and by the guiding presence of the horses.

The back and forth movement of Big Mom's chair is crucial to my reading of the final scene, especially considered alongside the song which Big Mom gives to the city-bound trio as symbolic of [his]story-making. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, between remembrance and creation, they generate and are surrounded by new and ongoing stories that will allow them to creatively adapt to the city:

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. . . . In the blue van, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers sang together. They were alive; they'd keep living. They sang together with the shadow horses: we are alive, we'll keep living. . . . Songs were waiting for them in the city. Thomas drove the car through the dark. He drove. Checkers and Chess reached out of their windows and held tightly to the manes of those shadow horses running alongside the blue van. (306)

In previous paragraphs, I have drawn out the importance of "song[s] of mourning" that become "song[s] of celebration" and the relationship of such creations to the process that Gerald Vizenor calls survivance. The narrative invocation of the shadow horses also reverberates with another of Vizenor's tropes, which incidentally shares billing with "survivance" as half of the title of an essay in *Manifest Manners* "Shadow Survivance."<sup>99</sup>

Although Alexie sidesteps the direct representation of Spokane cultural practices, he infuses representations such as this final passage with what Vizenor would recognize as "shadows." As discussed at this thesis's outset, Vizenor states that:

the shadows are the silence in heard stories, the silence that bears a referent of tribal memories and experience. The shadow words are active memories, and the memories of heard stories. The shadows are intransitive, an animate action in the silence of stories. . . . The shadow is the unsaid presence in names, the memories in silence, and the imagination of tribal experiences. (*MM* 73)

Alexie's evocation of the shadow horses offers an example through which to unpack Vizenor's dense quote. As the following paragraph will detail, although the Spokane "were a salmon tribe" (*RB* 36), like their Salish relatives to the East they were dependent

upon horses for mobility throughout the Northern Rockies and the Pacific Northwest.<sup>60</sup> Although Bird dismisses the horses' recurrence in the novel as a "convenient metaphor" (50), we can see that these shadow horses indeed "bear a referent of tribal memories and experience" (*MM* 73). Bird reads the killing of the horses, and its fictional invocation as confirming a tragic metanarrative that "reduces Indian existence to defeat" (50).<sup>61</sup> Yet hers strikes me as what Vizenor might call a "transitive" interpretation, one that eagerly offers an object to complete the meaning of a nebulous inference, or in this context, one that reifies the horses as significant merely for their tragic symbolism. Recalling my earlier discussion of Roland Barthes' "readerly" and "writerly" texts, I believe that Bird's analysis assumes that *Reservation Blues* is a "readerly" text, whereas Vizenor's essay and Alexie's novel encourage "writerly" interpretation of that which is "intransitive," that which does not provide a clear object, or in other words "the animate action in the silence of stories" (*MM* 73). Thus, the shadow horses can be read as affirming the "animate action" residing in tribal stories. Like the "shadows danc[ing] through the blinds" in Alexie's poem "Introduction to Native American Literature," the shadow horses defy simple definition. Along these lines, the horses evoke the "unsaid presence in names. . . and the imagination of tribal experiences" as they evoke a tragic episode in Spokane history, yoking it to the trio's migration to the city (*MM* 73). The trio's journey is negatively valenced by their inability to find a place on the Spokane Reservation, but their departure is marked by Coyote Springs' affirmation of their own, small, loosely knit community. At the same time, those who remain on the reservation assert cultural vitality. Just as Coyote Springs' departure is not merely tragic in its affirmation of mobility and ongoing cultural vitality, the evocation of the horses is similarly ambivalent. Yet when the reappearance of the horses is read alongside affirmations of survivance by the citybound trio and by those who remain on the reservation, and when it is accompanied by the "song of mourning that would become a song of celebration," shared with everyone by Big Mom, hopefulness wrestles ambivalence away from despair.

Read through Vizenor's theorization of shadows, we can consider the horses' role beyond that of a "convenient metaphor," introduced "for 'affect'" (Bird 50). One need not look far to uncover the horses' "referent [in] tribal experiences and memories." Revisiting Ruby and Brown's history of the Spokanes, one will recall that after the two major battles fought against the tribe, Wright and his troops happened upon nearly nine hundred horses, which the Spokanes had sought to conceal from the US forces. Resonant with the sentiment fictionalized in Sheridan's sneering quandary directed at Checkers in New York City: "I never know what to do with you" (237), the historical Wright was confounded by the horses. Although frontier law deemed killing horses a crime, they appeared too wild to be herded. And if the horses were left to be reclaimed by the Spokanes, the Indians "would have regained mobility to continue resistance and retaliation," but "without horses the Indians are powerless" (Ruby 136). Thus, the need to cripple the Spokanes outweighed considerations of wartime ethics. Wright's initial answer to the problem lay in killing the horses individually, which led to the more efficient, final solution of herding groups of them into a corral and lining up two companies to fire volleys into the massed horses.

This "convenient metaphor" can be read as a figurative recapitulation of the US policies that have informed the varied manifestations of Vanishing Indian rhetoric over the last two centuries. In Wright's response to the horses and in Alexie's fictionalized, contemporary bureaucratic management of reservations, the supposedly omnipotent and omniscient Euroamericans are perplexed by the indigenous threat of "mobility," "resistance" and resurgence. Thus they are moved to refinements upon violent tactics of genocidal containment and extermination. However, Alexie establishes a zone of resistance within which the final choice is left to the Native individual. Having chosen to abandon what they perceive as dwindling opportunities on the reservation, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers are accompanied by the shadow horses which inspire a spirited survivance. While these horses have fallen to Euroamerican colonization, their power endures, reminding us of Jace Weaver's paraphrase of Edward Said, earlier applied to the

elders “out in the deep woods.” Similar to the elders, the shadow horses are “beyond the reach of dominating systems” existing as “part of the oppressed that the oppressor cannot touch that makes change possible” (Said, quoted in Weaver 12). The “shadow survivance” of these horses ensures the mobility, the safe travel of the trio. By invoking the horses in this way, Alexie crafts consonance between the trio's migration and “the active memories,” the “imagination of tribal experiences” that informs this journey and is emblematic of mobility itself (*MM* 72-3).

Although its effect is contrary to that of Walter Benjamin's ninth “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” which obsessively laments our contemporary inability to set right the wrongs of history, the novel's final scene does call to mind an image crafted in that familiar passage, in which “the angel of history” sees history as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. . . [but he] would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (257-8). While Benjamin's angel is propelled backwards into the future by the forces of progress, tortured as the pile of the past's wreckage grows before his backward looking eyes, Alexie's ending offers a different vision. Driving towards the city, the trio embraces the positively-tinted ambiguity of their future, undoubtedly with a certain degree of trepidation. While the songs of their future wait for them in the city, they do not attempt to deny the stories of the past, nor do they hopelessly watch tragedy compound. They need not “awaken the dead,” as they have not been left behind. Instead, they grasp hold of the storied, shadowed past, and it of them, as they move back and forth, back and forth.

Back and forth: just as Big Mom rocks and blesses the journey of young Natives with her songs, and just as Thomas, Chess, and Checkers assert their mobility throughout the Native American diaspora, Alexie has written a dynamic novel in the spirit of Simon Ortiz's call for “creative responses to forced colonization.” *Reservation Blues* fuses many cultural influences, including Native humor and storytelling that is inflected by the age of satellite television, African-American-inspired blues, and postmodern techniques of anti-

realism in ways that destabilize “expected idea[s]” of Indianness in the late twentieth century. While I agree with nationalist critics that exploiting one’s culture for bucks and cheap yucks is reprehensible, deep investments in such stances can prevent critics from considering how humor that plays off hyperbolic stereotyping can drive readers to think more deeply about how Natives have been relegated to specific places and roles. Whether the places be *the* economically depressed reservation, or whether the roles be *the* drunken Indian, or *the* mystical storyteller, or *the* corrupt tribal cop, Alexie paints these familiar stereotypes in such lurid colors that it is hard to believe that so-called mainstream readers would read them as exhaustively representative of contemporary Native culture. Instead the attentive reader is treated to subtle unravelings of stereotypes.

Alexie’s stereotyping drives readers to look more closely at the ludicrous representations of indigeneity offered by the mass media, and it also masks vital aspects of Spokane culture from the potential exploitation of a largely non-Native readership. Just as there is a degree of truth to the despair writ large through Alexie’s stereotypes, despair that takes the form of material and psychological hardship that is rooted in the ongoing and often internalized effects of colonization, there is more than just a shadow of survivance in contemporary Native America. Like Big Mom, who found and “saved the bones of the most beautiful horse [killed by Wright’s men]. . . and built a flute from its ribs. . . . [and] played a new flute song every morning to remind everybody that music created and recreated the world daily,” Alexie partially redeems that which is awful and horrific by making of it a story. Adding a new twist to Alexie’s familiar equation “Survival = Anger x Imagination,” I read *Reservation Blues* as three parts despair + four parts humor x two parts fiction = a story that exposes inequity, entertains, encourages historical honesty, and one that is imbued with strategic silences and “shadow survivance” (*Lone Ranger and Tonto* 150).

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work, I use Native American, American Indian, Native, and Indian interchangeably. As I do so, I am aware that individual Native Americans have well-considered reasons for preferring one (or none) of these group descriptions. Nevertheless, to avoid tedious repetition, I try to vary my usage of these terms.

<sup>2</sup> I will parenthetically cite *Manifest Manners* as *MM*, just as I will similarly refer to *Reservation Blues* as *RB*.

<sup>3</sup> Like my own essay, Bird's focuses primarily upon *Reservation Blues*, whereas Owens's works primarily with Alexie's other pre-1998 fiction *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Indian Killer*. For this reason, I directly engage Bird's critique throughout this thesis, while I will briefly acknowledge my agreements and contentions with Owens's essay through this note. To his credit, Owens's is more willing than Bird to acknowledge that since

poverty and helplessness are such unavoidable realities of Indian existence, it is natural that poverty would be a part of such fiction. To ignore the painful would be to falsify the picture. It is also true that alcoholism is an enormous and even tragic problem in reservation communities, just as alcohol and drugs are incredibly destructive forces in virtually all poor urban communities. Poverty and an inability to imagine a future different from the intolerable present lead to despair, and despair leads to abuse of self and others as well as the natural desire for temporary escape. However, such portraits not only present just one side of Indian existence, but more unfortunately conform readily to Euroamerican readers' expectations that American Indians are all doomed by firewater. . . . (72)

As illustrated by Simon Ortiz's observation that the hardships and cultural expressions of Native communities are similar to those of other rural communities throughout America (12), Owens similarly makes clear that Natives are not exclusively (nor racially) plagued by problems with drugs and alcohol and poverty. More clearly than Bird, Owens is willing to acknowledge that depictions of despair in Native fiction are justified by lived experience. Further, Owens effectively states that for Native novels to dwell inordinately upon despair is to indulge the Euroamerican ideology of the Vanishing American, whereby, as he poignantly writes, they are depicted as "incapable of asserting any control over their lives, infantilized and cirrhotic, waiting to exit stage west" (82).

Such critiques are among the most valuable in shaping the directions that nationalist critics might pursue. However, Owens's direct criticism of *Reservation Blues*, although funny, is more flippantly derisive. While I deeply respect Owens's other critical work, the paragraph he devotes to this novel is anything but careful. Whereas Bird might be accused of failing to credit the humor at work in Alexie's novel, Owens refuses to take it seriously, as he refers inaccurately to "Big Mama" (instead of Big Mom), describing how "she communicates with her Indian relations via a very cute, miniature tom-tom pager" (78). While Owens's earlier statement that "it is crucial that non-Indian readers (whom he accurately describes as "responsible for the creation and sustaining of [desperate] conditions) not feel too responsible or guilty," is not aimed directly toward *Reservation Blues*, as I will develop later, I see Alexie nudging Euroamerican readers toward a deeper sense of historical honesty and responsibility in that novel.

<sup>4</sup> In making this claim, I do not intend to suggest that Native communities are currently unable to assert sovereignty, nor do I wish to denigrate writing that attends more directly to the nation-building concerns presented by Cook-Lynn. Along these lines, Louis Owens notes of the stakes of nationalist writing in *Mixedblood Messages*, "the last thing a mainstream readership wants today is a body of writing that presents Indians as threatening and disturbing in any way, that is, Indians as vital and able to assert control over their own destinies and, in so doing, assert a degree of control over white American destiny as well" (77). I think that Native fiction should be read more closely to discern the subtle ways in which it affirms cultural vitality and sovereignty. Attending to such subtleties, critics need not disparage emotional processes such as mourning as symptoms of "terminal dysfunction" (Bird 52). Instead they can see them as part of a healing process, which might strengthen of communities. By no means need such healing forestall the assertion of Native sovereignty.

<sup>5</sup> Virtually all of the critics and scholars in my bibliography contribute this "great critical potlatch." While essays by James Cox, P. Jane Hafen, Karen Jorgenson, and interviews by John Purdy, and Doug Marx largely celebrate Alexie's work, those by Gloria Bird and Louis Owens take his writing to task. Critical essays that don't directly address Alexie's fiction by writers such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Robert Warrior,

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Vine Deloria, Jr., Gerald Vizenor, Simon Ortiz, Jace Weaver, Phillip Deloria, Bonnie and Eduardo Duran, and Therese O'Neill have also informed my reading of *Reservation Blues*.

<sup>6</sup> "Waning of affect" is Fredric Jameson's term from *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capital*, and it seems an applicable description of Bird's critique of *Reservation Blues*, a critique that ends with the sentence: "But then, it's quite possible that we're not supposed to think about [the novel] all that hard" (Bird 52). For Jameson's description of "waning of affect" and "ahistoricity" see *Postmodernism* pp. 10–16. His critique of postmodernism and Bird's of *Reservation Blues* further dovetail as she describes Alexie's aesthetic as contributing to a "leveling of values and [a] weakening of emotional investment" in recent Native fiction (50).

<sup>7</sup>It is noteworthy that Alexie titled a poem published in 1996, a year after Bird's review, "The Exaggeration of Despair" (*Summer of Black Widows* 96-7). Chronicling suicide, mission school sodomy, the extremes of Indian failures and successes, and betrayals and fidelity, it reads as a poetic rebuttal to Bird's criticism. The poem's final stanzas read:

and this is my grandmother who saw, before the white men came,  
three ravens with white necks, and knew our God was going to  
change)

I open the door  
and invite the wind inside.

Like *Reservation Blues*, the poem intersperses—to lift a phrase that Alexie has lifted from Lou Reed—"magic and loss." Similar to the novel, the ambivalence opens to "survivance." His grandmother doesn't lament the loss of their God, but notes the coming change. The narrator "invite[s] the wind inside," but we don't know whether he emphasizes here a howling void within, or a cleansing by wind, or the creative power of wind and breath, by which we give voice and words to survivance.

<sup>8</sup> As the "expected idea[s]" of Indianness, and Alexie's attempted subversion of these stereotypes figure heavily into my reading of *Reservation Blues* it is as phrase to which I will frequently return within the course of this study.

<sup>9</sup> "The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me," in Alexie's 2000 poetry collection *One Stick Song* offers a funny twist on "readerly" expectations. In it, Alexie also draws attention to the material success of writers—Native and non—who fulfill such expectations as he bluntly states that "a book written by a non-Indian will sell more copies than a book written by either a mixed-blood or an Indian writer." Humorously fleshing out the nature of books that are commercially successful—thus, we can assume, ones that fulfill the expectations of popular audiences, and following his estimates, written by non-Indians—he adds "Non-Indian writers usually say 'Great Spirit,' 'Mother Earth,' 'Two-Legged, Four-Legged, and Winged.' Mixed-blood writers usually say 'Creator,' 'Mother Earth,' 'Two-Legged, Four-Legged, and Winged.' Indian writers usually say 'God,' 'Mother Earth,' 'Human Being, Dog, and Bird'" (21).

<sup>10</sup> My invocation of Derridean terms like "différance" is further justified by the interesting resonance Alexie's line has with "Between the Blinds" the subtitle of a Derrida reader, compiled by Peggy Kamuf in 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, employs the term 'ex-centric' to label decentered narratives which emerge from the perceived 'homogenous monolith' of culture. Her definition, which largely dovetails with the grouping of newly-recognized indigenous voices celebrated by Warrior, includes: categories of "class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity" (12).

<sup>12</sup> This line of my thinking on Alexie's recasting of popular stereotypes is informed by James Cox's "Muting White Noise" which appeared in *SAIL* (Winter 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Behind these textual sites are several potential sources for Alexie's depiction of elders in *RB*. In a 1996 interview, Doug Marx relates that Alexie's maternal Grandmother, Etta Adams "appears as the eternal, wise and practical 'Big Mom'" in *RB*. "She was one of the great spiritual leaders of the Spokane Tribe," Alexie says, "one of the most powerful figures to visit the Northwest, and in her last days thousands came to pay their respects" (39). Also, in Ruby and Brown's *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun*, Spokane Garry, one of the chiefs recognized by U.S. forces settled with a band of elders near Hangman's Creek, rather than move onto contested reservation lands (196-7).

<sup>14</sup> These three maps are included in Appendix 1 of this thesis

<sup>15</sup> On the effects of satellite television upon Native cultures, Jerry Mander has written extensively. See *In the Absence of the Sacred* (1991) pp. 97–119.



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<sup>16</sup> In conversations I have had with Native scholars familiar with Alexie's work, they have suggested that the lack of cultural specificity in *Reservation Blues* might indicate that Alexie, who attended private high school and college off the Spokane Reservation, was not familiar enough with details particular to Spokane culture to include them in the novel. While I do not discount that explanation, Alexie's description of his grandmother as a respected spiritual figure amongst the Spokanes and surrounding Salishan communities leads me to believe that he likely had a good deal of familiarity with Spokane traditions. Furthermore, in 1998 interview in *Cineaste*, Alexie counts "the five primary influences in [his] life" as "my father, for his nontraditional Indian stories, my grandmother for her traditional Indian stories, Stephen King, John Steinbeck, and *The Brady Bunch*. That's who I am. I think a lot of Indian artists like to pretend that they're not influenced by pop culture or Western culture, but I am and I'm happy to admit it" (37).

<sup>17</sup> While Bird's criticism of Alexie for the malaprops, "sweatlodge (instead of the Northwest sweathouse,) in Thomas' dream scene is accurate (Bird 49), this approach also complicates the reading of Chess' later pronouncement to Betty and Veronica: "a concussion is just as traditional as a sweatlodge" (*RB* 184)—that is—if you come to the Spokane reservation seeking a sweatlodge, you may well end up with a concussion. Either neither are traditional or both are.

<sup>18</sup> Here I lean upon Albert Memmi's formulation: "[the colonized] is in no way a subject of history any more. Of course, he carries its burden, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object" (92).

<sup>19</sup> See note 17.

<sup>20</sup> Thus, Alexie's novel allies itself with Fredric Jameson's observation that "this whole global, yet American postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror" (5).

<sup>21</sup> Here, and later on pp. 28–31 of this study, my usage of the term "cultural capital" relies upon Pierre Bourdieu's formulations. In *Distinction* (1984) and in earlier essays such as "Artistic Taste and Cultural Capital" (1968), Bourdieu distinguishes between those possessing newly found economic capital (nominally, the *nouveau riche*) but lacking in the refinement to embody a truly elite social position and those who possess a great deal of cultural knowledge and refinement—old-school graduate students for example—but dearly lack economic capital. In the instance of white "hobbyists" playing Indian at powwows, which Philip Deloria develops at length, Euroamerican "hobbyists" possess the spoils of conquest, yet they are increasingly dependent upon Natives, who possess what could be vulgarly deemed the "cultural capital" of knowing specific rituals and dances.

<sup>22</sup> Until noted otherwise, the following citations refer to Ruby and Brown's *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun*. Since doing so should not cause readerly confusion, later citations will only list Ruby.

<sup>23</sup> Rather than emphasizing skills appropriate to the region—namely, forestry and grazing—the boarding school stressed gardening and farming, reflecting the misbegotten "nineteenth century emphasis on farming," which was blind to regional and cultural nuances between American Natives (Ruby 225).

<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Deloria's description of the structured inequities of power flowing through "social and cultural systems" is evocative of what Bourdieu and anthropologists who have followed in his footsteps have called "practice theory." While the asymmetrical distribution of power is largely built into social structures over time, the everyday actions—"practices"—of individuals and groups are instrumental to changes—both gradual and radical—in the distribution of power. Euroamerican desires to partake of Native "cultural capital" certainly play a role in the tectonics of power, that in the best cases can bring about a greater degree of Euroamerican "answerability" to the claims and concerns of Native people.

<sup>25</sup> Here, I borrow from Alexie who borrows from Vine Deloria: "Someone asked. . . how to tell a plastic shaman, and he said to just ask how much they charge" (Purdy 16).

<sup>26</sup> James Cox's essay "Muting White Noise" makes the connection between Betty and Veronica and the *Archie* Comic Book Series, actually identifying an issue titled "Fringe Fashions," in which the comic book characters "play Indian."

<sup>27</sup> I would imagine that this tactic would certainly raise the hackles of members of tribes whose culture has been expropriated; I don't think anyone would voluntarily sacrifice their traditions to this fate, and I believe they would have reason to engage Alexie further on this point.

<sup>28</sup> See note 17.

<sup>29</sup> Philip Deloria implicates the Euroamerican attempt to maintain control over Indianness as he describes the employment of Indian judges and dancers at hobbyist powwows:

For the superhobbyists, the critical judges were Indian people as often as they were fellow hobbyists. Weekend warriors, on the other hand, were more reluctant to place

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Indian people in the position of judging them. Giving up smidgens of social and cultural power to Indians was one thing; giving up the power to define some part of one's identity was quite another. For some, the presence of Indians could even be an annoyance. . . . [One] weekend warrior observed that a powwow would have been great except 'there were too many Boy Scouts and Indians'(151).

Considering this alongside Betty and Veronica's complaints and their decision to return to Seattle, we see how they feel constrained—and threatened—by the presence of real Indianness. Unable to simulate Indian identity in the presence of the "exaggerated" desperate social conditions, they return to Capitol Hill, where they can again be the "most Indian" of their friends.

Also, see Churchill, "Indians are Us?" (216) on this point.

<sup>30</sup> Deloria articulates the example of Sun Bear:

The spiritual entrepreneur Sun Bear is an instructive example. . . . In the 1970's, . . . *Many Smokes* [a magazine oriented toward predominantly Indian readership, in which he "editorialized on all matter of native issues"] metamorphosed into a full-blown New Age periodical aimed at a much larger, non-Indian audience. In 1986, it changed its name to *Wildfire* and proffered a montage of articles dealing with. . . crystal magic, spirit channeling, vision questing, land brokering,. . . natural childbirth, and smudging one's computer with purifying smoke. Catalogue goods were always on sale, as were stock offerings for the Bear Tribe[.]. . . primarily a collection of non-Indian followers, [which] offered a path to tribal Indianness that relied not upon spiritual experience, cultural crossing, or accidents of birth, but upon economic exchange. Many Indians rejected Sun Bear and his enterprise. (*Playing Indian* 168–69).

<sup>31</sup> James Cox makes a similar point in his 1997 essay (68, n. 9).

<sup>32</sup> Anthropologist Thomas Biolsi in a 1995 essay "The Birth of the Reservation: Making the Modern Individual Among the Lakota" describes the normalizing gaze of Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) supervision on the Rosebud Reservation (38).

<sup>33</sup>It's difficult not to read Thomas' "misunderstanding" of the battle of the bands invitation as indictment of the deceitful sophistry continuing into the present day from the ugly history of bogus treaties. Ruby addresses Spokane Garry's mistrust of treaties in his history of the Spokane Indians (196).

<sup>34</sup> Alexie retools the legend surrounding bluesman Robert Johnson's prodigious guitar-playing, in ways that resonate with the neocolonial relationship that develops between Coyote Springs and Cavalry Records. Referring to the devil—who according to legend, Johnson encounters at a Mississippi crossroads—as "the Gentleman," Alexie is more than suggestive regarding the parallels between the devil and the so-called gentlemen, George Wright and Phillip Sheridan, who appear in Checkers' nightmares, alternately clad in "a wool suit or. . . cavalry blue dress" (248). Whereas Coyote Springs falls apart in the studio before they can consummate a bargain with the gentlemen, Johnson, in Alexie's telling, trades his freedom in order to become "better than anybody ever" at playing the guitar (264–65). Just as the psychic and material power wielded over colonized populations is dramatized through Sheridan's appearance in Checkers' nightmares, similar power is exerted upon Johnson by "the Gentleman." And just as Big Mom blesses Coyote Springs' migration to Spokane, she also redirects Johnson as she nurtures him back to health. As she gives him a cedar harmonica with which to replace his cursed guitar, Big Mom tells him: "You don't need that guitar anymore. . . . You're a good harp player. All by yourself, you can play a mean harp" (278). Similarly, although Thomas, Chess, and Checkers will, to certain degrees, have to play the neocolonial gentleman's song when they move to Spokane, they leave the Reservation confident of their Native identities, as they sing the song given to them by Big Mom.

<sup>35</sup>In *We Talk, You Listen*, Vine Deloria describes Indians as not only the objects of history, but also as the objects of Anglo "experience," as in one goes to a reservation to have "that [Indian experience]"(88-9). He distinguishes between "the real conditions under which Indians live" and "THAT [INDIAN] EXPERIENCE" as he describes how forays onto Indian reservations comprise

exotic experiences that Indians could provide for wandering college students with a summer to kill. But it is damn depressing to realize that your tribe exists at the sufferance of a society because it can be experienced. Because Indians are always categorized as others, whites have no reason to expect anything else, since they are regarded as merely

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another subspecies of minority-group Americanus. Being merely an experience with nothing more to contribute than a few exciting pages in a diary creates an incredible gap between Indian people and others that cannot be bridged easily. (89)

<sup>36</sup> On a Native American Literature panel at the October 1999 WLA conference, Taos Pueblo scholar, P. Jane Hafen, mentioned the common non-Indian claim of Cherokee great-grand parentage. This issue of heritage is revisited on page 272(RB).

<sup>37</sup> The question of ancestry and theft recurs when Coyote Springs gets into a confrontation with the young white man, Dakota, in the Spokane airport. Initially thinking Dakota's guitar is his, Victor hassles him. Like the New Agers, Dakota is auspiciously (or suspiciously) great-grandmothered by "a full-blood Cherokee" (259). He proudly informs Chess that his "dad is way into *the Indian thing*" (Italics added 259). Presented with the peculiarity of claiming distant Cherokee heritage, but being named Dakota, all the young white man can stammer is, "I don't understand what you are trying to say." Victor attempts to set Dakota straight: "You ain't supposed to name yourself after a whole damn tribe, especially if it ain't your tribe to begin with"(260). Dakota's parting words, invite analysis by way of German cultural critic Walter Benjamin: "You know, you act like I'm stealing something from you. This is my guitar. This is my name. I didn't steal anything"(260). Read in light of Benjamin's seventh "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," this passage nudges the reader to consider questions of representation, cultural theft, and inherited privilege:

[A]ll rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. . . . Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with a cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. (255-6)

Although calling a guitar in a painted case a "cultural treasure" may seem overblown, for Coyote Springs who have recently lost the means to make music and face an icy return to Wellpinit, the guitar bears freighted meaning. Trivializing his Native ancestry as a novelty—"the Indian thing"—Dakota incurs the bitterness of Coyote Springs, who, having been called "goddamn Indians" and having been romantically dehumanized as noble and wise savages, take misrepresentations of Indianness quite seriously. Furthermore, Dakota's Indian-playing can be approached through one of Philip Deloria's formulations: Deloria describes the assumption of "native identities in order to lay claim to the cultural power of Indianness in the white imagination" (168). While this may prove economically rewarding—if exploited properly—for those who find themselves in a position to claim Indianness, such claims not only disregard but also directly worsen the material conditions of Natives who for innumerable reasons cannot play at privileged dilettantism. Recalling Betty and Veronica after their decision to sign with Cavalry: "[they] looked at each other. They could hear drums"(273)—drums which are "vaguely Indian," which in fact, might not be drums at all, but conceivably the solid whooping shut of the four doors of a one of the neocolonial signifiers of commodified Native identity: a new Jeep Grand Cherokee, or a Mazda Navajo, or a Dodge Dakota purchased by Cavalry Records to celebrate their commercial success.

<sup>38</sup> Alongside essays written by Bird and Cook-Lynn, books written by critics such as Cook-Lynn, *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner*; Jace Weaver, *That The People Might Live*; Robert Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*; and Craig Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*; are among the major contributions to Native literary nationalism.

<sup>39</sup> Whereas Cook-Lynn, as I have noted previously, disparages Native authors who dwell on the emotions that accompany neocolonialism, Therese O'Neill's study, which I later rely upon, affirms the social values of wakes and mourning in ways that might serve decolonizing efforts.

<sup>40</sup> Describing his early writing as "the firewater chronicles," Alexie tells how his writing is similarly colored by his experience as the son of two alcoholics. Alexie frequently mentions in interviews that his father still cycles between periods of sobriety and drinking, whereas his mother has been sober longer than Sherman, and she serves as a tribal substance abuse counselor (Egan 19). In the *Cineaste* interview, he amplifies the role that familiar experiences with alcohol assumes in his fiction, examining more the underlying causes than the effects of alcoholism: "[O]ver the years. . . you'll see the work gradually freeing itself of alcoholism and going much deeper, exploring the emotional, sociological, and psychological reasons for any kind of addiction or dysfunction within the community" (31).

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<sup>41</sup> In the *Cineaste* interview, Alexie speaks to similar concerns:

[T]he idea that in Indian cultures in particular, men have lost all their traditional roles within society [is in my head]. There are feminine and masculine roles within Indian society and in many tribes, men and women played neither role, or went back and forth. But those traditional masculine roles—you know, hunter, warrior—they're all gone. I mean, driving a truck for the BIA is simply not going to fulfill your spiritual needs, like fishing for salmon or hunting for deer once did, so in some sense Indian men are more lost and much more clueless than Indian women. (31)

<sup>42</sup> By the time they have reached the fourth bar, the narrator informs us that while Junior had registered the number of "beautiful white women" they had seen, Victor had made a point of loudly remarking about them, yet neither had noticed the number of "beautiful women of all colors" or "the plain white ones" (233). Noting Victor's fascination with white women, Junior drives him to explain why he finds them so attractive. Victor's response is characteristically glib, but it drives Junior to consider his own preferences and experiences. Polatkin discounts his initial judgment that "white women were trophies. . . the best kind of revenge against white men" as too easy. As he further evaluates his experiences, he notes that "he loved to have something other Indians didn't have" (234). However, as Junior recollects his relationship with Lynn, "his first white woman," he comes to view his "enviable" victory over white and Indian men alike as hollow and heart-breaking. Reflecting upon the awkwardness of how they felt around their fellow students, her parents disdain for him, and Lynn's callous, racist response to Junior's suggestion that they marry after they discovered that she was pregnant, Junior remembers how he walked away from a relationship in which both were little more than ethnic trophies to each other. The pain of this recalled experience, in which his final vision of Lynn is of "an explosion of white skin and blonde hair" and of himself as "break[ing] into small pieces that blew away uselessly in the wind," reveals to Junior the ultimate futility of seeking white women as trophies to wield spitefully against whites and other Indians (240).

Although Junior is able to identify this futility, he is unwilling to search for another path that will allow him to live without experiencing and inflicting pain. After the foretelling of Junior's suicide at the beginning of Chapter Nine, the narrative flashes back to his experience of the flight back to Spokane. As they encounter turbulence, Junior fatalistically entertains a vision of the plane plummeting to the ground. Projecting his life passing before his eyes, he revises his memory of Lynn to note that it was only after he realized that "she didn't want [him] anymore" that he was able to concede how poorly the relationship had gone.

<sup>43</sup> O'Neil's study *Disciplined Hearts* addresses the complicated nature of contemporary Native identity as well as the community functions of grieving on the Flathead Reservation, which is the home of the Warm Waters sisters (Chess and Checkers) in *Reservation Blues*.

<sup>44</sup> Since Bird unfavorably compares Alexie's prose with N. Scott Momaday's lyricism, I cannot help but draw attention to Alexie's parodic riffing upon an acclaimed passage in *House Made of Dawn*, in which the protagonist Abel "was alone, and he wanted to make a song out of the colored canyon, the way the women of Torreón made songs upon their looms out of colored yarn, but he had not got the right words together. It would have been a creation song; he would have sung lowly of the first world, of fire and flood, and of the emergence of the dawn from the hills" (59). While Abel compares his longed-after song to the weavers of nearby Torreón, Thomas Builds-the-fire, illustrative of his satellite-TV education, boasts of knowing the words to a million international songs: Indian, European, African, Mexican, Asian:

'Hello,' he said of the night sky. He wanted to say the first word of a prayer or a joke. A prayer and a joke often sound the same on the reservation.

'Help,' he said to the ground. He knew the words to a million songs: Indian, European, African, Mexican, Asian. He sang 'Stairway to Heaven' in four different languages but never knew where that staircase stood. He sang the same Indian songs continually but never sang them correctly. He wanted to make his guitar sound like a waterfall, like a spear striking salmon, but his guitar only sounded like a guitar. (101)

While Abel is plagued by inarticulacy, Thomas is stultified by his overwhelmingly replete, postmodern access to everything, in which essential values, like "real Indianness" are difficult if not impossible to affirm. Both are unable to pray as they wish to, and their desires are frustrated by inarticulation.

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher Vecsey's phrase, "imagine ourselves richly," which he lifted from a 1980 commencement address by N. Scott Momaday, refers to the role storytelling plays in Native self-knowledge (xi).

<sup>46</sup> Quoting a recent study of "politics on Montana Indian Reservations," titled *Tribal Government Today*, Jack Anderson refers to the authors' judgments of the Crow Tribal Council, which exemplifies "a reliable method of rewarding friends and punishing enemies" (150). The study's authors, James Lopach, Margery Hunter Brown and Richmond L. Clow, further observe that "tribal politics 'is about who controls government and, therefore, who controls jobs and the dispensation of benefits'" (151).

<sup>47</sup> Acting consistently with *Tribal Government Today's* discussion of patronage, David comes closest to exercising compassion and asserting sovereignty when his nephew faces more time in a "white jail" for violating his parole by assaulting Victor and Junior. Following orders from the Tribal Council (headed by WalksAlong, we cannot forget), the Native American EMT lies, telling the doctors at the Spokane Hospital that the three Indians were in a car wreck. While the cause of sovereignty is half-invoked as motivating the Council's directions, the second reason offered by the narrator resonates more deeply: "Above all, White Hawk was David WalksAlong's nephew, and that counted for everything" (183).

<sup>48</sup> This is a loose quote of a term "arrogant paranoia" used by Mike Davis in *City of Quartz* (240).

<sup>49</sup> This drive for realism is underscored by Cook-Lynn's analysis of whether "'tribal realism,'" is reflected in Native fiction as the benchmark of evaluating its artistic merits (in Owens 75).

<sup>50</sup> This contrast is accentuated by Wright's and Sheridan's reliance upon the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota's guidance in *Wellpinit* because of their own inability to follow vernacular directions (188–89)

<sup>51</sup> My usage of the word supplement is informed by Jacques Derrida's essay ". . . That Dangerous Supplement. . .", which, like much of his writing, calls into question how literature fails to fully account for "presence," and specifically how "supplementarity. . . undermines the logic of identity" (76).

<sup>52</sup> Like Wounded Knee, fearful reactions to Coyote Springs arise from the government and fellow tribal members alike. Nineteenth century ethnographer James Mooney notes that the former commissioner of Pine Ridge Dr. V.T. McGillicuddy had "introduced a principle of home rule by organizing a force of 50 Indian police" (845). These police, under the command of Indian commissioners and the U.S. military performed some of the dirtier tasks in the subjugation of the Lakota. It was this group that captured and killed Sitting Bull (Mooney 857), and they were also called upon to ward off the advances upon Wounded Knee led by Two Strike after the slaughter of over two hundred Lakota men, women and children. The Indian police killed eight Lakotas as they arrested Sitting Bull, and when they came up against Two Strike's band of "hostiles," ("some of whom were their own relatives") the police killed two people and wounded several others (Mooney 873). Notably, amidst the tumult surrounding shrinking rations, the Ghost Dance, and the murder of Sitting Bull, "none of the Christian [Lakota] Indians took any part in the disturbance" (852). Many of the Spokane tribal members take a similarly disassociative, if not hostile, stance towards Coyote Springs. At one of their earlier rehearsals, an old Catholic Indian yells to the band: "you're damned. . . You're sinners! Rock 'n roll is the devil's music" (33). Just as the Lakota Indian police and the converted Christians abandoned their unassimilated Ghost Dancing kin, placing their faith in the government and religion of Euroamerican invaders and shunning the insurgent new cultural practices, the Spokanes also scorn the band members for adopting non-institutionalized forms of expression.

<sup>53</sup> Chapter 19 of Deloria's *We Talk, You Listen*, entitled "The New Individualism" proclaims that "Indians have always been the utmost individualists." But the nature of this individualism differs from that of Euroamerica, in that white America speaks of individualism on an economic basis, whereas Indians speak of individualism on a social basis (170).

<sup>54</sup> My reading of Negritude is informed by passages in *The Empire Writes Back*, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. See pp 21-1, 123-5.

<sup>55</sup> Here I borrow "manufacture consent" from Noam Chomsky's similarly titled book.

<sup>56</sup> Kathleen Kane, in an office conference in June of 2000, described this term as being at work in *Reservation Blues*. I believe that my application of the term fits with how she might define it. And I presume that its etymology traces through David Seals's novel *Powwow Highway*, and the film of the same name. Both of which, like *Reservation Blues* address issues of Native mobility and the pantribal gatherings and communities that develop in the Native American diaspora.

<sup>57</sup> In Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian*, we find an exemplary analysis of the literatures (and other cultural practices) of dominance. Almost comical is the list of criteria used by white hobbyists who sought to authenticate their "powwows" by inviting Native singers. Along with blood quantum, residence on the reservation, and "attitudes toward white society—traditionals who favored the old ways were better than progressives, who had made moves toward assimilation" were factors that figured heavily into the hobbyists' process of shopping for suitable singers. "The highest possible degree of authenticity inhered in

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the traditional, reservation-based full blood. The least authentic figure was the progressive, urban, low-quantum mixed blood. . ." (143). All of these criteria were applied through the judgments of the white hobbyists upon potential singers who, it goes without saying, possess a sense of being, a "pleasurable vagueness of consciousness" that eludes such narrow, empirical definition (Vizenor 53). Deloria further notes that in their preference for reservation-based singers, the white hobbyists "celebrat[ed]. . . the reservation as a marker of authenticity. . . [and it] had become a fetish and a legitimating tool within hobbyist circles" (143-4).

<sup>58</sup> See note 35.

<sup>59</sup> Published initially as "The Ruins of Representation" in the Winter 1993 edition of the *American Indian Quarterly*, this article may have caught Alexie's attention as he worked on *Reservation Blues*, which wasn't published until 1995.

<sup>60</sup> See Ruby and Brown, p. 136 and John Alan Ross's article in the *Handbook of North American Indians*, which mentions that some Spokanes even hunted salmon when mounted on horseback (271-78).

<sup>61</sup> Gloria Bird critiques the repeated invocation of the horses (who were slaughtered by Wright's forces because they were seeking to cripple the Spokanes), reductively labeling their recurrence as a "convenient metaphor. . . whose scream appears throughout as a refrain" (50). She also mistakenly states that "no explanation is given for the killing of the horses" (50); whereas, in Wright's confession to his wife, he explains how he demonstrated to his troops how to kill the horses (271).

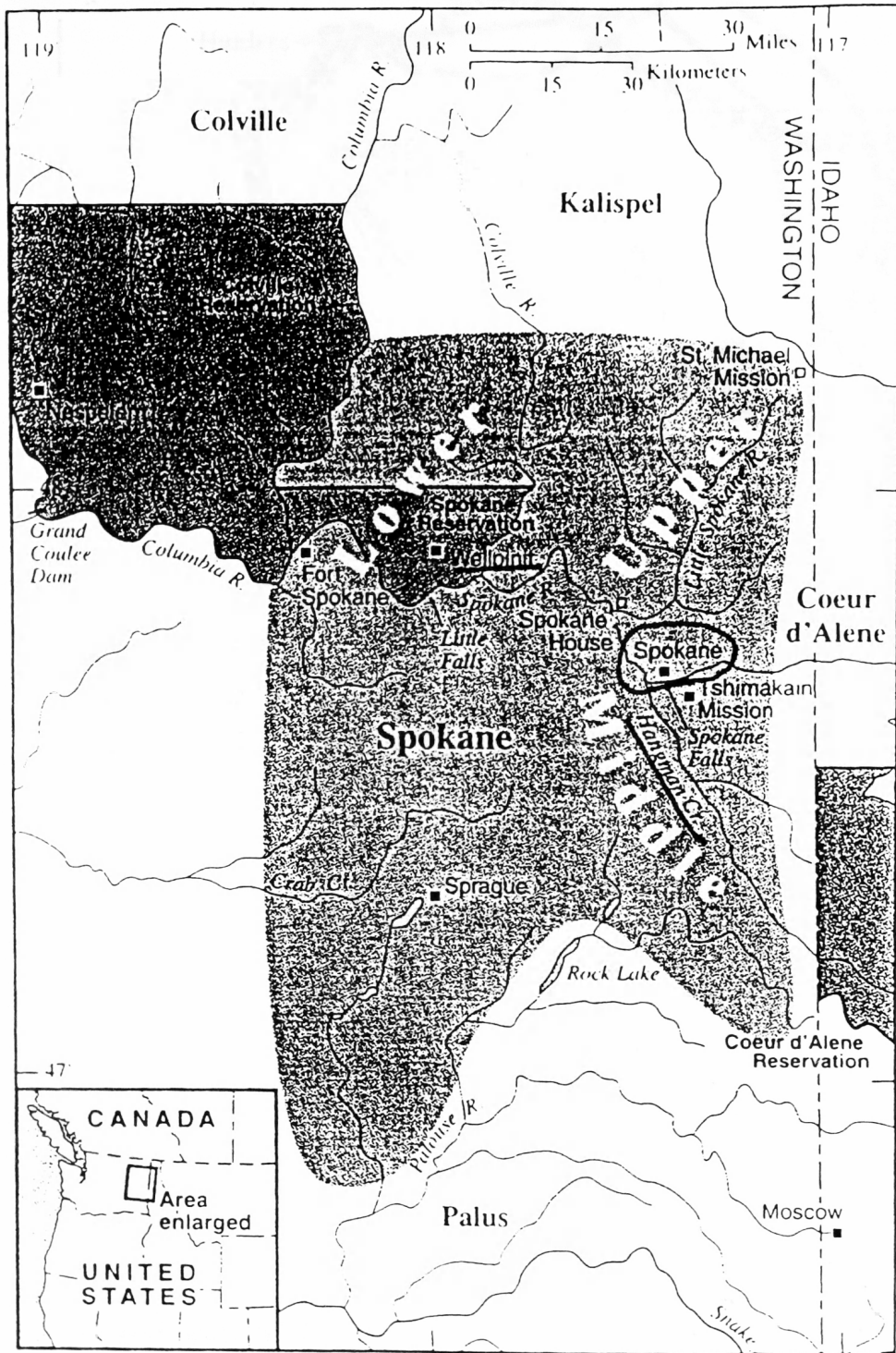
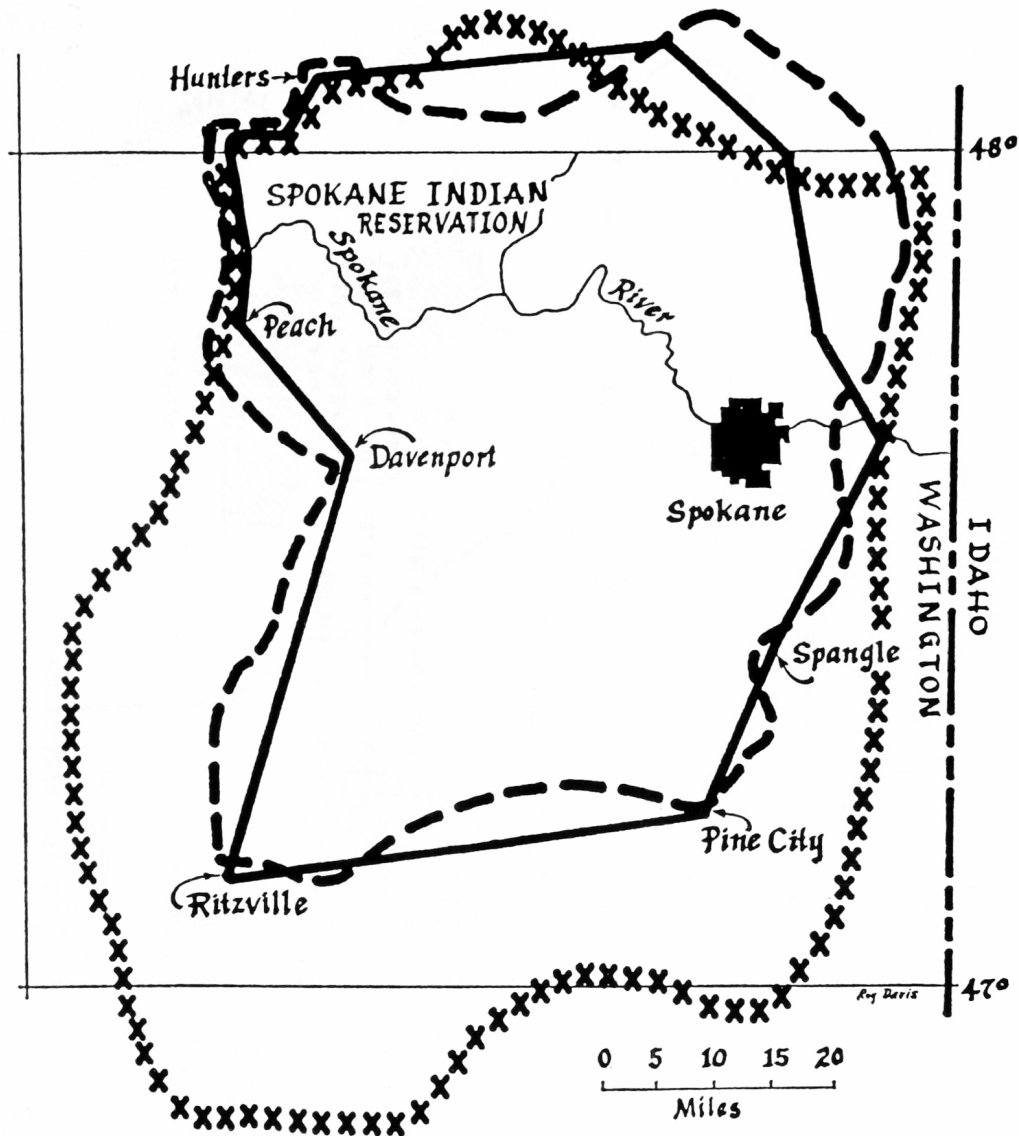


Fig. 1. Spokane territory and drainage during the 19th century, with modern towns.

From Ruby, Robert H. and John A. Brown.  
*The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun*  
 (1970) p. 17



*Spokane Tribal Claims*

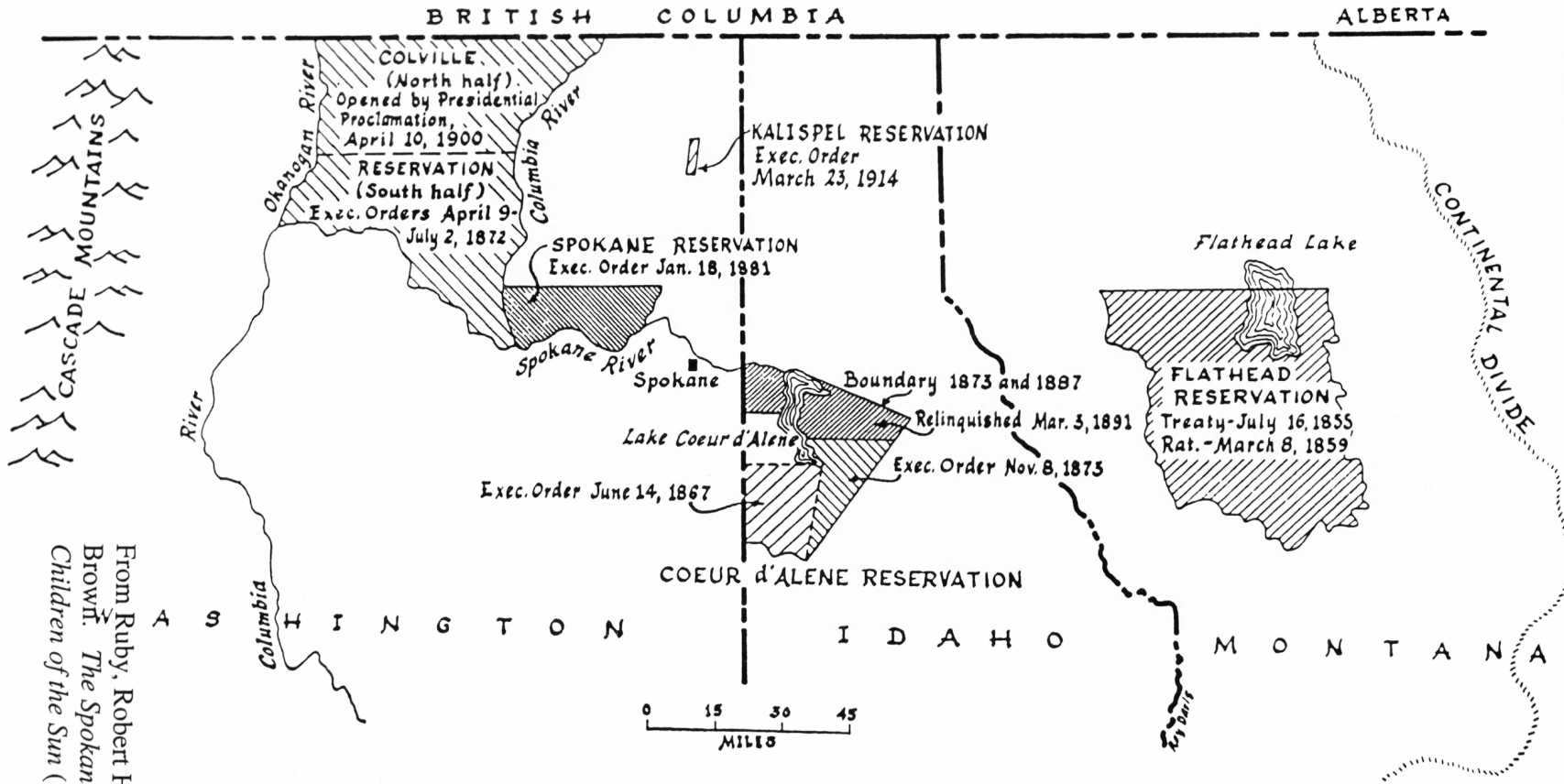
*Solid line:* Original Indian title Spokane Tribe (Finding 31, 9 Indian Claims Commission, 236, 252).

*Broken line:* "Spokane Area of Exclusive Use and Occupancy," map of Stuart Chalfant (1955). Defendant's Exhibit No. 71.

*"X"-marked line:* Territory of the Spokane Indian tribe according to Dr. Verne F. Ray, "Map of Aboriginal Habitat and Permanent Village Location" (1955), Petitioner's Exhibit No. 160.

From Ruby, Robert H. and John A. Brown.  
*The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun*  
 (1970) p. 301





Major reservations to which the Spokane Indians removed.

From Ruby, Robert H. and John A. Brown. *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun* (1970) p. 155

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