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## Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*: The Native American Journey Reflected in Dreams

Tiffany E. Price

### Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*: The Native American Journey Reflected in Dreams

Sherman Alexie provides a world of fantasy through the lens of magical realism while exploring the journey of the Native American people introspectively portrayed in *Reservation Blues*. The material in this novel is intricately detailed with elements that maintain obvious connections to the Native American community as a whole, but reveal paradigms that shift more directly to the Spokane tribe. Alexie has a niche for captivating his readers through humor, history, and creative narration as he addresses the presence of dreams and how these dreams portray the journey of a people group who value the role of dreams.

In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Wilson encourages his readers to take a closer look at the genre of magical realism, and how "...reading magical realism requires: a faculty for boundary-skipping between worlds" (209). This boundary-skipping between worlds can be a technique designed to dissect the worlds of dreams and reality by relying on the power of magical realism as a means to do so. The beauty of magical realism is that it allows for an easy transition that includes boundary-skipping between worlds when we experience any artistic medium soaked in fantastic elements, much like that of *Reservation Blues*.

Boundary-skipping is intrinsically tied to the priority Native American people place on elements outside of their natural world to help define and explain the individual and collective journey of the Native American people. Another example of boundary-skipping is the vision quest, which is a part of the sweat lodge experience. It is believed to be a meaningful communication structure from the spirit world that has a "multivocal nature [providing] visionary interpretations" (Irwin 5). Rebecca Solnit in her book *Savage Dreams* helps the reader understand that the Native American people have a "history of walking" and it is through the examination of the savageness within their dreams that they can then pursue "a deeper investigation of [their need for] meandering" (Solnit xxiv) based in the historical reality through which they have journeyed.

As we consider this boundary-skipping between worlds as a technique used in reading, analyzing, and synthesizing magical realism text, we have the opportunity to explore Alexie's novel, *Reservation Blues*, as it permits boundary-skipping between dreams and reality. Krippner and Thompson explore how Native Americans tend to interpret dreams in their culture, and contend that these interpretations of dreams and spirituality are viewed as authentic (76). Therefore, it becomes apparent that dreams, as portrayed in the characters' lives in *Reservation Blues*, are a mirrored image of the Native Americans journeying through real life events. Nightmares driven by traumatic events from the characters' pasts, gender differentiation dichotomized through dreams, religious paradigms revealed in dreams, and the senses ignited while dreaming all provide examples of how Native Americans see dreams as a reflection of reality that is experienced in life's journey. All of these elements can be examined by first determining how Native Americans approach dreams as it pertains to reality.

Freud and Jung are leading theorists when it comes to the interpretation of, purpose for, and reasoning behind dreams. Krippner and Thompson dedicate much of their research to what they call "the revised 10-faceted Ullman-Zimmerman model," in which ultimately Freud's and

Jung's (and Ullman's) theories are compared and contrasted (72, 73). However, one of the interesting concepts covered in Alexie's literary piece, *Reservation Blues*, is that the interpretation of dreams is essentially given initial credit to Freud and Jung before the Spokane tribe, or Native American culture (much like Krippner and Thompson's approach): "In Psychology 101, Junior had learned from Freud and Jung that dreams decided everything" (Alexie 18). In support of Krippner and Thompson's approach to initially interpreting dreams, Alexie uses his characters in *Reservation Blues* to tribute the theories of dream interpretation to Freud and Jung before crediting the Native American community. However, we also can see that culture plays an initial role in the interpretation of dreams, and is further dissected in the representation of dreams through the Native American community in Alexie's work, since "Dreamworking plays a more important role in most native societies than it does in Western culture" (Krippner & Thompson 74). So, before looking deeper into dreams as a mirrored image of reality through examples provided in *Reservation Blues*, it is important to examine how the Native American community approaches dreams as they become a faculty for journeying through real life events.

*Reservation Blues* is partly synthesized by considering the roles that hold significance in the novel while taking into account Alexie's personal experience on the reservation, involvement in the Spokane tribe, and influence from the indigenous cultural identity. This is best depicted when considering the importance of story-telling in the Spokane tribe. Alexie prioritizes story-telling as a way the Native American people celebrate their journey, and within those stories the world of dreams is not only honored but also affected. In *Reservation Blues* we see that "Thomas repeated stories constantly. All the other Indians on the reservation heard those stories so often that the words crept into dreams" (Alexie 15). These dreams, influenced heavily by stories told on the reservation, can essentially be tied to the history of the Native American journey, and many of those stories derive from the past, although they are often infused with supernatural elements that have been exaggerated while passed from generation to generation. Ford describes story-telling as "...a Native American oral tradition that, in turn, embodies a Native American history" (200). And although there is credit given to the Western culture for the psychoanalysis of dreams, Alexie creatively writes, "He [Junior] figured that Freud and Jung must have been reservation Indians, because dreams decided everything for Indians too. Junior based all of his decision on his dreams and visions, which created a lot of problems" (18). Alexie purposefully announces his personal insight regarding dreams and interpreting the course that takes place in the unconscious psyche through the use of the *Reservation Blues*, the people of the Spokane tribe, and the role that story-telling plays in dreams as characters journey through typical, Native American, real live events.

There are many ways to focus on the act of dreaming when it comes to dividing up the tribes that constitute the Native American community as a whole. However, in a study that includes 16 different tribes' approach to dreams, Krippner and Thompson claim, "In most of the 16 Native American models, there is no distinct separation between the dreamed world and the lived world" (94). Therefore, we can surmise that the Native American perspective on dreams is that they essentially play the role of mirroring reality in the subconscious, ultimately supporting the working argument that dreams portrayed in *Reservation Blues* become a reflection of the characters' journey realities when considering the traumatic events that cause nightmares, the gender differentiation that is dichotomized through dreams, religious paradigms that are revealed in dreams, and the senses that are ignited while dreaming.

Shore, Orton and Manson say, “Nightmares are a frequent sequelae of trauma and a frequent defining feature of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Harvey, Jones, & Schmidt, 2003),” and as these three authors enlarge the impact that traumatic events have on dreams (especially in the American Indian (AI) culture) they further claim, “Although limited, the available data indicate that trauma and PTSD are among the most prevalent and pressing mental health problems for AI populations” (26). Continuing with this theory, Zack and Hill explore the effects of waking life stresses and how they impact dreams: “Because dream content, and dream effect in particular, have both been linked to waking life stresses...it would make sense that the outcome of dream interpretation would be predicted by waking life stresses” (171). As we take a look at the lives of the characters represented in *Reservation Blues*, and how those life stresses become evident through dreams and nightmares, it is valid to interpret Alexie’s work of nightmares deriving from traumatic events as a reflection of the reality that many Native Americans have journeyed through. This can adequately be accomplished through investigating the impact of war, or the history of the relationship between Whites and Native Americans as an adequate portrayal of reality while fictionally presented in *Reservation Blues*, Victor’s family life, Junior’s family life, and the dreamcatcher that was created in American Indian culture to capture nightmares before reaching the individual’s subconscious.

Ford offers an accurate literary criticism of *Reservation Blues*, as he intentionally works through the written material, the reasoning for Alexie’s writing, and the harsh reality that accompanies the paradigms of this fictional piece. In his synthesis of the tension between Whites and the Native American characters in *Reservation Blues*, Ford writes, ““The horses’ screams follow the band members through traumatic events, usually perpetrated by the same soldiers who re-enter the text as record producers” (200). The Indian horses mentioned in the text are a parallel that Alexie creatively draws to the war between Whites and Native Americans. Such a traumatic event in the fictional story later impacts the nightmares that are dissected in *Reservation Blues*. “As he slept at the Warm Waters’ house, Thomas dreamed about television and hunger...He 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” (Alexie 70). This dream, or nightmare, represents the traumatic past that the Indians have experienced at the hands of White men. Although fictional, this nightmare, ultimately impacted by the traumatic event of war and history still resounding in the Native American culture, was an intentional act of Alexie’s to shed light on the mirrored image of reality. Furthermore, as the portrayal of war riddles the dreams of Alexie’s characters, we read about Chess’s dream of the unpainted Indian. The unpainted Indian pulls a knife while surrounded by White soldiers, “*He’s got a knife!* In Chess’s dream, the soldiers trained their rifles on the Indians who might help the unpainted one” (85). Although this dream can be seen as Chess’s traumatic past surrounding her father and ultimately how the unpainted Indian wanted to die with his father by his side, it is also appropriate to interpret the role of the White soldiers with rifles that represent the tension between Whites and Native Americans surrounding war and accurately reflecting reality through the dreams/nightmares. However, the most resonating scene of war depicted through dreams is that of Junior’s dream about riding his horse along the Columbia River while leading a group of warriors. Through the desire to attack a steamship, the Indian warriors became frustrated, but it wasn’t long before they were gunned down on the beach by hidden attackers. “Then the attackers began to materialize, Soldiers. White men in blue uniforms.

They laughed. They spat on Junior” (Alexie 143). Junior was later captured and then tried for the murders of eighteen settlers he did not commit, found guilty by General George Wright and hung, although soon waking to the snap of the rope. This dream/nightmare, is a purposeful approach to highlight the act of war and mirror reality: “But Alexie’s otherworldly imagery actually illuminates a generally overlooked historical event that took place during the military campaigns waged against the Spokane Indians by Colonel George Wright, the basis for Alexie’s Wright, the record producer/cavalry soldier. In 1858 Wright’s soldiers rounded up 800 to 900 horses... ‘Although killing horses on the frontier was a crime, this was war, and all was fair in it. Wright feared that to keep the animals would be to invite raids from the Indians’ (Ruby & Brown 136)” (Ford 200).

However, war is not the only traumatic event this people group has journeyed through that affects the dreams and nightmares of the characters in *Reservation Blues*; both Victor and Junior suffer from nightmares that are a mirrored reflection of their families’ reality in the novel. “Victor fought against his nightmare, twisted and moaned in his seat” (Alexie 18). And although during this particular event in the novel it is difficult for Junior to determine which nightmare flooded the subconscious of Victor, we later discover the reoccurring nightmare of previous traumatic events in Victor’s life as it pertains to the reality of his family dynamics. “Victor dreamed. In his dream, his stepfather was packing the car. Victor had sworn never to say his parents’ names again. But his stepfather, Harold, roared to life and threw Victor’s mother, Matilda, into the trunk beside the dead body of Victor’s real father, Emery. Victor struggled to leave the nightmare, the naming, but his mother’s cries pulled him back” (Alexie 107). Victor was greatly impacted by the traumatic experiences that he had been previously burdened with surrounding his family life. These traumatic experiences revisit Victor in his nightmares, and provide for the reader the mirrored image of fictional reality seen in the novel. Junior experiences much of the same effect: “During this night, they [Victor and Junior] dreamed of their families” (Alexie 24). While Victor dreams of his fathers (step father and biological father), Junior dreams of his parents’ funeral. Junior’s nightmares surround his drunken parents and his siblings who have gone away, which are traumatic events from the (fictional) reality that are revamped in Junior’s subconscious. “...Junior started to cry. He cried as each of his siblings climbed out of the car and ran away on all fours” (Alexie 111). In this nightmare, Junior’s parents go to find their missing children, “They drove and drove. Mother-and-father sat behind the wheel and drank beer....Then he [Junior] noticed the car moving faster and faster...but the car suddenly rolled...*Ya-hey*, Junior said as he climbed out of the car and saw his mother-and-father completely still on the grass” (Alexie 112). Readers later discover in *Reservation Blues* that Junior’s parents are killed in a drunk driving accident on their way home from a New Year’s party. Both Victor’s and Junior’s nightmares supports the research done on the Native American tribes (mostly the Alaskan Eskimos, the Hopis, and the Yumas) that reveals parallels surrounding the representation of dreams being a vision of the past, a statement of dreamers’ journey through life situations, or the source of all traditions, including story-telling/history (Krippner & Thompson).

Finally, as a measure of removing nightmares, which essentially can be based from previous traumatic experiences and ultimately reflect mirrored images of reality into the subconscious visions, the Native American community introduced dreamcatchers: “The dreamcatchers traditional function [is] to protect the sleeper by snaring unpleasant dreams in its webbing” (Ford 203). Interestingly, the representation of dreamcatchers in *Reservation Blues* is

depicted through a gift given by an old Spokane Indian to the Catholic priest. “Other priests would have dismissed the dreamcatcher as Indian mysticism or mythological arts and crafts, but Father Arnold was genuinely thrilled by its intricate system of threads and beads. He had laughed out loud when he noticed the dreamcatcher was actually decorated with rosary beads... ‘Come on nightmares,’ Arnold had whispered. ‘You can’t touch me now,’” (Alexie 250). This creative tie to dreamcatchers, the Native American community, and the purpose of the dreamcatchers as believed by all further supports the theory that nightmares in the Native American culture when real, were a hindrance, and as Zack and Hill, along with Shore, Orton, and Mason suggest, these nightmares are often a reflection of traumatic events/waking life stresses that happen(ed) in the Native American’s journey known as their reality.

Shredl and Piel investigate the differentiation of dream, dream interest, and dream interpretation as it applies to males and females. Ultimately, there is a difference in how dreams are formed and recalled based on dream interests of the dreamer when it comes to gender differentiation. However, a very thematic thread of female and male dreams, as read in *Reservation Blues*, surfaces when the dreams of both males and females are dissected in this novel. Ultimately, the male characters of *Reservation Blues* find their dreams driven by fear; whereas, the females of *Reservation Blues* ultimately find their dreams driven by their personal experiences with male dominance. Both genders demonstrate that dreams are mirrored images of reality.

The male characters of *Reservation Blues* have their dreams powered by fear that overtakes their subconscious when considering their reality. Although previously discussing the roles that Junior and Victor have as it pertains to their families and the fears that naturally coincide when applied to their dreams/nightmares, it is more appropriate to dissect Father Arnold’s dreams/nightmares of Checkers. As a Catholic priest, Father Arnold is called to adhere to strict policies surrounding women, relationships, and sexuality. In fear of losing his position at the church, his authority in the Spokane reservation, and his rights as a Catholic priest, Father Arnold is often thrown into dreams and nightmares with Checkers that would cause him to fall short of the priestly expectations that accompany his church position. It is said within the text that “He dreamed about her every night. In those dreams, she led him into a tipi, lay down with him on a robe, and touched him. Frightened and aroused Father Arnold woke and prayed that his dreamcatcher would work” (254). Upon explaining to Checkers that he dreams about her, Father Arnold expresses his fear that drives these dreams. He tells Checkers that he is a man of God and that he belongs to God alone, an ultimate reflection of fictional reality that becomes a mirrored reflection in dreams. The women characters of *Reservation Blues* have dreams that are driven by reality when considering the male dominance in their lives. This is best depicted when considering the many dreams that Checkers experiences in the novel, “She [Checkers] reached for the Indian men in her dreams and held them tightly. Her stomach turned, and she swallowed bile, but she held on” (Alexie 114). The Indian men that Checkers reaches for in her dreams is later discovered in the novel to be her father, Luke Warm Water. Alexie reveals this when he writes, “He stands in the doorway of the bedroom. Just like he used to. He’s been drinking. I can smell him. He doesn’t say nothing. He just stands there in the doorway, holding his arms out to me. Then I wake up” (Alexie 285). Luke Warm Water dominated Checkers’ childhood and early adolescent life, but this male dominance does not subside (in fictional reality or dreams) as Checkers has further subconscious visions of the White men, showing real dominance in not only

a part of her life, but is part of the journey experience by the Spokane tribe and Native American community as a whole. Checkers dreams of Father Arnold, showing the conflicting spiritual dominance through the male representation in her life, “She cried out as he [Father Arnold] forced her legs apart” (Alexie 156). Yet this is not the only depiction of rape or sexual aggression that are revealed through the dreams of Checkers, as seen when “Sheridan kissed Checkers, bit down hard on her lips. He was pulling at her clothes...” (241). This representation of Sheridan in Checkers dreams not only reveals the male dominance that overpowers the female dreams of the characters in *Reservation Blues*, but also shows the reality of the tension between Whites and Native Americans. Yet again, it is seen when Alexie writes, “Listen, he [Sheridan] said and tried to regain composure. *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*” (Alexie 237). This represents the fictional reality that is mirrored in the subconscious visions of the Alexie's female characters. Yet, the power of Whites over Native American's exercised in this fictional venue cannot be overlooked when we consider the raping not only portrayed in a sexual way, but in a manner that represents the stealing of society, the act of colonization, the devastating pilfering of all willpower and rights that Native Americans once possessed before the White men in their blue uniforms seized it from them. Checker's dreams play a double role: they are an accurate reflection of reality through the lens of male dominance in her life, but also in support of the dominance Whites exercised over the Native Americans, which was a historical reality that riddles Alexie's work as a reminder of what the Indians journeyed through during that time of war.

Dreaming holds a spiritual place in the Native American culture, and often the act of dreaming can be seen as a connection to the spiritual world. It is important to understand that in order “To regain their spiritual bonds, some of them [Native Americans] practice dream incubation and waking dreaming” (Tedlock 187). The spiritual bond is important to the Native Americans, but the importance of this spiritual experience extends beyond the parameters where dreams occur naturally into the arena of forcing (or practicing) the act of dreaming. However, although this spiritual connect/bond occurs within dreaming, when considering the religious paradigms explored in *Reservation Blues*, it's interesting to note that Alexie makes more of a ‘spiritual’ connection to the Western view of religion. Furthermore, the characters who experience dreams that introduce religious paradigms to their subconscious are reflecting the fictional reality of their Western spiritual state in the novel. Ford explains, “With Catholicism and tradition Spokane worldviews typically coming to a head throughout the novel, Alexie offers the rosary beaded dreamcatcher as a signifier of a more complex relationship, pointing to an improbable hybrid between the two often opposing worldviews” (Ford 203). These opposing worldviews, Catholicism and Native American spirituality, is best represented through dreams of Junior as they pertain to God and his personal views of praying or acknowledging the Western God. After his parents' accident in his dream, Junior tried to pray, “He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He strained and strained, his vocal cords ached with the effort, but nothing came out” (Alexie 113). This Western God to whom Junior strains to pray in his dream is an adequate reflection of reality that takes place in the fictional plot, but also in the Native American journey as a whole; their attitude toward spiritual bonds that are sought through dreams are opposed to the Western approach to religion - and the reality of this struggle is reflected in Junior's dream. Further extolling this strain toward Western religion, Alexie creatively envelopes the Western approach to

spirituality as it opposes the Indian spiritual theories through Junior's dream with Sheridan. "*Just sign it, and God will help you...Do you want to say a prayer?* Sheridan asked. *I don't pray like that, Junior said*" (Alexie 145). Ford helps the reader to better understand the attitude of the Western religious figure when he references a quote from the text addressing how a bishop speaks of how "it's never easy ministering to such a people as Indians. They are lost people, God knows" (Alexie 267). At another point, Thomas questions Chess's allegiance to a church that 'killed so many Indians' (166). Elsewhere, Father Arnold has a troubling vision involving the Whitmans, missionaries who used the fear of small pox to convert Indians to Christianity. Traces of these colonial relationships still exist in contemporary situations" (203-204). Ford explains that this relationship between Indian spirituality and the Western view of religion is an item of tension portrayed by Alexie and strategically exemplified through the physical location of the Catholic Church at the crossroads in the Spokane reservation. Yet this tension is expanded to introduce a further tension of spirituality or religious paradigms when the prospect of Christian missionaries plays a role in the dreams of Father Arnold. Alexie explains that "Father Arnold loved his newfound power, although it was the Protestant missionaries who were responsible for it" (Alexie 164). The three tensions become intertwined in Father Arnold's dream: the typical Native American approach to spirituality (even as it relates to dreams and using dreams as a way to connect to spirits), the Catholic approach to religion, and the Protestant approach to religion, which is an accurate reflection of the reality in all senses of the term (fiction and real). "The Whitmans opened the boxes...*We told the Indians the boxes contained smallpox, and if we opened them, the disease would kill them...Why would you do something like that?...It's the only way to get them to listen. And you saw how well it works. They listened to you...Don't be such a child. Religion is about fear. Fear is just another word for faith, for God*" (Alexie 165). The crossroads where Native American spirituality, Catholic religion, and Protestant religion meet in the dreams presented in Alexie's text are actually an accurate portrayal of reality when considering the fictional approach that the characters in *Reservation Blues* adopt to religion, and the true understanding of spirituality versus Western religion as understood by Native Americans.

We see senses ignited in the dreams of the characters presented in *Reservation Blues*, and those sensory modalities are related to one's imagery ability while awake, thus proving that dreams are a mirrored reflection of a journey depicting reality. Okada, Matsuoka, and Hatakeyama claim, "Many studies have reported that individual differences in dream recall frequency [in remembering sensory modalities such as vision, color, hearing, smell, taste, touch, temperature, pain, and limb movement] are related to one's imagery ability while awake" (107). Alexie demonstrates this in the text when he writes, "In Victor's dream, he could smell the dead body, his real father's...Victor hadn't seen his real father for years before his death. Victor could still smell that dead body smell. That smell never fully dissipated, had always remained on the edges of Victor's senses" (Alexie 25). In this character's fictional reality, the stench of his dead father's body revisits his dreams, providing him with senses ignited through an adequate reflect of what was experienced in the reality of that character's life. Victor also had a dream where he stared at a painting of war, and it ignited his sense of smell in the dream: "Victor looked at the painting. A battle scene. Two armies fighting. Guns, horses, men, flags, horses, smoke, blood, horses. Victor stared at the painting until he smelled blood and smoke" (Alexie 108). Alexie uses this vision in his fictional character's dream to portray the reality of war that took place between the Whites and the Native Americans. Again, although seen through a slightly different venue



when taking this scene out of the fictional context, Alexie writes the dreams to reflect the real journey experienced by this people group.

Checkers also has senses ignited in many of her dreams. Taking a deeper look at the elements of the waking mind that are accurately displayed in the subconscious, “Checkers patted the sheet beside her, and Father lay down close to her. She felt his heat, his smell. He smelled like smoke and Communion wine” (Alexie 155). This smell of smoke and communion wine would have been an adequate reflection of reality when placing the Father in real context with his tangible environment playing a strategic role in Checkers’ dream. The smell of smoke would have come from candles burned in the church, and the Communion wine that was offered to the members of the Catholic congregation. Further inspecting these senses ignited in dreams of the fictional characters in *Reservation Blues* as an accurate picture of reality, Okada et al. writes, “Dreaming and waking minds share the same cognitive mechanisms, individual differences in the vividness of imagery for each sensory modality may correspond to the recall frequency for each sensory modality during dreaming” (107-108).

Sherman Alexie writes in a creative way to pull the readers into the text that examines the journey of the Native American people. There are many elements that are easily examined when considering Alexie’s intentional portrayals of the Native American community, more specifically the Spokane tribe; however, the presence of dreams in *Reservation Blues* holds a resounding presence in the literary piece, and after dissecting many of the paradigms explored in the novel, it is understood why Alexie strives to represent the real journey of this people group through the dreams of his fictional characters.

While investigating the boundary-skipping between worlds as a technique to adequately read and understand magical realism, we can apply this theory encouraged by Wilson to the boundary-skipping between worlds of dreams and reality. However, the world of dreams, as understood by Freud, Jung, Ullman, and many tribes within the Native American community are an accurate picture of reality carried out in the role play of the subconscious (Krippner and Thompson). Alexie strategically situates the dreams of his characters to boundary-skip back and forth between worlds of dreaming and reality, and yet both worlds essentially prove to influence the other.

Examining the Native American community’s take on dream interpretation, while still crediting Western lead theorists on the psychoanalysis of dreams, it is evidenced that Alexie’s portrayal of dreams through the venue of his fictional characters’ subconscious in *Reservation Blues* is actually a mirrored image of the reality that many of these characters journey through. This is best depicted when synthesizing examples presented in the novel through nightmares that are caused by traumatic events from the past, gender differentiation for dream interpretation, religious paradigms explored at the crossroads of the Spokane reservation, and senses ignited during the dreams. Ultimately, dreams interpreted by both the Western world and the Native American community prove to be a mirrored reflection of the journey faced by Native Americans.

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