



Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

2012

Blues Trope as a Cultural Intersection in Alice Walker's The Temple of My Familiar and Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues

Julia Leuthardt
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/335>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Blues Trope as a Cultural Intersection
in
Alice Walker's The Temple of My Familiar
and Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts,
Department of English,
at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Julia Leuthardt

Director: Dr. Katherine Bassard,
Professor of English, College of Humanities and Sciences

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia

05/2012

©Julia Leuthardt

2012

All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgement

This has been a long journey. A journey that I felt was meant for me to travel with all the little bends and forks in its path. But I could not have made it this far, if it had not been for the people I met along the way. My biggest gratitude goes out to my American host family – the Elwell clan – who “adopted” me into their midst; Dennis, thank you for all your support, I would not be here, if it had not been for the generosity you have given me – “Let me tell you, mister.”

Thank you Dr. Bassard for giving me the time to converse my ideas into a written form; I know there were moments when doubt crossed my way, but that doubt I needed and the time. Dr. Cokal and Dr. Soderlund thank you from the bottom of my heart for having stayed on this committee for as long as you did. And many thanks go out to the MA English Program faculty and students at the Virginia Commonwealth University – I loved working with all of you.

Brian McTague and Denise Dicks – I had to cross an ocean for us.

A hearty thanks goes out to Stephanie Walker who untangled the electronic software knots in this paper.

And though I met new friends, the old ones back home in Germany did not stop caring for me – thank you all for the letters and long conversations on phone or internet.

My final words are for my mother, who let her youngest child and only daughter go out into the world, always fearing that she might lose her to the world of the Americas; but nonetheless, she never stopped sending her daughter encouraging words and tons of wonderful presents. Thank you, mom, and don't worry, I will find my way home.

Contents

Abstract	v
Introduction:	
“I am a red man, singing the black man’s blues”: Multi-ethnicity	1
Chapter One:	
The Blues Trope as Religious, Colorful, and Spiritual Tantrum in Alice Walker’s <i>The Temple of My Familiar</i>	6
Chapter Two:	
The Blues Trope as a Cultural Intersection in Sherman Alexie’s <i>Reservation Blues</i>	29
Conclusion:	
Keeping Stories Alive	46
Notes	49
Works Cited	53

Abstract

BLUES TROPE AS A CULTURAL INTERSECTION IN ALICE WALKER'S THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR AND SHERMAN ALEXIE'S RESERVATION BLUES

By Julia Leuthardt, MA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012

Major Director: Dr. Katherine Bassard, Professor of English, College of Humanities and Sciences

Though bound historically through hundreds of years, the African-Native American relation has not received much attention by scholars of literature; hence, the emphasis of this thesis is to investigate the literary portrayal of the interethnic relation between African Americans and Native Americans through the blues trope. The blues trope provides an intriguing literary platform for the psychological and physical struggles in finding an identity within an ever merging multiethnic society like the United States. For African American writer Alice Walker and Native American author Sherman Alexie the blues trope is a successful literary device in expressing long lost and rediscovered emotions, identities and hopes among an ever growing multiethnic nation.

Introduction:

“I am a red man, singing the black man’s blues”: Multi-ethnicity

In the summer of 2010 the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. hosted its first “Living Earth Festival,” featuring a concert with various musicians, among them Canadian Mohawk blues singer Murray Porter who left a particular impression. A man in his late 50s, wearing a hat and a red shirt and whose deep, roaring blues/soul voice came floating off the stage and circling above the audience heads, sang of a red man’s blues who “Can’t find no job, can’t find no way out/ Lord I paid my due/ See I am a red man, singing the black man’s blues,/ living in a white man’s world.” Porter’s lyrics of his entitled song “Colours” from his 1995 debut album *1492, Who is Who?* brought back memories of a previous exhibition that closed only three months prior to the festival and was entitled *indivisible, African-Native American Lives in the Americas*. Both, the exhibition and Porter’s song reflected upon a correlation between Native American and African American culture that has only recently, within the last ten to fifteen years, received broader scholarly attention. ¹

The attention that the African-Native American interethnic relationship has received, accompanies the growing research work examining the diminishing global economic borders of the world, which fosters a multiethnic society, where identity is no longer defined by one single community (Verkuyten; Weiten; Lott; Brewe & Hewstone). Hence, W.E.B. Du Bois’ coined phrase that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (1) between the African American and Caucasian American, has evolved in the twenty-first century into a color-line problematic that involves all ethnic groups. And which has led, according to scholars like Dutch social and behavioral science professor Maykel Verkuyten, to a “fragmentation and hybridization of identities”

(151). It is this diverse color-line that American journalist and essayist Richard Rodriguez, whose parents were immigrants from Mexico, refers to as the “browning of America” (xiii) in his essay collection *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. Apparently, as humans, we have become nomads again, interacting more freely with people of other countries, societies, and ethnicities (Weiten; Brewer&Hewstone). And it is this interaction that Rodriguez embraces when he writes about brown as

a color that is not a singular color, not a strict recipe, not an expected result, but a color produced by careless desire, even by accident; by two or several. I write of blood that is blended. I write of brown as complete freedom of substance and narrative. I extol impurity. (xi)

While embracing the diversity of ethnic identity in our global society, Rodriguez is aware of its challenges. According to him, there are two distinct threats that endanger the fusion of ethnicities. The exterior threat comes from the “terrorist and the skinhead [who still] dream in solitude of purity and of straight line[s] because they fear a future that does not isolate them” (xi), while the interior threat comes from within the brown child who tries to “attempt to be singular rather than several” (226). It is this interior confusion of belonging to more than one ethnic heritage that poet Robin M. Chandler expresses in her poem “Siouxjewgermanscotblack” when she writes in one of the stanzas:

Crossing four continents
My ancestors traveled over forty thousand years
To make me.
I am Siouxjewgermanscotblack (Cherokee)
Of tribes
And clans
Among kin and
Courtiers I will never know.
[...]

I don't come with directions.

So I must figure this identity thing out myself. (161,163)

As expressed by Chandler in the last line of the stanza, identity is a personal quest that needs to be understood and claimed by each of us, the individual, and not dictated by society.

This understanding and claiming of bi- or multicultural identity in a globalizing world culture is a complex matter that has brought forward voluminous scholarly research works through a variety of disciplines, worldwide, as it has been conveyed through previous references by Verkuyten and Rodriguez. As Robin Chandler and Murray Porter have shown, the individual expression of identity finds many artistic outlets; the former has chosen the creative work of poetry while the latter has dedicated his life to the art of music. Though grounded in a personal quest to understand life and the role one plays in it, it is this individual expression that can reach broader audiences. According to Northrop Frye and his well known work *The Educated Imagination*, literature provides another creative outlet, in which the reader as well as the author dive into a fictional world that shall "lead us toward the regaining of identity" (55). Within this literary world the "multiethnic writers," according to Professor Emerita of Psychology Bernice Lott and her work *Multiculturalism and Diversity*, "have begun to share their experiences, challenges, and resolutions in fiction and memoirs" (119). Among the first multiethnic writers one reckons African American author Alice Walker and Native American writer Sherman Alexie.

Both Walker and Alexie explore in their writings the matrix of being a member of a cultural ethnic group within a larger popular culture. For Alexie it is the Native American and Caucasian American relation that finds portrayal in most of his poetic and/or fictional

works. For Walker the African American and Caucasian American relation, which she depicted in her earlier writings, broadens in her later works by including other cultures and ethnic groups while never losing her critical womanist view on “cultural images that lead to the damage of women’s bodies as women try to conform to them” (Simcikova 34). However, both authors have created a specific novelistic piece that stands out from among their other written works due to the authors’ exploration of identity from within and around the cultural relation of African Americans and Native Americans. Further, the narratives of the two particular novels, Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* and Sherman Alexie’ *Reservation Blues*, explore the cultural interethnic relation of the two historically disadvantaged groups to Western popular culture through the music trope of the blues.

By incorporating the blues as a literary device in their fictional writings, in order to explore the struggle of finding one’s identity within the larger and ever-growing realm of society, Walker and Alexie use a powerful and thoughtful trope. Considering that the blues is rooted in the African Diaspora² and has its historic-symbolic meaning of representing “the struggle of black people to regain their sense of pride and identity after humiliations and sufferings of the African Diaspora and 200 years of slavery” (Oliver 39), it is a trope that seems to be most capable of capturing the complexity of the twenty-first century multiethnic color-line in fictional works. Hence, the blues themes of love, violence, oppression, animalistic images and magic that can be found in classic blues³, as examined by Paul Garon in *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, find their way into Walker and Alexie’s fictional works. These themes create what Graham Lock coins “blutopia” – a “future [that is] stained with memories” and “the refusal to forget its history” (3) and which is embedded in the individual who has gained his or her free chosen identity.

While similar blues themes occur in *Temple* and *Reservation*, the authors diverge on the structural blues level due to their different narrative attentions. Hence, Walker focuses on narrative repetition. She explores the ancient, spiritual paths, where humans and animals lived in harmony with each other and categorization of identities were unknown, through different characters and their indigenous past. These stories emerge, fade and re-emerge with variations throughout the novel like the repetitive blues structure itself (I,VI,I,V,I). Alexie, on the other hand, does not incorporate the basic harmonic blues structure like Walker does; instead, he uses lyrics to visually separate his chapters and incorporates the legendary blues character of Robert Johnson. Further, both authors include musicians as characters in their narratives; however, Alexie's musicians, in particular the reincarnated blues legend Robert Johnson, drive the plot forward. By incorporating Johnson's legend, Alexie's blues narrative attention is seemingly drawn to use the blues trope fundamentally as a device to help the Indian on the reservation to remember their ancient traditions and to overcome their racial and social confrontations with popular culture while connecting to African American culture as well.

In the following body work the authors Alice Walker and Sherman Alexie will be discussed and their works analyzed in separate chapters and in connection to their use of the blues trope. Due to the fact that the blues trope originates from the music genre of the blues, its analysis is multifaceted and does not conform to one specific theoretical point of view. Hence, the analysis ranges from musical interpretations to psychology and color association, to sociology and literary explanations. Chapter one explores Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, demonstrating the author's use of the blues trope in its structural form, including narrative repetition, color usage and its themes and

animalistic imageries. Chapter two examines Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*; how the author positions the African American blues legend Robert Johnson into his narrative plot and onto the Indian reservation in order to illuminate the African-Native American relation.

Chapter One :

The Blues Trope as Religious, Colorful, and Spiritual Tantrum in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*

1.1 Walker: Writer and Activist

When her novel *The Color Purple* was published in 1982 the author Alice Walker entered the literary world with notable force, gaining literary and public awareness by becoming the first African American woman winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.⁴ While Walker's writing force as an essayist, novelist and poet remains remarkable till today,⁵ *The Color Purple* never left its author's side or the public's interest, resulting in a movie adaptation by Steven Spielberg in 1985 and a most recent adaptation into a musical in 2005, which won a Tony Award (www)⁶. Without doubt *The Color Purple* is Walker's best known work. But while Walker's literary success seems to be in the fictional genre, her "first love" lies in poetry as Walker confesses in an interview conversation with Rudolph P. Byrd (316). Her first book publication was in fact a volume of poems entitled *Once* in 1968.⁷ It is the genre of poetry to which Walker seems to have returned in recent years, publishing two volumes of poems in 2003⁸ and *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing* in the year of 2010. Further, on her personal blog⁹ the author releases various poems at any given time. Hence, it might not come as a surprise when Walker refers to her poetry writing as a state of sanity that allows her to celebrate "with the world that I have not committed suicide the evening before" (39), as she expresses in one of her earliest interviews with John O'Brien.

But beside her success in fiction and her love for poetry, Walker is an enduring activist for human rights as well. It might not be too far from the truth to say that her name, which is so well-linked to her Pulitzer Price winning novel, is equally well-linked to

her role as an activist. May it be her participation in the Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1960s and 1970s or her voice against female genital mutilation¹⁰ and/or warfare in Africa¹¹, Walker gives her voice to those who cannot express themselves, especially women and children. As a result, her activism has carried the writer beyond her own community of African Americans, because for Walker there are no boundaries, neither socially or ethnically:

As adults we must affirm, constantly, that the Arab child, the Muslim child, the Palestine child, the African child, the Jewish child, the Christian child, the Native American child etc., is equal to all others on the planet. We must do everything in our power to cease the behavior that makes children everywhere feel afraid. (“Alice Walker”)

Her words echo that of her mentor and fellow activist Howard Zinn¹², who connects Walker’s dedication as a writer and activist, to her personality which seems to be drawn to “the firing line” where “she is herself” and “she is not going to conform to any idea of what a black writer shouldn’t do” (Parma).¹³

Thus, Walker’s work goes beyond the expected black and white, male and female constellation. As a result, her portrayal of the male African American characters have constituted some harsh criticism among male African American critics, who accused the author of “divisiveness, reverse racism, and male-bashing” (48) as scholar Bonnie Braendlin summons in her article “Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* as Pastiche.” Though Walker did not expect “such pettiness” (Dreifus 79) from critics of her own African American community, their actions seem to confirm Walker’s belief that African Americans reinforce the norms of a white society; and therefore, the African American writers’ role to write simply about the black and white relations (O’Brien 49).

Alice Walker has not only been denounced for her portrayal of African Americans and their relations, but also for her approach in viewing and addressing a relation between the two ethnic groups of African Americans and Native Americans. Walker, herself an African American who can claim Native American ancestors, has been “attacked for [...] [her] insistence of affirming [her] mother’s Cherokee grandmother” (132) as she reveals in an interview with Jody Hoy in 1994. In claiming her Native American roots, Walker has been accused of distancing herself from her African American community. A statement that Walker denounces, declaring that “people fail to understand [...] that the real pleasure of life is in what is unique” (Hoy 132). Hence, claiming different identities is not shameful but rather honorable because it makes us “whole.”¹⁴ Walker’s emphasis on spiritual wholeness, as stressed by scholar Karla Simcikova, has been acknowledged by critics and journalists who “have often referred to Walker as ‘a woman of deep spirituality’” (1); however, they missed “the complexity of its layers” (1). The spiritual journey of Walker that Simcikova attempts to explore in her work is a crucial one, because it is a journey that is deeply connected to identity search within society; and therefore, within the different cultural ethnic groups that are no longer characterized by the overarching historically burdened dualistic fusion between African Americans and Caucasian American or Native American and Caucasian Americans. For Walker the multiethnic identities in society find their exploration in *The Temple of My Familiar*.

1.2 *The Temple of My Familiar*

When Alice Walker published *The Temple of My Familiar*, her longest novel to date in 1989, she had come full circle off an eight year writing marathon during which

she constructed her fourth novel. However, the book received mixed reviews at the time and has even in recent days not received much attention. The fact that Walker's webpage emphasizes in all capital letters the actuality that *Temple* was "over four months a New York bestseller"¹⁵, seems on the one hand, a last attempt to draw attention to a book that has not received the consideration it deserved; and on the other hand, it creates a contradiction in itself. How can the book be on a bookseller list for over four months (among the best 15 books of the month) despite the rather modest critiques it received? Considering the actuality that *Temple* succeeded Walker's novelistic career breakthrough with *The Color Purple*, the public's expectations were high, drawing readers towards *Temple* in hope of finding another exceptional novel. Instead, the readers and critics found that they were unable to comprehend the complexity of Walker's piece. Doris Davenport, while acknowledging Walker's "Afracentric perspective"¹⁶, approaches the novel's flaws that lie within the "too serious and dry" conversations where "the omniscient narrator sounds exhausted" and the reader gets lost due to the "bombardment of ideas, theories and facts" (14). J.M. Coetzee¹⁷, well known literary critic and Nobel Prize winner, follows along Davenport's binary interpretation of and confusion with Walker's *Temple*. While Coetzee finds Walker's novelistic approach restraining in its "cliché-ridden prose" that lacks "narrative tension" and can only be coined a novel "in a loose sense," it should not be defined by it. Instead, the reader shall see it as "a fable of recovered origins, as an exploration of the inner lives of contemporary black Americans" as he states in his review for the *New York Times*.

The mixed reviews that Walker's fourth novel received, seems to support scholar Simcikova's argument that the critics "were unable to assess Walker's ideas outside of

the womanist context” (9); therefore, they failed to “recognize the significance of the shift in Walker’s spiritual plane” (10). Simcikova’s argument is noteworthy because it illuminates two problematic issues concerning authors and their written words: first, the categorization of authors into a specific genre or subject context; and second, the concomitant of authors’ physical, mental, and therefore, writing related abilities/process. While Walker’s body of work mainly embeds the problematic consideration of female consciousness and how “to reclaim womanhood” (Bates 114), it does not define the author’s work as a whole. There are other layers to her writing that seem to have been left undiscovered. Her spirituality, as Simcikova claims, is one of the complex layers that “ha[s] not been fully tapped,” resulting in the lack of “a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of its many levels” (1). It becomes even more complex when considering that Alice Walker does not simply refer to the spiritual journey of African Americans but exceeds the cultural and ethnic boundaries.

1.2.1 Walker and the Blues

In surpassing the expectations of society in her written work, Walker more than once has turned towards the blues as a literary device. Her short story “Nineteen Fifty-five,” which was published in her short story collection *You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down* in 1981, and her novel *The Color Purple* employ similar blues elements and blues characters as scholar Maria V. Johnson contends in her article “‘You Just Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down’: Alice Walker Sings the Blues.” According to Johnson, Walker uses “the character, language, structure, and perspective of the blues to celebrate the lives and works of blues women, to articulate the complexity of their struggles, and to expose and confront the oppressive forces facing Black women in America” (221). For Walker

the blues has “the honesty with which the people [are] trying to sing about what [is] actually happening” as she reveals in a 2004 interview with William R. Ferris (237). For Walker the story becomes music and vice versa, resulting in the use of blues techniques in her written work, which has authenticity that no other music seems to be able to convey; it lets you hear the feeling and struggle of finding “joy in life” (237).

1.2.2 Blues Themes of Love, Violence and Oppression

The dominating blues themes that Walker incorporates in *Temple* are those of love, violence, and oppression, which are seemingly interwoven with each other. These are familiar themes to Walker’s works as many critics will rightly argue; they are fundamental to Walker’s works and are driven most dominantly towards the exploitation of women in society. *Temple* is no exception. However, the blues trope gives these themes a complexity due to its repetitive mode. As Maria V. Johnson explains, the blues “consists of a series of stanzas each of which follows a basic harmonic structure (I, VI, I, V, I) and text form (AAB) which is repeated and varied as a piece progresses to give it a large-scale shape” (225). Hence, Walker’s six sections of the book that are outlined by the different animalistic images can be seen as six stanzas to her blues song and within each chapter stanza the textual form repeats itself in varying shapes, through varying characters who tell their stories that include the same themes of love, violence, oppression, and magic.

Walker begins her novel with the not yet clarified but soon to be discovered and complicated triangle relationship between Zedé, Carlotta and Arveyda. It is the introduction of the theme of love: parental love, partner/romantic/sexual love, and spiritual love, which weaves through the novel and its characters in varied ways and

always in correlation to oppression and violence. Oppression, as Lissie, the main and many times reincarnated character, recaps the danger of oppressing one's past, can be carried out by "parents, siblings, relatives, governments, countries, continents" and even the "own body and mind" (83). Walker's most dominating theme of oppression is related to parental love that is stained with hidden, violent memories – memories that want to be forgotten, silenced by its victims but it is a silence that haunts and infects the relationship to their own children and their partnerships. In music silence can be a part of the song in order to convert to another rhythm or theme; hence, "silence creates its own music" as the omniscient narrator in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* remarks and which novel will be examined later (9). But the silence should not overtake the music, for it is the purpose of the blues to tell the story "of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph" (100) as James Baldwin's narrator in the short story *Sonny's Blues* encounters for himself. Hence, in order to overcome their paralyzed mother-daughter relationship, Zedé needs to find a way to tell her daughter Carlotta about the past and circumstance in which Carlotta was conceived. Only through Arveyda, Carlotta's husband and musician, is Zedé able to express herself.

In Arveyda Zedé sees a resemblance to the man she loved, his name was Jesús, a priest and an abductee as well, who was murdered after being discovered with Zedé. "It is as if you went out and brought your father home. Ai, ai" (19), Zedé tells her daughter and continues to say that "He was Indio, your father, and his hair was rough" (19). The physical features of Arveyda had captured Carlotta as well when she first saw him: "a slight, dark-brown man who wore a headband and looked, she thought, something like herself. It was his Indianness that she saw, not his blackness" (7). In the character of Arveyda, Walker most directly creates the persona of a black Indian, a name first

brought to wider attention in 1986 by scholar William Loren Katz and his book of the same name, which ethnic group became in recent years more scholarly defined as African-Native American. It is also within the character of Arveyda that Walker seems to integrate the music legend of Jimi Hendrix, whose Cherokee's roots have only been acknowledged in recent years and in particular in a 2010 exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian entitled "Up Where We Belong: Native Musicians in Popular Culture."¹⁸ Linking Arveyda's character to Jimi Hendrix does not occur to be coincidental or far fetched. As Dick Weissman points out in *Blues – The Basics*, Jimi Hendrix "had one foot in rock, and the other in the blues" (132) and by doing so he introduced to the electronic blues "the notion of using distortion as an expressive musical tool" (117). Both, Arveyda and Jimi, master the guitar as their primary instrument of musical expression and both of them seem to immerge in their performances. Arveyda's music "so mellow and rocking, became tortured and shrill" while playing "his guitar in a trance" (24). The same is true for Jimi Hendrix as music critic and close friend of Jimi Sharon Lawrence reveals in her autobiography *Jimi Hendrix: The Intimate Story of a Betrayed Musical Legend* when she writes "[...] Hendrix played so effortlessly it appeared to be part of his body" (xii). A love for clothing and the wearing of a headband present another similarity between the character of Arveyda and the music legend Jimi Hendrix (*Temple 7*; Lawrence xi). But one final important factor is the time reference Walker makes in her book. For the most part the author avoids giving precise time frames in her story plot; hence, the past, present and future alludes to story-telling phrases like "in the old country" (1), "in lifetime after lifetime" (83), "some months after" (200). The more striking it appears when Walker introduces Arveyda who "was stoned" and the fact that Carlotta's mother Zedé "discovered that the rock stars of

the sixties were 'into' feathers" (7). The drug abuse and the mentioning of the sixties gives the novel its present tense time line and further connects Arveyda to Jimi, who became famous in the early 1960s and who also had been known to abuse drugs. In connecting Arveyda to the music legend of Jimi Hendrix, the author embodies a well known African Native American representative of this newly acknowledged ethnic diverse group within the American society.

But while Arveyda's physical presence catches the characters' as well as the readers' attention, it is also Arveyda's role as a musician that breaks the silence of oppressed parental love on many levels. He and his music become the messengers as it is the role of the blues as singer Larry Neal declares in "Any Day Now; Black Art and Black Liberation":

The blues singer is not an alienated artist moaning songs of self-pity and defeat to an infidel mob. He is the voice of the community, its historian, and one of the shapers of its morality. [...] He is the bearer of the group's working myths, aspiration, and values. (425)

It is through Arveyda that Zedé finds her voice, talking about the rioters who controlled her country and by whom she was accused of being a Communist (due to being a teacher who was assigned by government), and therefore, arrested and abducted into a village "in the backwoods of the country" (5), where she met and made love to Jesús and was raped by the guards, only to escape with the help of an American woman named May Ann Haverstock who calls that act "liberating Zedé and Carlotta" (205). Zedé's stories of the past find a listener in Arveyda who carries on the stories to her daughter Carlotta, his wife, explaining that the stones that Zedé gave Carlotta years ago "are a gift to you from your father and his people" (125). And while Arveyda retells Zedé's stories he himself realizes his purpose as a musician, as an artist: "he now

understood, [artists] were simply messengers. On them fell the responsibility for uniting the world” (125).

While “uniting the world” seems a little apocalyptic, Arveyda most certainly has gained the knowledge and awareness of uniting individuals whose love has suffered from silence. A silence that even within him had dwelled for far too long and only now with his ‘musical awakening’ can be brought to its surface. It is the repetitive blues note of parental love that Arveyda begins to explore between him and his mother, Katherine Dogs, whose real name, as his aunt Frudier reveals, was Georgia Smith. But unlike Carlotta, Arveyda cannot rebuild his relationship with his mother due to her early death; hence, he can only reconstruct his memory of her and his father through the stories of the relatives. As a result, the distance he felt to his mother as a teenager (13) wanes when he realizes that his mother’s passion, which aunt Frudier had disliked so much “because she exposed herself to what she wanted” (393), is what he loves about her and his father the most. Apparently, his mother did not want to restrain herself to the norms of society, her community, or even her family; she married an Indian man, changed her name and lived her life like she felt was right, even founding her own church. It is this passion for life that Arveyda begins to admire her for, even though, he had only seen, or only remembered, the day when she, “one of the most intrusive people he knew [...] simply stopped and sat down and looked out a back window of the house for three years” (12). It seems that in the end society broke her nonetheless.

It is society and the war that had broken Suwelo’s father; and inevitably, the parental love as well. Through Lissie, a neighboring friend of his uncle who passed away and whose house he tried to sell, Suwelo is confronted with his unconscious pain that he had locked away when she says: “Hal and I felt you have closed a door, a very important

door against memory, against pain. That just to say their names, 'Marcia' and 'Louis,' is too heavy a key for your hand" (352). It is an unconscious burden that even in re-naming himself (from Louis, his father's name, to Suwelo) he could not rid himself of the untold past that needs to be told in order to be understood. But it is not until the end of *Temple's* plotline and in the arms of Carlotta that Suwelo begins to understand and openly claim:

[m]y father, you know, had been a soldier in World War II and he'd lost half of one arm and all of his mind. [...] We stopped speaking. I hated my mother for staying with him. But she was trapped. Like a bird in a cage. He wasn't the man she married, but some kind of wounded, crazed patriot. More often drunk than sober. Frequently abusive. (402)

It is in these final scenes of the novel, the response stanza of the blues song, where the two couples – Suwelo and Fanny, Arveyda and Carlotta – find in the other's couple's partner a spiritual guide with whom the person can triumph over the past, live in the present, while creating a possible future with the identity that they have chosen for themselves and that is stained with the memories of their parents.

The only positive parental love relationship seems to unfold between Olivia and Fanny, considering the almost harmonious scene where both travel to Africa and share a bed, while talking about racism and forgiveness (307-312). However, their parental love relationship has unspoken wounds as well. As Fanny reveals, her childhood "was a long bliss" (155) but only because of "Grandmama Celie" and "Mama Shug" who "hugged [her] in all seriousness" and "kissed [her] intelligently" (155), while her own mother did not permit her to touch anything. For Fanny, her mother Olivia was "a boring woman, who rarely laughed and always had her nose in a book"¹⁹, which resulted in the fact that Fanny "soon learned to pay as little attention to her mother as she paid to [her]"

(155). Olivia's behavior seems questionable until she reveals her own story of how Fanny was conceived in Africa: "one evening I kissed him (Dahvid, an Olinka boy whom she liked and whose tribal name of Ola she only learned years later on a re-visit to the African land). [...]. But, as it turned out, a kiss was not enough" (153). Olivia's scene seems to indirectly express the oppressive violence of male dominance – an act that the author in reference to Zedé and the young child Lissie who "was raped by members of the [slave] crew" ship (68) directly articulates – and therefore, seems to be the cause of Olivia's parental silence towards her daughter. However, the relationship between Olivia and Fanny, which later involves Ola the father as well, surrounds a certain mystery that takes unexplained turns. For example, Olivia never mentions Fanny's biological father nor seems Fanny to be interested in wanting to know who he is. Then Fanny begins to disconnect herself from her work, her husband Suwelo, and begins to obsess about racist oppression, which threat lurks at every street corner and behind every individual, making "her blood pressure, [...] reach alarming highs" (303). It is in the midst of her daughter's identity struggle that Olivia suddenly asks Fanny "to accompany her on a quiet, restful, celebratory trip to Africa" (303) where Fanny would meet her biological father for the first time.

Alice Walker decides never to reveal directly the circumstances of the day Fanny was conceived. Hence, unlike the previously analyzed characters Fanny's closure with her mother is a superficial one. While on their way to Africa, Fanny and Olivia have a stopover in Great Britain where Fanny watches her mother giving scholarly speeches concerning her role as an African American missionary in Africa. It is in this environment that Fanny feels proud of her mother and states that she feels "embarrassed that for so many years [she] ignored her (mother)" (158). Most certainly, it is an acknowledgement

for her mother's work but it lacks the parental closure that involves the violent, oppressive act. It is a closure that Olivia wanted to spare her daughter, because the day Olivia learned that she was a product of rape, she "still couldn't grasp it" and "to this day, [Olivia] feel[s] almost as if [she is] a product of an immaculate conception" (173).

Seemingly, Olivia wanted to spare Fanny the confusion and the heartbreak that would come with telling her about the "sad last minutes with Dahvid (Ola's Christian name)" (174), hoping that Fanny could see herself in the same way she saw herself – as an immaculate individual. But instead of telling Fanny about the circumstances in which she was conceived, Olivia decides to introduce Fanny to her father.

Ola's sudden presence in Fanny's life has a tremendous impact upon her state of mind as she reveals in one of her letters to Suwelo: "I never dreamed I would so enjoy having a father. It is like having another interesting mind, somewhat similar to your own but also strangely different, to rummage through" (189). Alice Walker addresses this necessity of having the knowledge of both parents in a repetitive blues mode within the character of Lissie who tells Suwelo that "if our parents are not present in us, consciously present, there is much, very much about ourselves we can never know. It is as if our flesh is blind and dumb and cannot truly feel itself. [...] This is why adopted children will do anything to find their true parents" (353). Hence, in getting to know her father by talking about nature, history, the ever growing thematic of the "racism of the world [that] has infected [her]" (308) and his belief that nature "will produce for anyone" (187), Fanny begins to build a broader understanding and inevitably an identity for her own.

It is the belief of the natural crossing of racial boundaries that Ola expresses towards Fanny that is part of the author's repetitive blues theme of magic and totemic

images of animals that are part of our identities. According to Paul Garon, animals in blues lyrics “challenge all limited ‘humanist’ conceptions of man’s ‘righteousness’” (120), while with magic “the rational and the irrational, the subject and the object become whole again [...] and destructs the barriers “that separates the wish from its fulfillment, the dream from waking life” (154). Ola is certain that as humans we want to love freely, however, we have imprisoned ourselves centuries ago when maintaining a “tribal identity” became “natural to man, who perpetuates his genetic identity by controlling the woman he uses for production of his children” (187). It is this deconstruction of human categorizations through magic and totemic images of animals that finds its most powerful portrayal in and through the character of Lissie. She is the only character who can vividly remember her many reincarnations, which she calls “the dream memory” (83). By telling Suwelo of her many dream memories it becomes apparent that Lissie has lived through many different lives: she was a woman, a man, black, white, and red, she even was a lion. In her, the wholeness of being able to be all of these seems tangible, but illusive. Lissie could not be everything at the same time; she was one or the other. Hence, the only time Lissie felt close to being whole, and therefore, in peace with her and the world, was when the forest covered the whole of the earth and the trees equaled “cathedrals, and each one was an apartment building at night” (84) for many neighboring cousins. This was “the only dream memory of peace” (88) that she can remember. The cousins were not just “the very small people” (83), the pygmy; cousins also included the animals, the gorillas who were “big and black and hairy, with big teeth, flat faces, and piercingly intelligent and gently eyes” (84) and lived in different trees.

The harmony that Alice Walker portrays in Lissie’s ancient story seems to further manifest in her totemic animal images that divide the book into six major parts.

According to Gerri Bates and his critical companion of Alice Walker, these animal imageries “represent ancient symbols in which words or language are encoded” (104). Considering that *Temple* is Walker’s most in-depth spiritual written novel, Bates symbolic reference to the animalistic images, does not seem too far-fetched. However, Bates exemplifies only the symbolic meaning of birds that represent in “some ancient societies” the “regeneration of the soul” (104). While the bird icon dominates Walker’s chapter divisions – the peacock in the first part, the familiar, which consists of “part bird, [...], part fish, [...], part reptile” (118), in the second part, and the owl in the fourth part – the author also includes a serpent in the third, a turtle in the fifth, and a lion in the final section, which Bates does not address. The reason why Bates only refers to the bird icon might lie in the vagueness, and therefore, differing animalistic meaning in different cultures. While Walker’s selection of the animal imageries and how they appear in the given order within the book is arguable, they seem to present on a larger scale the ancient harmony that Lissie tries to convey in her story.

Hence, one can make the argument that the animalistic images are linked to, and therefore, present spiritual familiars to certain characters. Arveyda and Zedé seem to connect to the peacock; while the former wears the peacock gown, the later creates the peacock clothes and even remembers the peacock from her childhood. Lissie seems most dominantly connected to the animalistic familiar, but is also portrayed in relation to the lion. Suwelo’s eyebrows “were exaggerated crescents over his bold black eyes, and they were prematurely graying”, which gave him “an owlish look” (28), while Mary Jane Briden, who changed her name, is seemingly connected to the snake, “which shed its skin but is ever itself” (207). However, the turtle does not directly seem to relate to any other character, leaving Carlotta and Fanny seemingly without a spiritual animal. On the

other hand, an argument can unfold in viewing Walker's animalistic images as representatives of different tribal relations – the lion, symbolizing the African heritage, the serpent and turtle as symbols for the indigenous connection, and the peacock and owl as domestic, imported animals by European settlers. The familiar in turn could represent the fusion of these ethnic relations that due to “pride and distraction” (120) and the “stupid reflex of human pride” (119) began to be imprisoned as Miss Lissie reveals to Suwelo when she talks about her familiar that she betrayed.

This imprisonment, and therefore, destruction of harmony between humans and animals began according to Lissie when “the idea of ownership [...] came into human arrangements” (87). It started by owning a tree, a part of the forest, which then seeped into the tribal identity as well. The animals became the target for food and the women and children became the target of weakness (87). The inequality between men and women finds a repetitive blues voice in the character of Zedé, whose story unfolds around the ancient days of her people in South America. But unlike Lissie's story, the women in Zedé's culture have shared responsibilities in creating this inferiority. According to Zedé, in South Africa²⁰ “for centuries the male community revolved around the female one” (50), but the women became so comfortable in their priesthood and in the token of the worshipping men that the latter began to rebel against the women, deciding that “they could and would be priests” (51). The men's priesthood resulted in “cutting off and flinging away their maleness” (51), an action that proved devastating for the men who “died like flies” (51). Hence, till today there is “hatred of women,” because they have the ability to reproduce and whose pain is only “confined to childbirth and maybe a few cramps every month” (51), while the psychological pain in men lasts a lifetime.

Viewing Lissie and Zedé's pasts, it becomes observable that identity struggle, in the author's understanding, first evolves around gender categorization, which then extends to genetic tribal identity. Considering that the blues has had a variety of popular female blues singers, including Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday,²¹ and that its invention is based on the "experience of being black in a white racist society" (Cone 235), the music genre most certainly draws further parallels to Walker's literary portrayal of identity struggle. Though the quest for an identity has gained complexity in *Temple*, Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, in which the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (5), remains tangible. However, it is no longer just one cultural group (the Caucasian American that gazes at the African American) that tries to define the individual but rather several. Further, in *Temple* Walker reverses the dynamics by placing a seemingly white boy into an African tribe. The boy is Lissie's reincarnation. A dream memory that she admits to Suwelo has knowingly repressed (354) because it happened so long ago and there are memories she can better remember (364) but most of all she did it for Hal, her life companion, who feared "white people, especially white men, and [who] feared cats" (367). But the reincarnation as this little boy who "saw that other children regarded [him] strangely," but which strangeness only ever lasted as long as there were games to play, seems to also refer to Lissie's first encounter as being different on a skin color based encounter. The encounter of being different came when Lissie the boy grew to a man and courted with a girl. While lovemaking, the "mixture of dark berries and nut fat [his] mother always used" (359) to cover him, rubbed itself off and exposed his bare skin that "look[ed] like you don't have skin" the girl said (359). It was then that he was told that the mixture was not to "make his skin stronger and protect him from the sun" but rather "to make [him] look

more like everyone else” (359). The truth of his differing appearance is further confirmed for him when he looks into his non-berry mudded mirror image at a lake and he sees himself for what he was: a boy who “had no skin” (360). The mirror as a device to confirm an identity, a physical reality has been of popular usage in African American literature. For example, African American writer James Weldon Johnson has used the same mirror symbol in his *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, in which he describes how he thought that he was a white boy throughout his childhood, only to be showed his limitation when a teacher demanded all “the white scholars” (16) to stand up and Johnson was corrected by being told to “rise with the others” (16). Johnson, then, ran back home and starred at his mirror image:

I looked long and earnestly. [...] I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long, black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. (17)

It is this double consciousness of not knowing to which ethnicity one belongs that also infects the character of Lance, Olivia’s husband and Fanny’s adoptive father. It is “a sad, almost listless quality” (174) that Olivia recognizes in Lance. It is a blues “that people of obvious mixed race used to have” (174), Lance was no exception. By the time he finished medical school “his heart was broken” (172) by the “prejudice among black people” (171), his parents included for whom Olivia “was too dark”, “[p]ratcially an African, a real Africa, to boot” (171). Hence, Lance’s blues was a blues of a people that did not belong, first as slaves, now, as individuals of mixed blood.

Walker has depicted this lonesomeness and the yearning to belong in one of her essays entitled “Am I Blue?” which was published in her essay collection *Living By the Word*. The essay is a story about a white horse called “Blue,” and though he had the most beautiful five acres of meadow for himself he could not enjoy it for “Blue was lonely. [...] horribly lonely and bored” (5). Only when another female horse appeared in the meadow Blue’s expression changed; his eyes expressed “[a] look of independence, of self-possession, of inalienable *horseness*” (6). Olivia in a sense is Lance’s female horse; together they promise each other on the wedding day to leave the blues behind. In doing so, all of them including “the family and guests, magicians, horseshoe throwers, jugglers, French-horn players, and what have you – *all of [them] wore red*” (174). Red is the color of happiness, which the author links as a symbol to the Native Americans, for whom “the color of blue itself was ‘emblematic of failure, disappointment, unsatisfied desire’” as Walker describes the “one interesting possible origin, of the expression ‘the blues’” (43) in her essay “My Big Brother Bill.” Therefore, when the phase of emotional blueness subsided and “one felt better, red was the color of choice” (43).

Walker’s reference to the emotional state of mind within the character of Lance is further associative to the music form of the blues as it is a colloquialism “that a person will ‘sing the blues’ or ‘play the blues’ in order to rid himself ‘of the blues’” (3) as stated by author Paul Oliver in his work *The New Grove Gospel, Blues and Jazz with Spirituals and Ragtime*. The character of Arveyda further incorporates this artistic, emotional outlet when he explores his emotion through music, which notes become associated with colors as the narrator reveals:

Carlotta [now his wife] was yellow. The young, hopeful immigrant color, the color of balance, the color of autumn leaves, half the planet’s flowers, the

color of endurance and optimism. Green was his own color, soothing green, the best color for the eyes and the heart. And Zedé – Zedé’s color was peach or pink or coral. The womb colors, the woman colors. (24)

And when Arveyda was missing his dead mother or the father of whom he had only faded memories, he played in a musical range of blue notes. The color association and therefore its impact upon Arveyda’s emotional state of mind is a psycho-analytical process that began to interest scholars in that particular field since the beginning of the 20th century. Among the contributors in linking and analyzing the correlation of color and mind is Romanian psychologist Florian Ștefănescu-Goangă²², who studied under the famous German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. In his dissertation entitled *Experimentelle Untersuchungen der Farben zur Gefühlsbetonung* (‘*experimental studies of the emotional tone of colors*’), which was published in Germany in 1911, Ștefănescu-Goangă came to conclude that the experience of color was influenced by “the individual consciousness and above all individual experience” (qtd in Gage 192). For example, the color blue, Ștefănescu-Goangă discovered, depends on the clients personal experience of life and can range from being “calming, depressing, peaceful, quiet and serious, nostalgic (sehnsüchtig), melancholy, cool and calm, or dreamy” (qtd in Gage 192). Hence, in Arveyda’s case the blue musical notes associate with a longing and melancholy of something lost, in his case his parents.

The color blue, as Ștefănescu-Goangă had pointed out, has manifold emotional interpretation. Walker acknowledges this by associating other characters like Lissie and Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple* who reoccurs along side the blues singer Shug as a small character in *Temple*, and their emotions to the color of blue. For Lissie the color blue is positively associated with her animalistic familiar whose “predominant

color was blue” (119) and whose “movements were graceful and clever, its expression mischievous and full of humor” (118). Celie has similar positive connections to the color blue as her daughter Olivia reveals. For her the color blue was “a complex royal blue” that “gave off energy, or, to use her words, power” (145). Hence, Celie even designed clothes in this powerful color combination of “teal and electric blue” because “a person wearing this color was suddenly more confident, stronger, more present and intense than ever before” (145). Olivia felt this positive energy herself every time she wore the blue pantsuit her mother made for her when she came back from Africa as a grown woman.

Olivia’s presence in Africa as an African American missionary child introduces the blues theme of religion, which is according to Garon the refusal of the blues singer “to be placated by Christianity’s offer of a posthumous reward;” hence, “the blues singer demands more earthly gratification” (146). Garon’s argument reflects Walker’s own interpretation of what religion is, when she states in an interview with John O’Brien 1973 that “the truth is probably that I don’t believe there is a God, although I would like to believe it. [...] The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake” (52). Hence, in her character portrayals Walker refuses to depict faith as an institutional entity. In Samuel, who is Olivia’s adoptive father, the rejection of Christianity becomes most vividly portrayed when he, as a missionary, loses his faith “not in the spiritual teachings of Jesus, the prophet and human being, but in Christianity as a religion of conquest and domination inflicted on other peoples” (*Temple* 146). The spirituality of Samuel and Celie’s understanding of the empowering color of blue that is shared with Celie seems to amalgamate. Hence, Walker, besides her psychoanalytical portrayal of the melancholic color of blue, also follows a supernatural interpretation of blue. German scholar Götz

Hoeppe's exploration of the color blue in his work *Why The Sky Is Blue: Discovering The Color Of Life*, further supports Walker, when he argues that the unreachable sky that dominates the landscape with its facades of blue shades conduced to the idea of divinity and purity – the throne of gods (plural). As a result, Hoeppe is tracing the immaculate color of blue through different sacred script like the Torah and the Bible, and even through different cultures in Africa, where “the Ewe, a people that originated in what is now Ghana, knew of a sky god, Mavu, who wore a blue robe” (2). Walker's spiritual power of blue once again resembles the blues, which latter is defined by Amiria Baraka in *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classial Music* as “first a feeling, a sense-Knowledge (sic). A being, not a theory” (24).

The critical perception of religion in *Temple*, which accompanies the institutionalized idea of marriage, does not remain the only critical blues note in *Temple*. While Garon refers in his work to the police as another theme in the blues (141), which considering the time period of the early twentieth century involved without a doubt many police incidences²³, Walker includes the educational system in her work as a blues semantic. Both Suwelo, the “guerrilla historian” and Carlotta, the “guerrilla literaturist” (379) have left the college after both have discovered for themselves that while “it isn't impossible to teach the alternative reality” Carlotta states, while Suwelo finishes her sentence in saying that it is for “exhausting” (379).

Instead of being participants in the categorization of societal norms, Walker ends her blues novel *Temple* by providing a suggestive response, following the classical blues structure that ask for an answer to the previous (repeated) lines” (Weissman 23), in giving her characters of Suwelo, Fanny, Arveyda and Carlotta their spiritual equal familiar. Aveyda finds his spiritual self within Fanny and Suwelo, in turn, finds his

spiritual blues partner in Carlotta. It is through their personal journeys of “acknowledging the tragedy at the heart of being” as expressed by Buechler (qtd in Schroeder 125) in reference to the blues’ meaningful role that Walker’s spiritual narrative comes to an end. Identities that have been hidden or forcefully locked away due to the absence of parental love, which in turn was fostered by the violent oppressive nature of humankind in the past, have been re-discovered and re-claimed. By using the repetitive structural form of the Blues as well as the themes that are most often expressed in classic blues songs, Walker gives her characters “the unique quality of power, the power to remember” by re-enforcing in her characters “the personal effort to recapture the past as a significant element in present experience” (130) as argued by scholar Ikenna Dieke in her editorial book *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*. Stories are being told and retold and linked to each other’s personal experience in order to create a wholeness of an identity within Walker’s characters.

It is this power of the blues to create a “blutopia,” as coined by Graham Lock, to envision a “future stained with memories” (3) that can be found in Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* as well. In *Reservation* the blues trope functions as a catalyst to break through the silence in which the Native Americans have veiled themselves. A silence, as explored in Walker’s *Temple*, that “block[s] off what hurts us, [...]. But in the long run the wall, which prevents growth, hurts us more than the pain, which, if we will only bear it, soon passes over us” (353). Hence, the blues enables Alexie’s characters to reclaim their past in order to claim a future for them.

But like Alice Walker, Sherman Alexie is challenged by the assumptions of what an ethnic writer should write.

Chapter Two:

The Blues Trope as a Cultural Intersection in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

2.1 Alexie: Writer and Spokesperson

Most of Sherman Alexie's fiction and characters evolve from within the Spokane Indian Reservation, where Sherman Alexie was born and raised and where most of his family members still reside today. As a poet, novelist, and filmmaker Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, has entered the field of literature almost by fate. Initially, he planned on seeking a medical career, but "found that his frequent fainting in anatomy class was a dubious sign of his possible future as a doctor" (3), as Daniel Grassian humorously elaborates in *Understanding Sherman Alexie*. Consequently, Sherman Alexie shifted career gears, which led to his first poetry collection publication entitled *The Business of Fancydancing* in 1992, receiving high praises from critics like James R. Kincaid, who sees Alexie as "one of the major lyric voices of our time" (287).

But poetry did not remain Alexie's only literary pursuit. In an interview conducted by Tomson Highway at the 17th Annual International Festival of Authors in Toronto²⁴ in 1996, Alexie admits that "it was an economic move" because fiction sold better than poetry. And it has. His fictional writing has brought him national attention and includes the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature in the 2007, and the short story collection *War Dances*, which received PEN Faulkner Award in 2010. Alexie calls his national acknowledgement as a Native American author "an anomaly" because in normality, stories of full blood Native Americans "are not the appropriate kind of stories" that would

sell. The mixed blood Indians “have a better chance of selling a lot of books” because “it’s a particular kind of Indian experience,” but in comparison to the “non-Indian writer writing about Indians,” they (the mixed-blood Indians) still do not sell enough to level off the inequality as Alexie explains to his interviewer Tomson Highway. Meanwhile, Sherman Alexie has established himself as a writer within the American literary canon.

By writing his stories from the inside out, Alexie applies (one might find it ironic or suiting) an analytical approach like some literary critics apply when analyzing literary work – they work from the specific, the text, to the general, in order to arrive at a meaning in which the text can support or reject a certain societal claim. Hence, Alexie writes from within a microcosm of a reservation in order to understand the macrocosm of America’s society and the role each individual plays within that system. Due to the reoccurring setting of the Spokane reservation in Alexie’s work, his characters, in particular Thomas Builds-the-Fire who is “a misfit storyteller”, Victor Joseph who is “an alcoholic angry Indian guy,” and Junior Polotkin who is “the happy-go-lucky failure” of the trio, reoccur in the short stories as well as in Alexie’s first novel *Reservation Blues* (*Spokane Words*).

Reservation, unlike Alice Walker’s eight year writing marathon on *Temple*, was a concept based on a one sentence description of “an all-Indian Catholic rock-and-roll band” (*Spokane Words*) that Alexie presented to his publishers and which narrative he wrote within a year. That the story plot evolves around a band is from Daniel Grassian’s perspective a good tactical move because “books written about music, specifically pop music, have a greater chance of reaching a larger audience because music transcends boundaries” (78). It seems that Grassian’s interpretation has been influenced by Alexie’s interview statement, in which he announced that his first book of short stories *The Lone*

Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993) was an economic move on the author's part. While Alexie's first fictional publication had been a financial deed, as he admitted in the interview with Highway, it should not account for his fictional writing as a whole.

In fact, music seems to find its way into Sherman Alexie works at various times prior and post the work of *Reservation*. For example, in his 1993 poetry collection *Old Shirts and New Skins* the poet Alexie includes a poem entitled "Red Blues," where the sound of orchestra or blues or drums or simply "a pebble rolling down to strike" (86) shall make the "Indian boy" listen. Further, the short story "Because My Father Always Said He was The Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock" in *The Lone Ranger* and another poem entitled "The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me," which was published in the poem collection *One Stick Song* in 2000, indicate that Sherman Alexie does incorporate musical themes in his works. Hence, Alexie's re-occurring use of the musical theme does not seem random in order to be viewed as a simple financial strategy as assumed by Grassian.

While *Reservation* received widely positive reviews, which contributed to the fact that it won the American Book Award in 1996, criticism has equally flourished around his work. Interestingly, just like previously mentioned in reference to Alice Walker who had to deal with criticism from among her own African American community, Sherman Alexie has been confronted with critiques from among his Native American community as well. Professor Gloria Bird, who is a Spokane Indian herself, is one of the critics who disapprove of Alexie's stereotypical portrayal of the drunken and unaccomplished Indian in her article "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues." While "the portrayal of alcoholism [...] cannot be denied" Bird feels that Alexie "does not attempt to put the social problems of economic instability, poverty, or cultural oppression

into perspective” (51). Ironically, Bird’s argument is overly focused on the disparity of Indians, which she disdains in Alexie’s work itself, leaving the fundamental trope of the blues completely unrecognized. As a result, Bird loses sight of Alexie’s attempt to explore the societal problems concerning poverty, cultural misconceptions, and cultural traditions of Native Americans within the Western culture of the United States and in connection to the similar cultural challenges of African Americans through the blues trope. It is through the element of the blues, and in particular through the character of African American blues legend Robert Johnson, that Alexie tries to overcome the “racial and social biases and confrontations” (Hawkins 119) while keeping the Native American history alive and gearing towards a hopeful future. However, unlike Alice Walker who used the structure of the blues to drive her complex stories forward, Sherman Alexie relies on the character of Robert Johnson, his magic blues guitar, and the similar blues themes of love, violence, oppression, animals and magic that have similarly been found in Walker’s work.

2.2 Robert Johnson and the *Reservation Blues*

While the subject of the blues in Alexie’s *Reservation* has been explored by critics like Douglas Ford, Jane Hafen, and Scott Andrews, the figurative role of Robert Johnson has not received much attention. In fact, there seems to be confusion why Alexie has chosen the character of Robert Johnson as expressed by scholar P. Jane Hafen in her article “Rock and Roll, Redskins, and Blues in Sherman Alexie’s Work” when she states that it is “less clear [why Alexie made] use of self-destructive rock musicians or the murdered Robert Johnson” (74). But while some scholars seem irritated by Alexie’s choice, other, like Karen Jorgensen in her essay “White Shadows: The Use of

Doppelgangers in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*", see a "correlation between characters where none would ordinarily be apparent" (21). Hence, Jorgensen represents the role of Doppelgänger between Indian and non-Indian characters and refers in one section of her article to the character of Robert Johnson being Thomas Builds-the-Fire's twin: "they are both creators, storytellers with words and music, who have an inherent need to tell their stories" (20). The fragile physical features of the characters of Robert Johnson and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, as expressed through the narrative voice, confirms that "Thomas knew about sickness. He'd caught some disease in the womb that forced him to tell stories. The weight of those stories bowed his legs and bent his spine a bit. Robert Johnson looked bowed, bent, and more fragile with each word" (6), seem to confirm Jorgensen's Doppelgänger role.

While the physical features of Robert Johnson and Thomas Builds-the-Fire seem strikingly similar, their spiritual nature seeks to find freedom inside and outside of their bodies as well. When Thomas Builds-the-Fire declares that "[i]n the one hundred and eleven years since the creation of the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1881, not one person, Indian or otherwise, had ever arrived by accident" (3), his words of certainty indicate that the "black stranger" who "appeared with nothing more than the suit he wore and the guitar slung over his back....at the crossroads" (3) had a reason for his arrival at the Spokane reservation crossroads. While seeking his spiritual freedom, Robert Johnson brought the music of the blues to free the Native Americans from their silenced past. Hence, through the character of Robert Johnson, Alexie tries to acknowledge first, the blues as a sensitive music device to capture a burdened past that, secondly, is able to connect two disadvantaged groups that have similarly (not equally!) struggled under the oppressive Western popular culture, and thirdly, to demonstrate that music is a

sacred form of storytelling but that the choices one makes in expressing oneself can be of destructive nature.

With the arrival of Robert Johnson on the Spokane reservation Thomas Builds-the-Fire regains his strength in remembering the power and sacred role of storytelling, in which, just like in blues music as argued by Professor Emerita of Music and Afro-American Studies Eileen Southern in *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, “a kind of catharsis” (334) is being reached. It is through Robert Johnson’s blues that Thomas remembers a past, which despite the sorrow, has patches of delightful memories. Before the arrival of Johnson, Thomas and with him the whole reservation had lost the ability to remember their indigenous pride. Instead they have become focused on what they cannot have. This state of mental paralysis is according to Daniel L. Schacter in *Searching for Memory: The Brain, The Mind, and The Past* the cause of “the imposition of Western culture and religion [...] [that] destroyed [...] traditional modes of remembering” (301). Sherman Alexie’s further indicates this inability to remember the past through the idiom of television – a reoccurring symbol through most of Alexie’s works – that reflects upon “the desire and passivity as well as confusing identity and increasing feelings of inferiority” (82) as argued by Daniel Grassian. It is this sense of feeling lost that has crept into Thomas’ stories, which “climbed into your clothes like sand, gave you itches that could not be scratched” (15). Hence, the reservation members have stopped listening, because they wanted to forget. But with Johnson’s arrival, Thomas begins to revisit a past that brings not just sorrow but also moments of delight. Like his mother’s voice that “sounded like a flute when she was happy (22),” but which had been buried under the painful memory of her passing away from cancer when Thomas was ten years old, leaving behind a broken father who “has been drunk since

the day after his wife's wake" (22). The music becomes an inspirational force for Thomas who begins to "strongly identify[y] with the guitar" (11), deciding to form a rock 'n' roll band in which the blues is mixed with modern pop.

While Robert Johnson brings the blues music to the Spokane reservation, its inhabitants have a music teacher living atop Wellpinit Mountain, known as Big Mom, who is similar to Walker's character of Lissie, "a part of every tribe" (199). In her, Alexie brings to the fore the oppressive, violent history of Western colonization that has inflicted the Native American life, and therefore, empowered them. Alexie refers to a particular historic event that surrounds the slaughter of horses, which, according to Douglas Ford, took place "during the military campaigns waged against Spokane Indians by Colonel George Wright" (200) in 1858. By slaughtering the horses, the militia summoned that without the horses the Native Americans were powerless against the military invasion, as referred to by Robert Ruby and John Brown (qtd in Ford 200). This powerlessness, as presented in Alexie's *Reservation*, haunts the fictitious world of the Spokane reservation till today, for the horses have stopped singing. Under their murdered bones lie buried a prosperous and fearless past that has been replaced by fear and loss of identity. And even though, the slaughtered horses and their songs attempted to return in the form of famous musicians like Janis Joplin, Marvin Gaye, or Jimi Hendrix, "they fell back into the earth" (10), due to the choices they made.

It is Big Mom who reflects upon the responsibility of choices when she tells Thomas' band Coyote Springs, after they have rehearsed at her place in order to improve and give the band their own unique musical style, that

I've had plenty of students get famous, really famous. I've had students invent stuff I never would have thought of, like jazz and rap. I've seen it all.

But I ain't had many students who ended up happy, you know? So what do you want me to say? It's up to you. You make your choices. (216)

Hence, creating music comes with responsibilities. A responsibility that is similarly stressed in Alice Walker's character of Arveyda is the role of a musician to unite the world. But this role can be overshadowed by the misconception of what music should do for the individual and the larger society. It is the choice of the musician to use music as a sacred form of storytelling or as a commercialized motive to make money.

The blues legend Robert Johnson represents this dualistic, mystic, and economic power exchange. For Johnson's legend tells that after having been away from home for a couple of months, he returned to a blues joint where he impressed his fellow blues musician Son House with his rapid improvement of playing the guitar that Son House (maybe jokingly?) suggested that Johnson had "sold his soul to the devil in exchange for learning to play like that" (in Pearson and McCulloch 89). Alexie assimilates Son House's story into the plotline of *Reservation* when he writes:

Son House, preacher and bluesman, had been a star in Robinsville, Mississippi, way back when. Robert Johnson was just a teenager when he started to follow House from juke joint to joint. Johnson played only the harmonic then, but he was good enough to join Son House on stage every once in a while....But it wasn't enough. Johnson wanted to play the guitar. "Oh, God," Son House said to Johnson after he let him play guitar at a juke. "I ain't letting' you play no more. I ain't ever heard such a racket. You was makin' people mad." Ashamed, Johnson packed up his clothes and guitar and left town. He just disappeared as he walked north up Highway 61. Just vanished after the first crossroads. (262-263)

It is the mysticism of the story that, despite the growing body of factual information, still fascinates scholars and readers alike, and which finds its presentation in articles like

Alan Di Perna's "Devil in the Detail," which was published in celebration of Johnson's one hundredth birthday in 2011 in the *Guitar World magazine*. Hence, Robert Johnson's mystic legend is resurrected in the story of *Reservation* when the character of blues guitar player Johnson appears at the reservation as "a restless spirit, seemingly doomed to wander the planet, never able to find personal contentment" (Grassian 85) due to the deal he made with the white gentleman. Sherman Alexis substitutes Johnson's legendary story of having sold his soul to the devil with the personification of the white gentleman, which, as will unfurl in the narrative, is representative of the music industry, where "they (the musicians) don't need to be good. They just need to make money" as one of the producer says (223) in reference to Coyote Springs recording session in New York City.

This misleading conception of what music shall provide for the individual and the community finds expression in the blues theme of love and oppression. As Alexie reveals in his character of Robert Johnson, it was on stage where "he felt loved" while "singing and blowing his harp" (263). A love that the character Johnson could not find at home but longed for and hoped to find on stage. A conscious choice made for the sake of love and attention. Alexie's character of Johnson draws close similarities to the real life legend Robert Johnson, whose father, according to Pearson and McCulloch, left Johnson and his mother and took most of the siblings away with him (6), resulting in Johnson being "shunted from one house to another and consigned to the care of various guardians during childhood" (Di Perna 55). Hence, the juke joints created a place, where the legend Johnson could play his music, get drunk and enjoy the company of women (56) as "Honeyboy" Edwards, one of the last blues legends²⁵ who met Johnson in the late 1930s, tells journalist Di Perna when referring to Johnson's quiet but funny nature

as a musician. It was this attention and need for universal acceptance that also contributed to Johnson's early death, which was the result of foul play. His enticing behavior towards women, as it has been viewed by many contemporary scholars including Pearson and McCulloch, was the main reason for Johnson's early death. For his flirtatious behavior with the wife of the owner of a juke, where Johnson was playing his last gig, resulted in the jealous and angry action of slipping Johnson a poisoned whiskey (Pearson and McCulloch 9; Di Perna 169).

Though Alexie's character of Johnson does not die in the book, the lack of parental love during his childhood, draws similarities to the character of Thomas, whose mother, as mentioned before, died of cancer and whose father "had been drunk since the day after his wife's wake" (22). The lack of parental guidance and love draws both of them, the young character of Johnson and Thomas, to seek a substitute love in the commercialized world of society. Hence, both of them misread the spiritual power of music and in particular the blues, when "Thomas thought he needed more money than music" (23) and Johnson decided to make the deal with the white gentleman that caused him the freedom of his soul (264).

This theme of longing for universal acceptance and love finds repetitive blues notes in the character of Father Robert Arnold, the "priest of the reservation Catholic Church" (34). It is in a conversation with Checkers Warm Water, a Flathead Indian and sister to Chess, when Father Arnolds has to admit to himself that "[h]e'd been just all of the other performers in the world. He'd wanted to be universally loved. He wasn't that different from Victor, Thomas, or Junior, They got onstage and wanted the audience to believe in them. They all wanted the audience to throw their room keys, panties, confessions, flowers, and songs onstage" (287). It is the challenge to not fall apart "in

the face of all of that” (287) as Father Arnolds reflects. Admitting to himself, Arnolds fell apart, when he was tempted by kissing Checkers, who was falling in love with Father Arnolds, but whose love he could not return because he made a religious vow. The only way to collect oneself and overcome the temptation is through discipline as Arnolds summons. For it is the challenge to not get lost within the adoration and temptation.

It is the temptation of universal acceptance that drives the Indian band of Coyote Springs, whose rock’ n’ roll cover songs soon draw white strangers into the Spokane Reservation, among them two white women, Betty and Veronica; “both had long blonde hair and wore too much Indian jewelry” (41). With Betty and Veronica, “those New Age princesses” (41) as one Indian woman calls them, Alexie begins to introduce the blues theme of oppression, manipulation, misconception, and deceiving fascination with Indian culture. When Junior asks Betty what it is she likes about him, she replies that “You’re the best. I mean, you’re an Indian and a guitar player. How much better could you be?” (43). It is his Indianness, the “American popular image of bellicose male Indian warriors as the epitome of masculinity” (79) as Grassian reasons, that Indians “have been led astray” and “that often leads men to despondency and drug abuse” (79) because they cannot live up its misconception. But it is a mistaken belief that both the Native American characters of Victor and Junior and the Caucasian American characters of Betty and Veronica want to exploit each other by dating each other and claiming victory over one another. In a radio interview in Seattle, the city where the band played and won a band battle and got music producer Mr. Armstrong’s attention who will later introduce the band to the music agent George Wright’s, Thomas Builds-the-Fire further supports and clarifies the exploitation of the characters by stating that “they’re using each other as

trophies. Junior and Victor get to have beautiful white women on their arms, and Betty and Veronica get to have Indian men” (158).

The image of the beautiful white woman is further strengthening the theme of misconception within *Reservation* and finds a repetitive blues note in the character of Checkers, who confides in Father Arnolds: “Those women are always perfect, you know? When I was little and we’d go to shop in Missoula, I’d see perfect little white girls all the time. They were always so pretty and clean. I’d come to town in my muddy dress (139).” Hence, as a young girl Checkers wanted “to look like that” (140), wanted to look like an angel with blond hair and blue eyes, who gets treated nicely. However, her admiration and longing for a white identity gets shattered when the Father of her reservation brings his nieces to church and one of them “pinche[d] my breast, my little nipple” (142). The meanness of the girl’s action destroyed the harmonic image that young Checkers had created, leaving her in an ambivalent state of mind where the white world lost its attractiveness, but nonetheless, remains a force that still seemed to present more than the Indian life could offer.

It is this misconception of recognizing “a culture within a culture” (38), as scholar Bernice Lott describes the multiethnic environment in her work *Multiculturalism and Diversity*, that challenges the dynamics of “intersectionality” (118). As mentioned previously, this identity ambivalence finds further accentuation in Sherman Alexie’s symbolic use of the television. The television, as the omniscient narrator reveals in *Reservation* and in connection to Thomas’ dreams, haunts its dreamer by continuously reminding him “of all he never owned” (70), strengthening the disparity between the “popular culture in general” (Andrews 139) and the reservation life. While the Native American is presented with pop-cultural images that seem to lie out of his or her reach of

accomplishment, the pop-cultural society in turn creates an image of a Native American warrior that does not exist. It is this deceiving portrayal of cultural images that also leads to Betty and Veronica's abrupt leaving of the Spokane Reservation when they realize that Junior and Victor are not the warrior Indians they thought they would be: "We didn't want it to be like this" Veronica tells Chess, to which Chess replies sarcastically: "Can't handle it? You want the good stuff of being Indian without all the bad stuff, enit?" (184). Sherman Alexie himself treats humorously the misleading portrayal in media in one of his literary readings, when he appears on stage as one of his fictional "vodka-guzzling" characters, asking the audience "What did you expect – a warrior?," as *New York Times* reviewer Timothy Egan recollects the evening with the author in his article "An Indian Without Reservations."

The complexity of cultural intersection, and therefore, the finding of an identity within this hybrid environment become even more complex and controversial, when Alexie incorporates the racial stigmata of mixed genetic identities in the voice of Chess Warm Water. Chess' character throughout the novel of *Reservation* dismisses the presence of the popular white society, first with her sister Checkers to whom she always said that she was stupid to admire white girls because in her mind "we were better than those white girls any day" (140); then with Betty and Veronica who were the white lovers of Victor and Junior, making her hate "Indian men who chased after white women" and making her hate "white women who chased after Indian men" (81). Chess's argument finds its controversial peak when the band discovers that Junior, the drummer of the band, who committed suicide after the band failed to get the record deal, had a son with a white woman. In her mind Checker debates with the white woman:

Why did you love him, that broken Indian man? [...] Why did you conceive him a son? [...] He's always going to be half Indian, [...], and that will make him half crazy. Half of him will always want to tear the other half apart. It's war. (283)

Then Chess wants to save the half-Indian son from the pain of being beaten by Indian who will not accept him for "he'll never be Indian enough":

[...] All you can do is bred the Indian out of your family. All you can do is make sure your son marries a white woman and their children marry white people. The fraction will take over. Your half-blood son will have quarter-blood children and eight-blood grandchildren, and then they won't be Indians anymore. They won't hardly be Indian, and they can sleep better at night. (283)

While wanting to save the child from pain, Chess also wants to save the Indian from pain of being confronted with "those quarter-blood and eight blood grandchildren (who) will find out they're Indian and torment the rest of us real Indians" by reminding us "how much we don't have" because they "will get all the Indian jobs, all the Indian chances, because they look white" (283). While scholars like P. Jane Hafen argue that Alexie's has failed to show the complexity of multiethnic identities, others like Scott Andrews doubt that the mixed ethnic children "fight forever an internal war" (149) and still others like Gloria Bird dismiss Alexie's approach on multiethnic identity completely because in Bird's eyes Alexie "still evades the issue" (49). Even as scholars seems to deny Alexie's exploration of the complexity of struggle within and outside the multiethnic individual, it is interesting to note that the author follows along side Alice Walker's portrayal of the character of Lance in *Temple*. Recapping that Lance's blues "was sad, almost listless quality that people of obvious mixed race used to have. [...] consumed by [the] effort to live honorably as who [he was], with both sides – black and white – constantly warring

against each other and despising those caught in the middle” (*Temple* 174). While Alexie’s wording might have been more direct in comparison to Walker’s, he, nonetheless, uses the “blues matrix,” as coined by Houston Baker²⁶ in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, to provide culture’s complexity “a point of ceaseless input and output” (3). Hence, *Reservation* rejects the oversimplification of heritage and multiethnic identity. While it seems an easy task to place an African American blues legend as a character onto a fictionalized Indian reservation, the presence of this character serves as a catalyst to explore the challenges of finding an identity within a multiethnic society.

It is this challenge of overcoming disparity in order to claim an identity that Scott Andrews does not seem to find in Alexie’s work. Instead, Andrew argues that the music that is supposed to provide “possibilities of a cross-cultural exchange” (138) silences at the end of the novel, not “turning its obstacles into opportunities, [nor] re-imagining that culture of biological mixture as a boon rather than a curse” (149). Interestingly, Andrew admits that “it is hard for me to rest easy with this conclusion” (151) of a silencing novel. It is an uneasiness that most likely rests in the doubt that the novel ends in silence, for it does not. On the surface the band of Coyote Springs disperses after having failed to get the record deal in New York due to the fact that Victor tried to play the first chord on the guitar but “his fingers slipped off the strings and frets,” making the instrument buck and twist “away from his body” (225) until “it broke the straps and fell to the floor in a flurry of feedback” (226). This scene is causing some irritation, because without a direct initiator the mysterious bond, a bond that “held onto Victor even harder than it ever held Johnson” (175) and which Big Mom refers to as the guitar’s want (207), between Victor and the guitar is broken off. The only explanation for this to occur might lie in the fact

that Victor had not made a direct deal with the guitar, the way Johnson had done; it was simply passed down to him. Hence, the guitar might not have wanted the band to succeed without having made a deal with it. This finds support in the dream Victor has, in which the guitar returns to him and says that “you can have me back. You can take me and you can be anybody you want to be. You can have anything you want to have. But you have to trade me for it” (255). Victor needs to trade in what he loves the most. Here, Alexie obscures his actions again. From the narrative it is not clear if Victor made a deal with the guitar; however, before Junior commits suicide he “heard Victor whisper his name” (256). If Victor had made a deal with the guitar the outcome remains far from glamorous for his best friend Junior dies, while Thomas, Chess and Checker leave the reservation. The only positive outcome seems to be that Victor stopped drinking and applied for a job, as his scarce curriculum vitae reveals (297). But behind the author’s vagueness lies one certainty, namely that Coyote Springs have escaped from the fangs of the white consumer music business world, enabling its members to make their own individual choices.

Even though, Johnson’s guitar silences in Andrews’ self-righteous understanding, its fading music makes room for new notes to come alive and represent the fusion of the old with the new world and the cultures within. The character of Robert Johnson ones again is part of this cultural intersection when he makes the choice of staying on the reservation, in which he has already integrated himself by “wearing a traditional Indian ribbon shirt, made of highly traditional silk and polyester” (303). He further begins to make music with the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota, indicating a musical fusion of the African American and Native American cultures, which finds further expression in Big Mom’s teaching of a new song called “the shadow horses’ song, the slaughtered horses’

song, the screaming horses' song" (306). This song resembles and connects to the blues for it is a song "of mourning that would become a song of celebration: we have survived, we have survived" (306). Hence, Alexie's Indians of the fictional Spokane Reservation have begun to make the transition from a past that was mournful and paralyzing to a present of celebrating life, which will potentially lead them to a visionary future that is stained with the memories that they share and keep alive in their songs of shadow horses. The horses that are running alongside the blue van of hope, in which Thomas, Chess, and Checkers drive into their future that lies beyond the horizon of the reservation and where songs "were waiting for them" (306).

Conclusion:

Keeping Stories Alive

Houston A. Baker has been one of the first scholars²⁷ who examined the blues trope more extensively, and therefore, critically in his work *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, creating the term of a “the blues matrix,” which “is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit” (3). While Baker examines the blues matrix specifically in African American literary works²⁸, its meaning remains powerful for Walker’s *Temple* and Alexie’s *Reservation*. In fact, the blues’ “intersection, this crossing, codifying force, providing resonance for experience’s multiplicities” (7) seems to gain strength in the world of the twenty-first century, where the multiethnic writer faces the challenges of a more dynamic identity. An identity, as Maria P.P. Root explains in her “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,” that gives the individual the right “to identify differently in different situations (363) and gives the right to change identities “over [a] lifetime – and more than once” (365). It is a challenging task for the multiethnic author for the individuals, as Baker concludes, have “to situate themselves inventively and daringly at the crossing sign in order to materialize vernacular faces” (202). The blues trope for the African American and Native American writer, as Walker and Alexie have shown, established itself as a successful device in expressing long lost and rediscovered emotions, identities and hopes in literary works. For the blues music, as expressed by Marc Buechler who is quoted in Schroeder’s *Robert Johnson: Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture*,

is not about surrendering to sorrow, as so many uninformed listeners believe. It’s about grappling with that sorrow down in the rag-and-bone

shop of the heart and transforming it through impassioned vocals, through a groove or through a bent note – into a kind of affirmation of the human spirit. But it's an affirmation without sentiment and without delusion, one that never fails to acknowledge the tragedy at the heart of being. (125)

It is the empowerment behind the blues music and its trope in literature that gives its listeners, writers and readers a proper figuration of the complexity in modern day society. As Walker and Alexie have shown in their works, the use of the blues trope can spin a web of cultural intersections between ethnic groups who transform “experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic” narratives (Baker 7).

Though there is a growing number of multiethnic writers who grapple the complexity of social identity in their works, Walker's *Temple* and Alexie's *Reservation* are exemplary for breaking away from the “validating contingency of whiteness in the racial equation” (Kang 222) by exploring an identity relation between two “minor, derivative, or subordinate” cultures – the African American and Native American cultural histories. Kang rightfully states in her Ph.D. dissertation ‘*A Lot of Indian in this Face*’: *The Native American Presence in Twentieth-Century African American Autobiography* that by “[b]ringing Native American identity into the fold of black consciousness [it] causes a crisis of definition, but it also prompts self-dialogue” (225). As this thesis work has shown, Walker and Alexie have begun this dialogue with themselves, their cultures, and the society they are living in.

It is upon the writers of the next generation to create a literary canon that can be perceptive of all these interethnic relationships that are currently unfolding themselves in this ever growing multiethnic culture. So that Rodriguez's brown child can have a voice within literature as well. And it is upon the reader and the scholar “to untangle knots, to

resolve complications” as William Reichard in *American Tensions: Literature of Identity and the Search for Social Justice* within the literary world because as readers we “like puzzles that ask [us] to consider how each piece sits in relation to the next, and how the individual pieces relate to the whole” (xvii). Let the multiethnic identity unfold itself upon white pages for it needs to be acknowledged as it will be the future that needs to be stained with our memories (Lock 3).

Notes

¹ Author, historian and educator William Loren Katz published in 1986 his work *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*. It was one of the first books and scholarly works that openly explored this hidden heritage that according to scholar Howard Zinn has existed “for four centuries” (<http://williamkatz.com>). But it took another century to pass until scholars got further invested in exploring this correlation, which members soon became known as African Native Americans. James F. Brooks edited the book *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America* in 2002, which was soon followed by Jonathan Brennan’s editorial work *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote* in 2003. The scholars Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland brought forth another editorial work in 2006 under the title *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country*. In 2004 scholar Patrick Mingos collected and published primary narratives of African Native American during slavery entitled *Black Indian Slave Narratives*. To my knowledge these are the four main (five when including Katz’s work) editorial publications that are currently available and specifically devoted to the African Native American Diaspora.

² Most scholars agree that the blues is an African American music genre, which creation is linked to the African Diaspora of the slave trade; however, opinions disperse when giving a specific time reference to when the blues was created. Some scholars argue that the blues has African tribal roots, and therefore, has been indirectly brought with the slaves to the new land. Other scholars argue that the blues was invented on American soil and after the first years of slavery. But as rightly expressed by John Cowley and Paul Oliver: “Like any other music, blues does not, and did not, exist in a social or musical vacuum” (7).

³ As Dick Weissmann in *Blues: The Basics* defines, classic blues refers to first performance art of the blues that was recorded for an audience.

⁴ Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was the first African American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1950 for her collection *Annie Allen* and James Alan McPherson became the first African American man to win the prize in fiction for his short story collection *Elbow Room* in 1978.

⁵ Till today, the year of 2012, Walker has published seven novels, 6 volumes of poems, 5 collections of essays, 3 collection of short stories, 2 collection of non-fiction (memoirs), and 3 children books. This information has been collected from *The World Has Changed, A Conversation with Alice Walker*.

⁶ tonyawards.com.

⁷ Though in 1967 Walker’s short story “To Hell with Dying” was published in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*, her volume of poems entitled *Once* was the first book publication.

⁸ *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth and A Poem Traveled Down My Arm.*

⁹ alicewalkersgarden.com/blog

¹⁰ which she expresses in both fiction – *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and non-fiction – *Warrior Marks*

¹¹ Of which Walker writes about in *Overcoming Speechlessness: A Poet Encounters ‘the Horror’ in Rwanda, Eastern Congo, and Palestine/Israel*

¹² Howard Zinn “was a historian, playwright, and activist. He wrote the classic *A People’s History of the United States* [...]” (www.howardzinn.org).

¹³ Howard Zinn is quoted from *Alice Walker: Beauty in Truth*, a documentary on the author, which is currently in progress; hence, the quote is taken from the trailer (youtube.com/H-a49NJuH4).

¹⁴ Walker coins in a 1973 interview with John O’Brien the term “spiritual survival” and her preoccupation with “the survival *whole* of my people.” During the 1970s and 1980s Walker further defined womanism in connection to spirituality and later eco-feminism, which has been exhaustively researched by other scholars like Pamela Smith, Gretchen Ziegenhals, or Delores Williams – it will not be part of this thesis approach.

¹⁵ No other book on Walker’s webpage, alicewalkersgarden.com, has such special reference to its literary whereabouts on booklists.

¹⁶ Davenport first heard the term being used by philosopher AfraShe Asungi and refers to the state of being “wholly female and Black at once, with no schizophrenia, no alternating realities, and no question bout it, either” (13).

¹⁷ J.M. Coetzee was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2003; being the second South African author, besides Nadine Gordimer in 1991, receiving such honor.

¹⁸ newsdesk.si.edu.

¹⁹ Olivia’s portrayal as a bookish mother who does not care much for her daughter is a strikingly familiar portrayal of Walker in her daughter’s book *Black, White and Jewish* by Rebecca Walker.

²⁰ The story of *Temple* does not reveal a specific country in South America but due to the fact that Zede escaped with a boat through the Panama Canal and that her native language seems to have been Spanish, it can either be Colombia or Venezuela.

²¹ musicradar.com features “The 25 Best Female Blues Artists Ever.”

²² Ștefănescu-Goangă was not just one of the influential psychologists in the early twentieth century in Germany but also a forerunner in Romanian psychology, which has “survived during Communist period and, [...], is still visible on the international psychological scene” (159) as stated by Daniel David, Mark Moore, and Anca Domuta in

their article “Romanian Psychology on the International Psychological Scene: A Preliminary Critical and Empirical Appraisal.”

²³ In particularly having the Jim Crow laws in mind.

²⁵ David “Honeyboy“ Edwards passed away in August 2011, only three month after he has been quoted in Do Perna’s article on Robert Johnson.

²⁶ Houston Baker explains that the blues matrix consists “of a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, criss-crossing impulses always in productive transit” – of a culture that is complex and a reflexive enterprise.

²⁷ Which includes critics like Amiri Baraka, Henry Louis Gates and Albert Murray.

²⁸Baker examines his coined term of the blues matrix in works of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, to name a few.

Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. *Reservation Blues*. New York: Warner Books, 1995. Print.
- Andrews, Scott. "A New Road and a Dead End in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*." *Arizona Quarterly*. 63.2. (Summer 2007): 137-152. *Project Muse*. Web. 20 March 2012.
- "Alice Walker: Why I'm joining the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza." *The Guardian*. 24 June 2011. Web. 10 October 2011.
- Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, A vernacular Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1984. Print.
- Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues." *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. 10th ed. Ed. Alison Booth and Kelly J. Mays. New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2011. 75-101. Print.
- Bates, Gerri. *Alice Walker – A Critical Companion*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 2005. Print.
- Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People*. 2nd ed. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999. Print.
- . "Blues, Poetry, and the New Music." *The Music – Reflections on Jazz and Blues*. Ed. Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka. New York: William Morrow&Company, Inc., 1987. 262-267. Print.
- . *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2009. Print.
- Bird, Gloria. "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*." *Wicazo Sa Review*. 11.2. *JSTOR*. University of Minesota Press, 1995. 47-52. Online.

- Braendlin, Bonnie. "Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* as Pastiche." *American Literature*. 68.1. (March 1996): 47-67. JSTOR. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.
- Brewer, Marilyn, and Miles Hewstone. *Self and Social Identity*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004. Print.
- Burney, Fanny. *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney, Volume IV, The Streatham Years: Part II, 1780-1781*. Ed. Betty Rizzo. Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. Print.
- Byrd, Rudolph P. Ed. *The World Has Changed – Conversations with Alice Walker*. New York: The New Press, 2010. Print.
- Chandler, Robin. "Siouxjewgermanscotblack." *Other Tongues; Mixed-race Women Speak Out*. (Nov. 2010): 161-165. Ed. Adebe De Rango-Adem and Andrea Thompson. Toronto: Inanna Publications and Educat. ILLiad Interlibrary Service. Print.
- Cone, James H. "The Blues, A Secular Spiritual." *Write Me A Few Of Your Lines – A Blues Reader*. Ed. Steven C. Tracy. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 1999. 231-251. Print.
- Cortez, Jayne. *Jazz Fan Looks Back*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2002. Print.
- Coetzee, J.M. "The Beginnings of (Wo)man in Africa." *nytimes.com*. The New York Times. 30 April, 1989. Web. 13 February 2012.
- Davenport, Doris. "Afracentric Visions." *The Women's Review of Books*. 6.12 (Sep. 1989): 12-14. JSTOR. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.
- David, Daniel, Mark Moore, and Anca Domuta. "Romanian Psychology on the International Psychological Scene: A Preliminary Critical and Empirical

- Appraisal." *European Psychologist*. 7.2 (June 2002): 153-160. *PsychArticles*.
Web. 15 April 2012.
- Davis, Yvonne R. "Big Moma Is In The (White) House." *huffingtonpost.com*. The
Huffington Post. 8 Dec. 2008. Web. 20 March 2012.
- Dieke, Ikenna. "Walker's The Temple of My Familiar: Womanist as Monistic Idealist."
Critical Essays on Alice Walker. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westport: Greenwood Press.
1999. 127-139. Print.
- Di Perna, Alan. "Devil in the Details." *GuitarWorld Magazine*. April 2011. Print.
- Dreifus, Claudia. "Writing to Save My Life": An Interview with Alice Walker from *The
Progress* (1989). *The World Has Changed – Conversations with Alice Walker*. Ed.
Rudolph P. Byrd. New York: The New Press, 2010. 78-85. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York: Penguin Books. 1996. Print.
- Egan, Timothy. "An Indian Without Reservations." *The New York Times*. January 18,
1998. Web. 20 March, 2012.
- Ferris, William R. "I Know What The Earth Says." *The World Has Changed –
Conversations with Alice Walker*. Ed. Rudolph P. Byrd. New York: The New
Press, 2010. 225-238. Print.
- Ford, Douglas. "Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues." *MELUS*. 27.3. (Autumn 2002):
197-215. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 March 2012.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Educated Imagination*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964.
- Gage, John. *Color and Meaning – Art, Science, and Symbolism*. Berkeley: University
Press California, 1999. Print.
- Garon, Paul. *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: City Lights. 1996. Print.

- Grassian, Daniel. *Understanding Sherman Alexie*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press. 2005.
- Hafen, P. Jane. "Rock and Roll, Redskins, and Blues in Sherman Alexie's Work." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*. 9.4 (Winter 1997): 71-78. JSTOR. Web. 20 March 2012.
- Hamilton, Marybeth. *In Search of the Blues*. Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2008. Print.
- Hawkins, Alfonso W. *The Jazz Trope: A Theory of African American Literary and Vernacular Culture*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2008. Print.
- Hoeppe, Götz. *Why The Sky Is Blue: Discovering The Color Of Life*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007. Print.
- Hoy, Jody. "The Richness of the Very Ordinary Stuff': A Conversation with Alice Walker (1994)." *The World Has Changed – Conversations with Alice Walker*. Ed. Rudolph P. Byrd. New York: The New Press, 2010. 124-141. Print.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road – An Autobiography*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996. Print.
- Jewett, Almira. "Color Symbolism." *The Quarterly Journal of the University of North Dakota*. Stanford: University of North Dakota Press, 1918/1919. 50-71. playgoogle.com. Web. 12 March 2012.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. 25th ed. New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1991. Print.
- Johnson, Maria V. "You Just Can' Keep a Good Woman Down': Alice Walker Sings the Blues." *African American Review*. 30.2. (Summer 1996): 221-236. JSTOR. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.

- Jones, LeRoi. "Slave and Post-Slave." *Write Me A Few Of Your Lines – A Blues Reader*. Ed. Steven C. Tracy. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. 83- 88. Print.
- Jorgensen, Karen. "White Shadows: The Use of Doppelgangers in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*. 9.4. Winter 1997. 19-25. JSTOR . Web 4. Feb. 2012.
- Kang, Nancy. "'A Lot of Indian in his Face': The Native American Presence in Twentieth-Century African American Autobiography." Diss. University of Toronto, 2006. Print.
- Kincaid, James R. "Who Gets to Tell Their Stories." *New York Times*. May 3, 1992. Web. 20 March, 2012.
- Lawrence, Sharon. *Jimmi Hendrix: The Intimate Story of a Betrayed Musical Legend*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 2005. Print.
- Lock, Graham. *Blutopia – Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*. Durham: Duke University Press. 1999.
- Lott, Bernice. *Multiculturalism and Diversity, A Social Psychological Perspective*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Print.
- Neal, Larry. "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation." *Write Me A Few Of Your Lines – A Blues Reader*. Ed Steven C.Tracy. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. 422-433.Print.
- O'Brien, John. "Interviews with Black Writers." *The World Has Changed – Conversations with Alice Walker*. Ed. Rudolph P. Byrd. New York: The New Press, 2010. 35-57. Print.

- Oliver, Paul. "Blues." *The New Grove Gospel, Blues and Jazz With Spirituals and Ragtime*. Ed. Paul Oliver, Max Harrison, and William Bolcom. New York: W.W. Norton&Company, Inc, 1986. 36-178. Print.
- Oliver, Paul and John Cowley. *The New Blackwell Guide to Recorded Blues*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996. Print.
- Parma, Pratibha. Dir. "Alice Walker: Beauty in Truth." *alicewalkersfilm.com*. alicewalkersfilm. Web. 14 March 2012.
- Pearson, Lee Barry and Bill McCulloch. *Robert Johnson, Lost and Found*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 2003. Print.
- Reichard, William. Ed. *American Tensions: Literature of Identity and the Search for Social Justice*. Oakland: New Village Press.
- Rodgers, Jeffrey Pepper. "Chris Whitley Leaves Behind Eclectic Musical Legacy." *NPR Online*. 23 November 2005. Web. 24 November 2011.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- Root, Maria P.P. "A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People." *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context*. 2nd ed. Ed. Philomena Essed and David Goldberg. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004. 355-368. Print.
- Schacter, Daniel L. *Searching for Memory: The Brain, The Mind, and The Past*. New York: Basic Books, 1996.
- Schroeder, Patricia R. *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture*. Illinois: University Press of Illinois, 2004. Print.
- Simcikova, Karla. *To Live Fully, Here and Now, The Healing Vision in the Works of Alice Walker*. New York: Lexington Books. 2007.

- Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997. Print.
- Spokane Words: An Interview with Sherman Alexie*. Interview by Tomson Highway. Osaka University, 1 March 2002. Web. 12 January 2012.
- Tracy, Steven C. Ed. *Write Me A Few Of Your Lines – A Blues Reader*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. Print.
- Unterberger, Richi. "The Roots of the Blues." *All Music Guide to the Blues: The Definitive Guide to the Blues*. 3rd ed. Ed. Vladimir Bogdanov, Chris Woodstra, and Stephen Thomas Erlwine. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003. 680-681. Print.
- Verkuyten, Maykel. *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*. New York: Hove Psychology Press, 2005. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *The Temple of My Familiar*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989. Print.
- . *Living By the Word*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1988. Print
- . "Am I Blue?" *Living By the Word*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1988. 3-8. Print.
- . "My Big Brother Bill." *Living By the Word*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1988. 41-50. Print.
- Weiten, Wayne. *Psychology: Themes and Variety*. 8th ed. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2010. Print.
- Weissman, Dick. *Blues - The Basics*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Wilentz, Gay. "Healing the Wounds of Time." *The Women's Review of Books*. 10.5. (Feb. 1993): 15-16. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Feb. 2012.
- Whiting, Bartlett Jere. *Early American proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*. 2nd ed. D.C.: Library of Congress, 1980. Web. 20 Feb. 2012.

Vita

Julia Leuthardt was born on October 28, 1982, in Altmarkkreis Salzwedel, Germany, and is a German citizen. She graduated from Friedrich-Ludwig-Jahn Gymnasium, Salzwedel, Germany, in 2002. She received her Bachelor of Arts in British and American Studies with a minor in German as Foreign Language from the University of Greifswald, Germany in 2007. She then came to Richmond, Virginia, United States to obtain an Associates Degree in Social Sciences for Teacher Preparation from J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, Richmond, Virginia, in 2009. Continuing her studies, she began to attend Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, from where she graduated with a Master of Arts in English Literature in 2012, while having worked for one semester as an intern for Blackbird, the Online Journal of Literature and the Arts, and one and a half years as a consultant for the VCU Writing Center.