

The FATHER in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

Katalin Bíróné-Nagy

All literature is identity politics. Some way or another literature is “latent infection” spreading identity viruses, which might sicken at times but always strengthen us. Works by writers of colonized nations—Native Americans alike—abound in identity issues, depicting the crisis of having been deprived of traditional means of identity formation, while being offered only assimilation as an alternative on a route paved with colonizer-conceptualized expectations and stereotypes. Naturally, “the central theme of post-World War II Indian writing in the United States [...] is identity” (Cheyfitz 8). The present paper focuses on a contemporary Native North American novel: Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995), examining its concern with one of the most profound sources of identity formation: the Father. Be a father present in or missing from one's life, active or inactive, natural or unnatural, loving or oppressive, he is a formative part of one's intellectual and emotional make-up. Sherman Alexie celebrates that but grieves it also, depending on what type of father his work is invoking, displaying mostly the cultural and historical sides of the issue.

Alexie is not an easy case: he defies categorization, is often called a controversial writer, mostly because it is difficult to tell whether he is a traditionalist or the very opposite. His playful and challenging postmodern-like narrative stance has often been compared to the trickster narrator Vizenor's, while, surprisingly, some critics misread him, stating that “the identity theme so common in Native American fiction ... is not actually present in Sherman Alexie's works” (Krupat and Eliot 167). Can it possibly be so with a writer believing

the whole idea of authenticity—“How Indian are you?”—is the most direct result of the fact that we don't know what an American Indian identity is. There is no measure anymore. There is no way of knowing, except perhaps through our pain. And so, we're lost. We are always wondering (Nygren 157).

For Alexie “Native literature is the literature of humiliation and shame” (Nygren 155)—attributes of identity crisis. Yet, no matter how sadly disturbed, chaotic, destructed and self-destructive the Alexie universe is, the moral obligation is always there never to give up searching until there is a flick of hope to secure some sense of identity.

The colonizer as father

The roots of pain and wondering Alexie talks about in the above quoted interview is in colonial oppression Native Americans have been suffering from for centuries. Alexie's fiction is saturated with the grand narrative of colonialism and no matter in what form colonial power reveals its presence, it functions as a Freudian tyrannical father, who steals the mother's and here the natural father's embrace (both: tradition, heritage) from the child. The father metaphor is, in fact, a historically relevant way of grasping Indian-White relations, since US political rhetoric has always applied the “ward” context to Indian affairs (addressing Indians as children) and has acted accordingly.

The oppressive and in this case also unnatural father appears in two forms in *Reservation Blues*: as the American government and as Christian religion. The former is seen as responsible for the economic and social disintegration of indigenous America, while the latter for its weakening moral and spiritual state. The novel suggests that disintegration originates from George Washington, one of the founding fathers of the American political system. He appears in a haunting vision, as the one allowing for the “official” victimization of Indians. Washington is the first to shoot at Indian horses, whose songs of mourning can be heard even today. The devastating reservation life Alexie presents is also a context set forth by the American government, as outlined by “The Reservation's Ten Commandments”:

You shall have no other forms of government before me. [...] Remember the first of each month by keeping it holy. The rest of the month you shall go hungry, but the first day of each month is a tribute to me, and you shall receive welfare checks and commodity food in exchange for

your continued dependence. [...] Honor your Indian father and Indian mother because I have stripped them of their land, language, and hearts, and they need your compassion, which is a commodity I do not supply. [...] (*Reservation* 154)

Assimilating urban life is not better, either, as one of the blues poems suggests:

I've been relocated and given a room
In a downtown hotel called The Tomb
And they gave me a job and cut my hair
I trip on rats when I climb the stairs
I get letters from my cousins from the rez
They wonder when they'll see me next
But I've got a job and a landlady
She calls me chief, she calls me crazy (*Reservation* 221)

Christianity, the other aspect of the unnatural and oppressive father imposed on the Indian targets the most precious native value: spiritually. Based on the history of religious contact, Christianity seems to have become synonymous with fear: "Fear is just another word for faith, for God" (*Reservation* 165). Likewise, Thomas believes, when contemplating the contemporary world, it "[s]eems there's more proof of the devil than proof of God" (*Reservation* 160). Even the reservation priest feels emotionally enchained by his religion, let alone by his Church as an institution. The hypocritical aspect is most evident in Victor's case—he was sexually abused by a seemingly loving, fatherly priest at boarding school.

There are more subtle and indirect ways of colonial oppression, through which both oppressive father concepts (government and religion) remain empowered: most importantly, the "misrepresentation of reality" that leads to "its reordering" (Loomba 57). There have been two modes of misrepresentation operating hand in hand in indigenous America: one is what Martin Calvin termed "historiographic colonialism" (33) and the other is stereotyping.

Historiographic colonialism implies writing cultural anthropology and the history of Indian-White relations exclusively from the dominant society's—from the oppressive father's point of view, excluding the Indian side. In Alexie's novel historiographic colonialism is not a thematic concern, yet it is underlying many of the contemporary grievances and without an awareness of it, there is no comprehension of

the characters' motivation. The songs of the dead horses, for example, represent horses and Indians massacred at Wounded Knee and beyond that a history of genocide. All these songs and with them all that sacrifice constantly echo in the lives of the novel's characters. However, it is not something to forget about but to cope with. In the last scene the storyteller protagonist leaves the tribe to find ways of bridging worlds on and off the reservation, ways of survival, but does not leave behind the shadows of these horses, carries them along.

The second means of "misrepresenting reality" (Loomba 57) is stereotyping. The source is again the oppressive, colonizing "father," his gaze, his prejudices, and his judgment. Yet, this means of misrepresentation is a more profound presence in the novel, since stereotyping is the primary level on which even historiographic colonialism manifests itself in everyday reality. Colonial stereotyping "*facilitates* colonial relations, and sets up a discursive form of racial and cultural opposition in terms of which colonial power is exercised" (Bhabha 78). Stereotypes as means of racial bias, "construct identity from the outside" (Vickers 3), and eventually penetrate into the private sphere of the colonized, becoming a determining factor in the individual's identity-formation processes. Its consequence for the Native world is identity crisis. The proper handling of what is called "the colonizer's gaze" implies either internalizing the alien stereotypical image imposed on the colonized self or rebelling against it, but, in either case, racial bias is to be made the colonized's own as a result of being forced to be defined in relation to it. The problem, however, is not only how much of him/herself the colonized self can retain in opposition to, or in alliance with, the colonizer, but who s/he is in relation to others in colonial subjugation, since a major component of colonial discourse has been the restructuring of Native "heterogeneous identities (for each tribe has developed its own tribal identity) into a more homogeneous identity [...], [to] replace historical Indian identities with an easily manipulated sameness" (Vickers 3).

When studying traditions of identity-formation, the historical as well as the psychological fate of the colonized self is determined to a great extent by the "othering" process of which stereotyping is a symptom. Two distinct ways of perceiving the Native have developed in the American colonial context: a positive and a negative one. The "positive" way formulated variations on the "noble savage," a metaphoric stereotyping that results from a "narcissistic object-choice," to use Homi Bhabha's terminology (77). In Dee Horne's analysis, "[c]olonizers see a metaphoric

image like themselves [i.e., one that resembles their best], but it is an image that they have constructed” (73). At the same time, this positive identification maintains the hierarchical relationship between colonizer and colonized (father and son) by adding the negative category “savage.”

The “negative” stereotypes, variations on the “ignoble savage” (Vickers 4), are metonymic ones, which “register the perceived lack” (Bhabha 75) of characteristics similar to those of the colonizer and intend to “negate individuality” (Horne 73) by homogenizing heterogeneity (Vickers 3), when incorporating individuals into “collective categories of otherness in which differences become the mark of sameness” (Horne 73).

Although the bulk of the novel takes place on the Spokane reservation, the presence of the dominant white society can strongly be felt, most profoundly through metaphoric and metonymic stereotypes that dominate the media—and Indians here do watch a lot of television. With high unemployment rate, poverty, economic frustration, little hope for a better life, a lot end up yearning for white riches, or at least are blinded by the show of it, while feeling inferior and outsiders to it. Even Thomas, the storyteller in the novel, who honestly tries to maintain traditional Indian values, is troubled by the fact that “[w]hite people owned everything: food, houses, clothes, children. Television constantly reminded Thomas of all he never owned” (*Reservation* 70). Moreover, the cultural identity crisis the Indian world is in—“nobody believed in anything on this reservation” (*Reservation* 28)—leads to the internalization of alien/false, stereotypical values and characteristics presented about Indians in Western movies. The metonymic stereotype is applied by one Indian against the other in the statement: “That’s a vending machine, you savage. It works on electricity” (*Reservation* 135). An example of how the “misrepresentation of reality”—here: considering the Indians savage beasts—becomes “its reordering” (Loomba 57), that is they start looking upon themselves and one another as inferior savages.

In *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* (1995) the Durans describe how peoples “assaulted in a genocidal fashion,” internalize after despair “what appears to be genuine power—the power of the oppressor. [...] merely a caricature of the power actually taken from Native American people” (29). One Indian calling the other savage is none other than exercising, idealizing this stolen, externalized, oppressive fatherly power. According to Jessica Benjamin, “every idealization defends against something: the idealization of the father masks the child’s fear of his power” (232). However, such an act of idealization—as the Durans

point it out—leads to self-hatred, which can be internalized (the symptoms are alcoholism and suicide) or externalized (manifesting itself in violence). Alexie's Spokane characters, especially the males, are often brutally violent and get into trouble all the time for drinking heavily. Oppressive white fathering is evidently devastation to the Indian world.

The Indian father

What can overpower such an unnatural and tyrannical father as dominant white America is for the Indians? Only a natural Indian father of the Native heritage: a father that, as a consequence of Indian-White relations, has been "banished" or is simply lost, forgotten. *Reservation Blues* is a quest story, then, a search after the natural father, after Indian fathering as opposed to White fathering. Here lies the answer to the question: why fathering and not mothering? It is in fact the father's position that has been intimidated the most when replaced by "white fathering." The mother has also been pushed to the background by newly imposed patriarchal thinking and attitudes; the role has suffered serious distortions. Yet, it is Indian fathering that needs to be restored first in order to contest devastation and its source (white fathering) and allow for the return of the mother.

The comeback of the most profoundly traditional Native fatherly presence in the novel is father as text (be it poetic or narrative): textualizing as "fathering," the very act of storytelling/reciting as begetting, maintaining life, ensuring cultural survival (as has always been the case in oral cultures). Nicely theoretical and stupidly vague as it may sound, Alexie does manage to sustain the sense of some fatherly presence (not his) prevalent less in what a text says but in its initial being, through the fact that it is there inviting reaction (self-creation) to it; not necessarily actively writing or reciting something to respond to but by simply being there, no matter in what silent or hidden way, thus initiating communication, activating the Indian in the characters. The concept is not God-like, which would require adherence to some divinity or to certain principles. It is not the narrator's presence either, but arises from some spiritual connection, a dialogic relationship between the prose body of the novel and the poems that introduce every chapter. The result functions as the novel's distinct cultural cohesion.

The texts that initiate intratextual/intertextual communication are the poems and the dream sections. The poems—lyrics to blues songs—poeticize the problems set forth in the prose chapters following them. These songs connect the contemporary topics to other time dimensions, mostly to the past, and show resemblance partly to traditional Native lyricism, partly to the blues. Traditional Indian lyrics “rhyme perceptions, moods, natural objects, the world as word (the poem as unifying association)” and weave “the story through poetic time” (Lincoln 95). Consequently, the issues raised in the novel get to be connected to a “land base” of feelings and ideas traditionally there (arriving from the past as eternal presence), with which one can bond, and start to heal. As usual in Alexie, the reader is to do the job: “[t]hrough the dialogic exchange of the synchronic and the diachronic messages that shape the written text, Alexie engages his readers in piecing together these stories. He moves his readers from the position of reading (or watching) to becoming part of ‘the happening’—the ongoing retelling of stories and consequent recreation of identity” (Carroll 82–3). “Narrative fathering” thus implies the offering of prose and poetic texts for temporal and topical harmonization along with what goes identity formation. The past and the present meet in an embrace for the sake of a future—textual dialogue moves in an Indian circle of time. And it is this temporal recontextualization that constitutes the ceremonial, healing aspect of the Native American storytelling mode the novel utilizes.

Temporal traffic is rendered by the blues genre also since it ensures survival (a future) through remembering the past in the present: the “blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, [...] and to transcend it [...] by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (Ellison 212). The blues allows for a balance between the tragic and the comic, however, in a Native American novel it gains additional significance. As Jennifer Gillian points it out when discussing Alexie’s poetry, through the blues can the author “explore the possibilities of crosscultural articulation” (109). The African American and the Indian share the pain of genocidal and discriminating marginalization in the history of the United States, while both feel to belong to more ancient and spiritually much richer cultures than the “white” one that has been imposed on them. Feeling ancient implies rootedness; an awareness of tradition, ancestry, generations of fathers and mothers talking through you. The novel is an example of how means of securing such richness can be learned from

another culture with the same experience of oppression, from African Americans in this case.

Blues temporality and Indian lyric and story time are not only similar but need to be harmonized. They symbolize strategies of coping, key to maintaining survival balance in an Indian-White reality. At times harmonizing fails, there is no blues-prose communication:

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

“Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast,” claims Emile Benveniste (40), thus when the Spokane Indians in the prose segment refuse to open up to and communicate with the blues songs with characteristics of ancient Indian lyricism, they fail to recognize the significance of contrast that reveals sameness. They let go of the possibility to develop awareness of identity through the Other; consequently, the traditional fatherly embrace by means of contextualizing is not recognized, has no opportunity to heal. At this point the Indian is “trapped in the now” (*The Lone Ranger* 22)—not to be confused with the Native sense of eternal present. The Indian idea of the wheel of time expresses movement with a sense of eternity. Although the wheel moves around a center, it is in motion, does not stand still, does not get stuck in one place. Heritage, traditions, identities must do the same, as Thomas, Alexie’s storyteller warns his fellows in another novel:

Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you. Maybe you don’t wear a watch, but your skeletons do, and they always know what time it is. Now, these skeletons are made of memories, dreams, and voices. And they can trap you in the in-between between touching and becoming. [...] What you have to do is keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons. They ain’t ever going to leave you, so you don’t have to worry about that. [...] Sometimes, though, your skeletons will talk to you, tell you to sit down and take a rest, breathe a little. Maybe they’ll make promises, [...] will dress up as beautiful Indian women and ask you to slow dance. [...] But, no matter what they do, keep walking, keep moving. And don’t wear a watch. Hell, Indians never need to wear a watch because your skeletons will always remind you about the time. See, it is always now. That’s what Indian time is. (*The Lone Ranger* 22)

Indian time and Indian identity are inseparable—if you do not understand one there is no access to the other and both are inseparable from heritage, the broadest sense of the natural father in the novel. Father as tradition, is not only textual presence or absence, but also the spiritual fathering through teaching how to “move with skeletons,” skeletons that are texts that come your way, texts you MUST respond to because they are all you—you by reflecting upon your thoughts, feelings, desires; or you by highlighting who you are not. The concept is none other than the Indian web of life: do not ignore any strand (text) around you, no matter where it seems to originate it leads to you, thus it is your responsibility to maintain a balanced relationship with it. In case locked up in a shell, the strands around are torn, the balance of the world is disturbed. Thus, the most profound sense of fathering in *Reservation Blues* does not originate from the author, or the narrator, or the storyteller within the story. It is rather the tradition of *offering*. An offering of texts, of strands, of the world with an invitation in them to please respond and build a web, be a web. *Those who were fortunate enough to experience such fathering stay constantly empowered by that offer.*

Blues-prose communication, the recognition of fatherly embrace does not always fail. It is achieved, for example in one of the blues poems, “Father and Farther.” Father and son share the kind of suffering and frustration the novel abounds in. Still, they are not in it together; as if a character from the novel stepped out into the realm of poetry knowing that only there can he find fathering, understanding and consolation:

Sometimes, father, you and I
Are like a three-legged horse
Who can't get across the finish line
No matter how hard he tries and tries and tries and tries

And sometimes, father, you and I
Are like a warrior
Who can only paint half of his face
While the other half cries and cries and cries”

chorus:
Now can I ask you, father
If you know how much farther we need to go?
And can I ask you, father
If you know how much farther we have to go? (*Resrvation* 93)

The question is not answered. The father has been through it all, he is a fellow-sufferer, not superior, oppressive, just silently there for the son with the same experience, with no comments, yet with cultural expectations he himself fails to live up to, e.g. to be a warrior. Still, both the father and the son feel these cultural attributes to be relevant. All might fail as warriors but the warrior status is not outdated, simply needs to be updated. The boy's question is a poetical one, he expects no answer. What matters is that he can turn to a father who represents a tradition, and as such offers textual embrace—not cold authority but a respected partner even in failure. Two alternatives of the father as partner merge here: the one that offers the text, the poem in this case, and the one that is in it, who shares the same experience with his son.

In the poetry section the offering of texts, strands to be connected into a web is the gesture of understanding pain and solitude—here the tragic tone dominates. In the prose section, however, tragedy and solitude are almost natural undercurrents nobody cares much about anymore. It is some desperate will to survive combined with self-irony that generates the special Alexie humor or rather sarcasm from which the prose section's tragicomic, at times solely comic, note develops. As Joseph L. Coulombe argues, Alexie “uses humor—or his characters use humor—to reveal injustice, protect self-esteem, heal wounds, and create bonds” (94). Humor, then is part of the textual strategies with which to grapple the task of undoing the colonial misrepresentation of reality and of rebuilding the web of identity (even if it is no longer purely indigenous). It is another kind of fatherly embrace, offering a different tool (besides knowing how to move with our skeletons) with which to approach the task of fitting strands into a web. *A father with a great sense of humor is a lot of fun and true medicine*. To stay with the previous example of “the warrior,” the status is handled differently in the prose than in the blues sections, with more sarcasm, less understanding: “Victor and Junior were fragile as eggs, despite their warrior disguises” (*Reservation* 16). Even worse when seen through the eyes of women:

When Indian women begin the search for an Indian man, they carry a huge list of qualifications. He has to have a job. He has to be kind, intelligent and funny. He has to dance and sing. He should know how to iron his own clothes. Braids would be nice. But as the screwed-up Indian men stagger through their lives, Indian women are forced to amend their list of qualifications. Eventually, Indian men need only to have their own teeth to get snagged. (*Reservation* 74–5)

As for father characters, all the protagonists in the prose section have intense feelings towards theirs, be it love, understanding, confusion, disgust, or hatred. The seemingly upright and strong Indian is David WalksAlong, the Spokane Tribal Council Chairman, who used to be a great basketball player and “looked almost like an old-time Indian warrior” (*Reservation* 37), but plays golf now, and has become a corrupt politician, paying for votes. He is a father figure, raised his nephew, White Hawk, an “alcohol baby,” who has grown into a monster: little brain capacity, a lot of muscle and arrogance. WalksAlong ends up faceless in the midst of all the roles he is playing, in a fake life he has built up, deserting his son when that gets into prison. He is a sad case of mimicry, internalizing the colonizer’s power that destroyed his people.

The other fathers are all victims of the colonial situation, deprived of traditional roles, fighting all the time but not sure whom or for what and where the battleground is; as a result mostly drunk. The father of the two women singers, Chess and Checkers is paid most attention. When his son is dying, he goes out to get some help, knowing, he will not find any and returns as a defeated warrior, eventually becoming an alcoholic.

The more abstract father attributes of the Indian world are seen in a different light. Nature, for example, is not addressed as mother but as father –“‘Father,’ he [Thomas] said to the crickets, who carried their own songs to worry about” (*Reservation* 101). When no one wants to listen to his stories, Thomas tells them to pine trees and is grateful for their attention. Nature for him is like the father in the “Father and Farther” blues poem, to whom you bond, with whom you spiritually communicate but who does not answer questions for you. *A father who knows how to listen without wanting to interfere in one’s life is a blessing.* In Alexie’s world Nature, poetry, and music share the same spiritual realm and have the attributes of a father. They even turn into each other to father life:

Music rose above the reservation, made its way into the clouds, and rained down. The reservation arched its back, opened its mouth, and drank deep because the music tasted so familiar. Thomas felt the movement, the shudder that passed through tree and stone, asphalt and aluminum. The music kept falling down, falling down. (*Reservation* 24)

Cultural tradition is a profound fathering principle, even if some Indians no longer adhere to it or believe in it. The protagonists form a band but cannot decide on the name. Finally, Thomas comes up with “Coyote Springs,” which is “too damn Indian” (*Reservation* 45) for the

others. Coyote, the trickster is angered by that, lightning falls on the reservation, a fire is started and Coyote steals Junior's water truck, hiding it in an abandoned dance hall. As a consequence, Junior loses his job, so they all agree to stick to the name "Coyote Springs." Big Mom represents a similar power in the novel. Like Coyote, she is semi-human, semi-divine. As a helpful mountain spirit she teaches musicians, heals the sick and comes down to the people when there is a fry bread contest. Her text or strand is that of the divine mother but like all the mother characters she is kept in the background. She trains Coyote Springs, gives the musicians singing lessons, cares a lot about them, but cannot be there for them, has to watch the band fall apart; they do not even come for consolation to her.

Ancestors also participate in the offering of texts that father our lives, lining up behind all our thoughts, feelings, and actions: "Thomas also heard something hidden behind the words. He heard Robert Johnson's grandmother singing backup. [...] Johnson's grandmother was not alone [...]. Other black men, women and children sang with her" (*Reservation* 174–5). In times of emotional and spiritual hunger the ancestral pile of textual offerings is what functions as a set of roots through which to take "food for life." *One receives ancestral stories—often from the father or the grandparents—as tokens of sharing, of belonging, of family embrace.* A grave problem with contemporary reservation life in the Alexie novel is that for many living there equals being an Indian and no one searches for or offers access to ancestral values and stories. Geographical space is endowed with spiritual power, but without the traditional knowledge of what language to address it in, connection fails, the reason why the songs in the rain are not heard.

In case an ancestor's words of wisdom are in fact noted, they become an important strand with which to connect to the world: "[m]y grandfather always told me you can take a boy off the reservation, but you can't take the reservation off the boy" (*Reservation* 227). The Indian sense of place is emphasized here, traditionally the most important aspect of Native American Weltanschauung—space as Nature, as culture, as father/mother. The sources of power are geographical locations imbued with spirituality, the most significant being the one where the specific tribe came to the earth. The others are normally prominent historical sites. As Eric Cheyfitz points it out, "Native storytelling, which reinforces kinship, is land based, tied to the local sites of communities that narrate their origins as autochthonous" (66). Characters in the novel travel a lot off the reservation, even to New York City, but feel alien and powerless.

When Thomas is worried about leaving at the end of the novel, Chess is surprised, saying the destination is only an hour away. Still, for Thomas “[a]nywhere off the reservation [...] is a long ways from the reservation” (*Reservation* 304). The reservation has magnetic power—it is people, culture, Nature:

Meanwhile, the reservation remained behind. It never exactly longed for any Indian who left, for all those whose bodies were dragged quickly and quietly into the twentieth century while their souls were left behind somewhere in the nineteenth. But the reservation was there, had always been there, and would still be there, waiting for Coyote Springs’s return from New York City. Every Indian, every leaf of grass, and every animal and insect waited collectively. (*Reservation* 220)

Nonetheless, after arriving home, the destruction of their lives continues in the lack of goals or any initiative. Drinking remains the only program. Alexie’s Indians seem to be left with isolation in the world outside the reservation, alienation inside it, and no hope for any perspective.

Yet another ancestral text, the mournful singing of the screaming horses, is the consequence of the clashing concepts of fathering. These horses slaughtered by white soldiers at Wounded Knee more than a hundred years ago symbolize the tragic history of Indian-White relations, a history of white fathering that involves the destruction of both people and Nature—a spiritual and textual heritage difficult to address, yet an essential strand with which to bond to contemporary reality. However, the horses still communicate owing to Indian fathering. As mentioned earlier, these horses symbolize victimization by an oppressive father (the American government), while they also stand for the warrior ancestors whose voices echo in their songs. Big Mom is the one most bothered by this music; she watches the constantly returning spirits of the horses fail as musicians, some of whom are not even Indians. The horses at this point represent whoever was victimized by American politics. Big Mom tries to help, she never succeeds: even 500 years after the colonization of the American continent,

[in] 1992, Big Mom still watched for the return of those horses and listened to their songs. With each successive generation, the horses arrived in different forms and with different songs, called themselves Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gay, and so many other names. Those horses rose from everywhere and turned to Big Mom for rescue, but they all fell back into the earth again. (*Reservation* 10)

Into this standing water arrives Robert Johnson, an African American blues guitarist and meets Thomas Builds-the-Fire, “the misfit storyteller of the Spokane Tribe” (*Reservation* 5). Both display extraordinary cases of artistic obsession. Robert Johnson is an African–American blues musician, who, like a modern Faust, has given his soul away to a so-called Gentleman in return to a magical guitar that makes him the best guitar player in the world. The problem is that his talent leaves him when he plays for money. Losing everything as a consequence, then not being able to get rid of the guitar (if it is broken it mends itself; if it is lost, it finds its way back to him), Johnson arrives on the reservation as a sick man, searching for a woman he has seen in his dreams, who turns out to be Big Mom. Johnson withdraws to Big Mom’s to heal, and the magic guitar is left with Thomas: a gift from one race to the other, an offering of the blues of the African American world to the Indians.

First the guitar plays itself and talks to Thomas, initiating a dialogue through the channel of music between Indians and their past (both history and spiritual heritage): “‘The blues always makes us remember,’ the guitar said. [...] Y’all need to play songs for your people. They need you. Y’all need the music” (*Reservation* 22–3). Yet another offer: music. The blues poems outside the narrative enter the plot as music initiating communication, starting to weave a protective web around the Indians. Eventually, the band, Coyote Springs is formed, Thomas writes the lyrics, is also the lead singer and Victor plays the guitar. Music is like a blanket that keeps them warm against the chills of reservation reality. *Such a blanket is a soul-securing offering*. Everything goes well until they perform in front of an Indian audience on or off the reservation. However, when they are after the white musicians’ carrier and after making money from entertaining white people, the guitar fails them and the band is sacked. Music is power; it constantly recreates the world (*Reservation* 10) and when the boys forget to respect that by misusing it, music leaves them. It is power offered as a means of strengthening identity, not destroying it. When the boys try to please whites to be a success, they hope to be recognized in the white world. As Louis Owens argues, “In order to be recognized, and thus have a voice that is heard by those in control of power, the Native American must step into the mask and be the Indian constructed by white America” (176). It is indeed checked if the band looks and sounds Indian enough. So does the destruction of already unstable Indian identities begin: the members of Coyote Springs are

expected to perform double and contradictory mimicry: to mimic the white musicians' attitude, through that to show assimilating intentions; but at the same time they are to mimic white stereotypes of the Indian, thus to maintain difference—and both alien identities are expected to be authenticated. The result is collapse into voicelessness, frustration, storming violence the guitar wants no part of, can be no protection against. Music as offering and embrace fails when distorted into a medium of mimicry.

Fortunately, there are stories instead. Thomas believes he “caught some disease in the womb that forced him to tell stories” (*Reservation* 6), which “crept into dreams” and “hung in your clothes and hair like smoke, and no amount of laundry soap or shampoo washed them out” (*Reservation* 15). No beating, no attempt at trying to sweet-talk him into silence is ever successful—he keeps talking and talking. Thomas appears to be the last “traditional” Indian, in the contemporary context a real misfit. But his traditionalism, his interest in the past, is like blues remembrance for survival in the future. The Wounded Knee massacre for him is not an event that has passed and is none of their concern: “We were slaughtered at Wounded Knee. I know there were whole different tribes there, no Spokanes, or Flatheads, but we were still somehow there. There was a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow” (*Reservation* 167).

Thomas is the key to spiritual survival. He is the one who maintains the tribal heritage; not by telling old stories but by making up ones that adhere to tradition, yet speak to the present moment, this way keeping the heritage flexible, alive: “Thomas looked into himself. He knew his stories came from beyond his body and mind, beyond his tiny soul” (*Reservation* 167). He can reach to the source of stories because he is a visionary, for which he is both ridiculed and envied. The others find his serene countenance and his closed eyes before stepping on the story path ridiculous. Nevertheless, when Junior commits suicide and Victor questions his buddy's dead spirit about the reasons, its answer is that “when I closed my eyes like Thomas, I didn't see a damn thing. Nothing. Zilch. No stories, no songs. Nothing” (*Reservation* 290). Since having dreams and visions is an essential attribute to the formation of Native American identity, receiving no vision is the sign of identity crisis.

Thomas, the seer, although constantly teased or ignored, emerges as a father figure for the other characters. His narratives are offerings, strands with which to connect to a web, create a web. These stories are warriors, fight for the Indians, take care of them, teach and comfort them.

As a visionary, Thomas is the one within the prose section of the book who bridges the realms of prose (in which he is a character and parts of which he tells) and poetry (the blues lyrics he writes); he embraces the time spheres of past, present, and future; Nature and culture; the spiritual and the material worlds. As such a *synthesizer*, he is the personification of the traditional Indian father presence the novel maintains; he is live heritage, offering his fellow Indians texts to relate to, texts that address the Indian in them. Thomas intends to heal, “wanted the songs, the stories, to save everybody” (*Reservation* 101). Although scared in New York, having no stories for the new context, he is the one who decides to leave the reservation with his girlfriend and her sister (also Indians but from another tribe) at the end of the novel. The Reservation as space imbued with spirituality makes an offering to them: gives shadows and a dream:

They all held their breath as they drove over the reservation border. Nothing happened. [...] No voices spoke, although the wind moved through the pine trees. It was dark. There were shadows. Those shadows took shape, became horses running alongside the van. [...] Those horses were following, leading Indians toward the city. [...] In a dream, Chess, Checkers and Thomas sat at the drum with Big Mom during the powwow. All the Spokane Indians pounded the drum and sang. Big Mom taught them a new song, the shadow horses’ song, the slaughtered horses’ song, the screaming horses’ song, a song of mourning that would become a song of celebration: we have survived, we have survived. [...] She’d play a note, [...] [o]ne for each of the dead horses [...], one note for each of the dead Indians.

In the blue van, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers sang together. They were alive; they’d keep living. [...] Thomas drove the car through the dark. He drove. Checkers and Chess reached out of their windows and held tightly to the manes of those shadow horses running alongside the blue van. (*Reservation* 305–6)

At this point is Thomas ready to leave the reservation: when he enters fully into the spirit of his Indian identity: he communicates with the spirituality of space (the reservation shadows), with history (learning the songs of the screaming horses massacred at Wounded Knee) and heritage (drumming the Indian rhythm of life in a tribal circle). Now can he be lead off the reservation by the pain of his ancestors to build a bridge between the reservation and the world outside and thus ensure survival for his people. When the Indian synthesizer and warrior father revives, the

mother returns with him as demonstrated by Big Mom's active participation in the last scene.

Reservation Blues is an outcry against disempowerment, against the tragedy of no comprehension of but a desperate urge for an Indian identity. Only a vague sense of belonging lingers on, accompanied by constant insecurity; still, Alexie's characters hang on to it against all odds. Perhaps that stubborn, unconscious drive to belong keeps the roots of the Indian in these characters alive. The heritage is difficult to make out and many are literally or psychologically orphaned on both sides—no one to acquire tribal knowledge from. Parents have fallen victim to the consequences of colonialism and the novel seems to suggest that it is the father who has to be restored first as a traditional, at the same time new type of warrior to counter the oppressive "white father" before the mother can come back into view. *This father is a warrior, empowering through the act of offering: offering himself as heritage, as a series of texts (stories/poems), as silence, as humor, as music, as lessons in how to move with one's skeleton and as Nature—offering the embrace of a synthesizer storyteller.*

Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.
- . *Reservation Blues*. New York: Warner Books, 1995.
- Benjamin, Jessica. "The Oedipal Riddle." *Identity: A reader*. Ed. Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman. London: SAGE, 2000. 231–47.
- Benveniste, Emile. "Subjectivity in Language." *Identity: A Reader*. Ed. Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman. London: SAGE, 2000. 39–43.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Carrrol, Kathleen L. "Ceremonial Tradition as Form and Theme in Sherman Alexie's 'The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven': A Performance-Based Approach to Native American Literature." *The Journal of Midwest Modern Language Association* 38 (2005): 74–84.
- Cheyfitz, Eric. "The (Post)Colonial Construction of Indian Country: U.S. American Literatures and Federal Indian Law." *The Columbia*

- Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States Since 1945*. Ed. Eric Cheyfitz. New York: Columbia UP, 2006. 1–126.
- Coulombe, Joseph L. “The Approximate Size of His Favorite Humor: Sherman Alexie’s Comic connections and Disconnections in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fishfight in Heaven*.” *American Indian Quarterly* 26 (2002): 94–115.
- Duran, Eduardo, and Bonnie Duran. *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*. Albany: U of New York P, 1995.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Shadows and Act*. New York: Vintage, 1972.
- Gillan, Jennifer. “Reservation Home Movies: Sherman Alexie’s Poetry.” *American Literature*. 68 (1996): 91–110.
- Horne, Dee. *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature*. New York: Lang, 1999.
- Krupat, Arnold, and Michael A. Elliott. “American Indian Fiction and Anticolonial Resistance.” *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States Since 1945*. Ed. Eric Cheyfitz. New York: Columbia UP, 2006. 127–82.
- Lincoln, Kenneth. “Native American Literatures: ‘old like hills, like stars’.” *Three American Literatures: Essays in Chicano, Native American and Asian American Literature for Teachers of American Literature*. Ed. Houston Baker, Jr. New York: MLA, 1982. 80–167.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Martin, Calvin. “The Metaphysics of Writing Indian-White History.” *The American Indian and the Problem of History*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987. 27–34.
- Nyrgen, Ase. “A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie.” *MELUS* 30 (2005): 149–69.
- Owens, Louis. “As if an Indian Were Really an Indian: Uramericans, Euramericans, and Postcolonial Theory.” *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 15, 170–83.
- Vickers, Scott B. *Native American Identities: From Stereotype to Archetype in Art and Literature*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1998.