Sherman Alexie's Postindian Reconstruction of the Spokane Indian Reservation in *Reservation Blues*

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Inspired by the immediate success of Sherman Alexie's 1995 *Reservation Blues* Gloria Bird claims: [the novel] "contributes to an exaggerated version of reservation life [and] perpetuates many of the stereotypes of native people and presents problems for native and non-native readers alike" (1). Bird criticizes the images of reservation life as presented by Alexie's novel and implies that such presentation results in a detrimental reception of contemporary Native America. Bird's claim is further supported by David Treuer who, in his *Native American Fiction* states: "hate [for Indian people] flourishes for the same reasons […] that love survives" (112). Treuer challenges the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of contemporary Native American literature and calls into question the fictional quality attributed to Indigenous peoples represented in this very literature. In his view stereotyping is a dangerous rout regardless it is employed to express pro- or anti-Indian sentiments. He proclaims that "We readers are trained to interpret [literature] the same way we are encouraged to 'read' the exhibit of Native American art at the Weisman Museum: with our hearts, not with our heads. It also proves that the words and images, the literary work in Native American literature, takes a backseat to issues of identity and perceived 'authenticity'" (Treuer 163). That is, by the application of "the terrible twins" (Treuer 5) – the notions of identity and authenticity – the reader is misled by the belief that they read Native American culture, and fail to recognize the fictional elements of contemporary Native American literature. The present paper attempts to reconcile the tension between the perpetuation of stereotypes and the employment of identity and authenticity by utilizing Gerald Vizenor's "postindian" concept to denote

how a new tribal presence is created in stories (12). Postindian warriors generate the "sensation of a new tribal presence in the very ruins of the representations of invented Indians" (Vizenor 3). Through an analysis of *Reservation Blues* I wish to prove that Alexie consciously employs stereotyping to reconstruct an Indian identity both fictional and real, strongly rooted in 20th century postethnic America. The common attributes of reservation life will be interpreted to provide an explanation to how stereotypes de- and reconstruct images of contemporary reservation existence.

Federal Indian trust lands have always played a crucial role in white-Indigenous relations. As their primary creation demonstrated Western ethnocentrism and they were products of competition and power differences reservations have come to provide a clearly defined geographical locale for ethnic stratification. Concomitantly, reservations have become a hotbed of extreme stereotyping. To complement volumes of anthropological and sociological analyses of Indian peoples' adaptation to urban environments, I explore a postindian novel to testify to the changes of reservation Indian identity. *Reservation Blues* is a "novel of education" (Treuer 164). However, […] the person being educated is not the main character. It is the reader who is being taught. As a "cultural manual" "the education offered by *Reservation Blues* is a curriculum designed for the outsider" (Treuer 164–65, 169). Yet, this curriculum both constructs and deconstructs itself.

Through its literary presentation of the most commonly misunderstood characteristics of reservation life *Reservation Blues* contests the forces shaping Indian identity from the outside, depicting them instead as having come to be internalized and turned to the Spokane community's own advantage and applied within their interpretation, thus reconstructing the "ancient" phenomenon of Indian country in a postethnic society. While postethnic and postindian may sound synonymous and imply moving beyond a certain "cultural separatism," (Hollinger 6) I argue that the novel both criticizes and asserts the legacy of the Native perspective by its introduction of other ethnic cultures in the reservation context.

Daniel Grassian claims that "[b]y placing traditional African American music and contemporary music in the contemporary context of the reservation and then having individuals from the reservation move into mainstream America, *Reservation Blues* straddles the lines between ethnicities, cultures, time frames, [and] religions" (78-79). Grassian's

reference to the novel's magic realistic character of Robert Johnson and Seattle's grunge music scene fails to acknowledge Alexie's strong belief in the legacy of a spatially separate Indigenous sphere of existence where other cultures are judged, welcomed or rejected according to Spokane standards. Alexie does not offer an explicit definition of the reservation, rather, following Treuer's interpretation reservation "means Indian and Indian means reservation in a dizzying tautological duet, the division between what is Indian and what is not Indian are absolutely clear" (181). In Alexie's interpretation the matter is less complicated. "If I write it, it's an Indian novel. If I wrote about Martians, it would be an Indian novel. If I wrote about the Amish, it would be an Indian novel. That's who I am" (qtd. in Grassian 7). Thus, the Spokane practice to decide on the incorporation or exclusion of certain cultural properties is justified.

In the larger context of Indian country the "active Indian presence" (Lurie 52) and Indians' interaction as Indians (Szathmári 225) should manifest ideally on the Spokane Indian Reservation. However, as the title of the novel already suggests, it is not an isolated place where outside influences may only arrive by the right of force. Stereotypically devastating reservation conditions resonate through the choice of traditional African American music. [Alexie] "invites the reader to learn whenever the narrative stops and the characters discourse, but by attaching the adjectival 'reservation' to the objects in these lessons, he simultaneously holds the reader outside the reservation" (Treuer 182). It is through this contrast [of rejection and education] that meaning is generated (Treuer 182). His story can be specific and—by mobilizing a similar but slightly different set of ideas about Indians (the alcohol, the government handouts, the traditions, the very fact of difference itself)—universal at the same time (Treuer 182).

The plot suggests a reenactment of the traditional warrior initiation rite: Coyote Springs, the mostly Spokane rock band, ventures out into the world to make money as rock stars. It apparently contradicts Robert Parker's claim that "Indians do nothing, or nothing counts as anything, and whites cannot stop doing," (29) by which Parker considers the inactive, procrastinating young male characters a typical feature of Indian literature. The band's choice of name already alludes to an epiphany in their lives. While Springs may be a natural phenomenon borrowed from the widely held "Mother Nature" concept, the leap taken by Coyote often associated with Trickster offers the interpretation of an active role of the young Spokanes to shape their own future.

Although Coyote Springs introduces a new kind of heroism misunderstood by both the Spokane and the white world, their interpretation of activity stands its ground. The band is a new generation of warriors, the product of historical confinement to a federally determined geographical location. Resonant of the old tradition, the three young Spokane men reconstruct themselves as postindian warriors and venture out to count coup and go on a raid for existence and experience, seeking prey in cowboy bars, Seattle and New York. Throughout their trip, their interaction is Indian, thus carrying Indian country within themselves. But, while Indian country lacks exact geographical definition (Szathmári 221), their Spokane reservation is defined by very vivid constraints. Its borders, originally separating cultures, serve as bastions of cultural protection. This protection is carried to the extent that the Spokane do not believe a band composed of a "crazy storyteller, a couple of irresponsible drunks, a pair of Flathead Indians, and two white women" (Alexie 176) would create an acceptable image of the tribe. Confinement is internalized by the tribe for the sake of retaining tribal identity spatially defined by reservation boundaries. While residents of the Spokane trust land the band members, except for the two white women, had been an integral part of the community. Trust is rather an ironic term in this case—and, in fact, all throughout U.S. history. In *Reservation Blues* trust is lost upon leaving trust land for the outside world. Unlike heroic old time warriors, the crazy storyteller, the suicidal college dropout, and the bullying drunk are met with antagonism upon return. "But we still live here," Thomas, the storyteller argues. "But you left. Once is enough" replies an elder (Alexie 180).

Dominant cultures tend to compartmentalize the colonized world. *Reservation Blues* reverses this process, and the ethnocentric perspective is shifted to the reservation terrain. The above mentioned education process "follows the same pattern: a white person does something stupid, which is racialized as 'white behavior,' and the Indian characters react, sometimes in thought, sometimes in dialogue, and other times, though rarely, in action" (Treuer 167). This way the reservation, formerly in Fanon's terms "a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute" (37) becomes safe haven. It secures "reciprocal exclusivity" (Fanon 37) imposed by Indian practice and not by an exclusive white society.

Yet, this fact does not automatically generate the idolization of Spokane surroundings. While the reservation Spokane consider themselves culturally superior to any other entity they remain tolerant and

receptive to outside influences provided they come to their geographically defined place. As long they enter reservation terrain, Elvis, Jesus, Jung and Freud are all respected Indians, or more specifically, Spokane. Their achievements are a testimony to the validity of reservation existence. Elvis returns to learn the art of music from Big Mom. Jesus feeds the crowd with a single can of salmon. Jung and Freud prove their Spokane heritage by their appreciation of the importance of dreams (Alexie 18), which mainstream culture often fails to acknowledge. Eating, music and dreams are not culture specific, but they are more culturally loaded in the Spokane world view. In *Reservation Blues* they are presented as export goods from the Spokane.

The reservation also possesses the healing capacities of home. Part of the sacred pool of words, dreams, songs, myths, and visions, it should be the setting for healing Robert Johnson, the ghostly guitar player, who arrives to nullify the deal he made with the Gentleman. Yet, his guitar speaks more for him by "abducting" Thomas, Victor and Junior into the musical terrain. The compulsory oral component of Indian literature (Parker 80–101) is replaced by blues, the mutually intelligible communication channel. In addition, lead singer Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who also fulfills Spokane storyteller functions, fails to make any sense of words:

> Thomas repeated stories constantly. All the other Indians on the reservation heard those stories so often that the words crept into dreams. An Indian telling his friends about a dream he had was halfway through the telling before he realized it was actually one of Thomas's stealth stories. Even the white people on the reservation grew tired of Thomas's stories, but they were more polite when they ran away. (Alexie 15)

With the irritated Spokane reaction to Thomas's stories Alexie moves beyond the traditional/oral culture. While due to the effective operation of the moccasin telegraph everyone knows about Robert Johnson's arrival within five minutes, nobody except Thomas is willing or able to communicate with the black man. And, the Spokane "rock star" takes his heritage onto a non-Indian stage, even if it sounds like the Sex Pistols. The tired tradition of the Spokane "gospel" is refreshed by Robert Johnson's blues, while the off-reservation world benefits from the storytelling tradition.

The same reciprocal effect is applied in the treatment of reservation institutions, and formerly controlling federal presence is incorporated into

reservation life. In Alexie's decolonized reservation it is not the "Indian characters […] who seem ridiculous […] rather the world we find them in, the situation, and the description of Indian action, is ridiculed" (Treuer 174). Government agencies and organizations related to Western culture acquire an Indian meaning, function and relevance. So far oppressive establishments become integral parts of reservation topography. They are manifestations of adaptation, and prove the regained strength of the Spokane. "Essential" government agencies, such as Indian Health Service, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Bureau of Indian Affairs earn their legacy in everyday Spokane life. The trading post, often a symbol of defeat, poverty and white oppression is elevated into a fictional council house. The literal descendant of Wounded Knee I and II, hosts most community affairs and offers room for tribal discussions and conflict resolution. The building itself, as well as the ceremonial objects of this modern Indian world, carry the same sacred power that the traditional sanctuary and regalia had: "Its shelves were stocked with reservation staples: Diet Pepsi, Spam, Wonder bread, and a cornucopia of various carbohydrates, none of them complex. One of the corners of the Trading Post was devoted to the gambling machines that had become mandatory on every reservation" (Alexie 12). The trading post assumes the religious and communal functions of a council house by relying on traditional community discipline. When Coyote Springs does not comply with the tribal norms of behavior, it is ostracized and "excommunicated" from the store. The often criticized consumer culture of mainstream society enters the reservation and the evils of commodity are reshaped in forces essential to secure community integrity.

Other federal agencies, such as HUD and the Indian Health Service are treated with a tone of sarcasm. Yet, it is their dysfunctional character and not their existence that makes them a target of criticism. The Department of Housing and Urban Development laid the foundations of its houses on "all the dreams that were murdered here" (Alexie 7). The dreams of the past still haunt modern constructions since "[they] were buried quickly just inches below the surface" (Alexie 7). Although tramping on old Spokane dreams, they also provide shelter and prove an apt place to host the society of modern warriors. The tradition of hospitality finds its way up from the buried past, but the ceremonial pipe sharing has to be replaced by commodity grape juice.

Officially Indian Health Service is responsible for the physical and mental well-being of Indian people, and it does attempt to fulfill its obligation to its best. Yet, its ignorant operation turns it into a motivation for vision quest. Since "Indian Health only gave out dental floss and condoms, and Thomas spent his whole life trying to figure out the connection between the two" (Alexie 6), Thomas becomes a spiritual traveler who, amidst the changing circumstances of his life, tries to interpret and live up to the vision he received at an early age. His mental health is secured by the contemplation on IHS practices, and the band members' physical condition is also taken care of after a drunken brawl.

The Spokane make the best of the Trading Post, IHS and HUD, and incorporate all into the neo traditionalism of the reservation's spiritual life. This spiritualism, however, bears the same significance as the traditional one. The three government agencies become sacred entities in place of other, more viable potentials. The first buildings the reader encounters upon setting foot on Spokane territory are "the Assembly of God Church, the Catholic Church and Cemetery and the Presbyterian Church and Cemetery" (Alexie 3). Yet, "nobody believed in anything on this reservation" (Alexie 28). The ethic the churches project is most fulfilled by their Sunday social gatherings. The irony of the massive Christian presence is highlighted by a remark on the spiritual state of the young men of the reservation: "all they know about religion is what they saw in Dances with Wolves" (Alexie 145).

This would imply a serious criticism of the loss of tradition. But, while Christian church premises dominate the view on the level of everyday existence, an eternal presence oversees the entire reservation from her abode on the top of Wellpinit Mountain. Seated above the Spokane both spiritually and topographically Big Mom, the mostly invisible clan mother, forms a bridge among various cultures. A natural master of songs, she teaches Elvis, Robert Johnson, and Janis Joplin, artists of various colors and cultures, the power of music. Her presence is acknowledged, respected, even feared by the spiritually barren reservation. Her immortal nature secures not only a Spokane, but also a universal future.

The golden middle between Big Mom' spirituality and the literally down-to-earth churches is the community itself. Some of the sacred functions are "colonized" by the Spokane reservation. Samuel Builds-the-Fire, Lester FallsApart, Michael White Hawk, and Luke Warm Water demonstrate the pattern of combining traditional with modern Indian

existence in the process of naming. These names reflect the extent of cultural modification of the sacred rite of naming in the Spokane world. Characters tend to have a Christian first name, some of Biblical origin, and an Indian last name. In the postethnic perspective such naming suggests that blood and genealogy do determine the possible affiliations of an individual. While the tribal character is preserved through ancestry and is inherited through generations, the new culture is embodied in the common address of the individual. A culturally loaded example is the character of Lester FallsApart, the "most accomplished drunk" on the reservation. By turning the stereotype of the drunken Indian into an honorable position both mainstream and Native culture shift their foci. From the non-Indian perspective Lester FallsApart is the typical reservation drunkard, never getting anything right, a permanent target of jokes. His well-deserved last name is a reinforcement of the Indian stock character. As a traditional trickster figure he also lives up to his Indian name: the clumsy and lovable "reservation magician, reservation clown" (Alexie 34). Yet, undermining his qualities attached to his ancestral heritage and white image, Lester holds the community together. Personally he may be falling apart, but tribally he is a cohesive force. By stumbling in on tribal council meetings, he is the one who casts the decisive vote to keep the community together and show more tolerance to the outside world.

Losing the right to naming, instead of the spiritual and moral comfort churches are intended to provide, the three church buildings are reshaped into a battlefield. The most sacred purpose of all three congregations is to prepare for the Spokane Indian Christian Basketball Tournament, and winning souls for redemption is dwarfed by the possible points scored on the court. (Alexie's poem "Defending Walt Whitman", published the same year as *Reservation Blues* replaces Walt Whitman's "What is the grass" in "Song of Myself" by "what is the score"). The sanctity of basketball resonates throughout the plot, and the entire tribe views it with respect. Replacing old time physical conflict with the sport event is the Spokane way of interpreting contesting spheres.

Treuer says: Native American literature […] does not constitute culture. "It constitutes desire with seemingly culturally derived forms. It is literature that creates the fantasy of the Native American—not the other way around. As if the illusion has created the illusionist" (199-200). By the employment of widely known stereotypes *Reservation Blues* de- and reconstructs a fictional setting for the reservation Indian identity to be

formulated in. By relocating ethnocentric cultural concepts cherished by both the Spokane and the off-reservation world, a new Indian is created. In his later fiction Alexie removes his characters from the reservation setting, and their return always signifies a momentum of quest, such as in *The Toughest Indian in the World* or *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Yet, the intercultural bridges of *Reservation Blues* assert the legacy of a postethnic-postindian reservation.

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