

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - The Paradox Of Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues



In 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 there by accident.

*Reservation Blues*, p.3.

Sherman Alexie's (1995) (Spokane/Coeur d 'Alene) *Reservation Blues* (RB), the saga of the rise and fall of an American Indian blues band named Coyote Springs, opens as a "black stranger" with a "guitar slung over his back" stands at a "crossroads," waving "at every Indian that [drives] by" until Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the "misfit storyteller of the Spokane Tribe" (pp. 3, 5),**[i]** stops. Characters, scene, and their conversation intimate the novel's trajectory:

"Are you lost?"

"Been lost a while, I suppose."

"You know where you're at?"

"At the crossroad," the black man said (pp. 3-4).

The visitor is bluesman Robert Johnson, not dead in 1938 as advertised, but alive and seeking an "[o]ld woman [who] lives on a hill." He needs her help because he "sold [his] soul to the Gentleman so [he] could play . . . [his] damn guitar better than anybody" (pp. 5, 8). The historical Johnson**[ii]** was the paradigmatic blues artist: a "trickster, hoodoo man, . . . the devil's son-in-law, too lazy and too proud to work for a living" (Pearson, 1984, p. 122). Johnson leaves his guitar behind because it rules "its possessor like a drug" (Pasquaretta, 2003, p. 286), ascending the Spokane reservation's Wellpinit Mountain to find respite with Big Mom, a pan-Indian figure who's been around for centuries and who's not only "a part of every tribe" (p. 199) but also "the teacher of . . . [the] great musicians who shaped the twentieth century"- Elvis, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Diana Ross, Paul McCartney (p. 201). Johnson's guitar, which fixes itself *and* talks to people, continues to wreck havoc as it impacts the fate of Coyote Springs. Populated by more or less normal beings as well as supra-natural figures, *RB* literally is a blues-

based work that embodies an argument grounded in paradox that warrants Alexie's contention that a "shared history of pain and oppression between African-Americans and the First Nations. . . gives Natives the right to perform the blues, and the knowledge to perform it well" (Cain, 2006, p. 2).

The survivor of both surgery to correct hydrocephalus and alcoholism - his father's and his own, Sherman Alexie received a mostly mainstream education because his mother saw such a route as the road to success and survival (Grassian, 2005). After shifting from medicine to a career in writing, he became a prominent literary figure in the 1990s with the publication of a book of short stories titled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto: Fist Fight in Heaven* (1993) which subsequently served as the basis for his collaboration with Chris Eyre (1998), on the film *Smoke Signals*, the first feature film created/controlled exclusively by American Indians to do well at U.S. box offices. Writer of poetry, fiction, and films, [iii] his performances and written works challenge mainstream literary and popular discourse. From Captivity narratives to the novels of James Fennimore Cooper, from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show to Nickelodeon shorts, from films of D. W. Griffith to John Ford's *The Searchers* to *Little Big Man* to *Dances With Wolves*, imaging of Indians justified Eurocentric expansion across the western United States. Slotkin (1973) tellingly argues that the structuring metaphor of America's frontier legacy is/was "regeneration through violence" (p. 5). This orientation also situates a homogenized Indian in a distant past, portraying peoples vanishing through the "inevitable demise of Native cultures in the face of Euro-American progress" (Luethold, 2001, p. 57). The inability to distinguish among indigenous Nations while relegating them to the past creates a pernicious marginalization. That today's Indians have internalized such images hardly is surprising. The producer of a television documentary, for example, describes actresses mimicking Disney's version of Pocahontas whose male counterparts sport long hair with a vest or ribbon shirt, thus pandering to mainstream expectations (Aleiss, 2005). Equally telling is Alexie's description of childhood play: "I rooted for the cowboys just like everyone else. . . . Only the unpopular kids played Indians" (aqi Newton, 2001, p. 422).

In contrast, American Indian discourses, especially fiction, embody five general characteristics that capture commonalities attendant on the materiality and diversity of indigenous peoples. First, an emphasis on everyday dialogue as well as on ceremony and myth reflects a spirituality based in an oral tradition. Second,

place, literal or imagined, grounds the life worlds depicted. Simon Ortiz (Acoma) (Ortiz, Manley, & Rea, 1989), for example, describes “land” as not only “a material reality” but a “philosophical . . . idea or concept” central to “identity” (p. 365). Third, American Indian writings foreground the exigency of survival as manifest in preoccupation with “daily hurting and healing” (Roemer, 1991, p. 586), a concern rooted in a history of genocide and suppression. Fourth, such discourse constitutes a “resistance literature” that enacts “liberation” through “cultural resistance” constituted in the articulation of “Indian values, concepts, . . . [and] intonations” (Ortiz, Manley, & Rea, 1989, p. 365). Finally, characters tend to be multiethnic, thereby mirroring current Indian populations.

Alexie’s works find an uneasy home within this literature. Although he deconstructs “myths . . . [such as] steward of the earth, stoical warrior, shaman, [and] savage” (Alexi & Jaggi, 2008, par. 2), he also dissociates his fiction and poetry from more mythic/epic writings, telling Frasier (Alexie & Frasier, 2000/2001) that “[y]ou throw in a couple of birds and four directions and corn pollen and it’s Native American literature, when it has nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of Indians” (p. 63). Additionally, he avoids depicting traditional rites because he believes writing about “spiritual practices” is “dangerous” because “it’s going to be . . . used in ways . . . you never intended” (Alexie & Purdy, 1997, p. 15-16). Rather, he foregrounds the challenges faced by today’s rural *and* urban Indians.**[iv]** His life worlds are those of the Spokane Reservation, of the streets of Seattle and Spokane. They embody the angst involved in negotiating Indian survival as well as identity. Thus, they contrast with iconic works like Silko’s (1977) (Laguna) *Ceremony*, Momaday’s (1968) (Kiowa/Cherokee) *House Made of Dawn*, and Erdrich’s (1984, 1993) (Chippewa) *Love Medicine*, which stress the strength and resilience of Indian cultures.

This difference plays out in diverse reactions to *RB* and to his work generally. Egan (1998) interviewed Spokane who talked of it “hurt[ing]” and “wounding” a lot of people, of wishing Alexie would write “something positive” about reservation life. Various Indian academics concur: Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee) (1998), says that Alexie too often simply “reinforces . . . stereotypes” (p. 79); Bird (Spokane) (1995) takes issue with his adapting cinematic forms that distort Indian discourse and culture; and Cook-Lynn (Lakota) (1998) laments his use of the “deficit model of Indian . . . life” (p. 126). Hence, they object to his supposedly replacing the vanishing evil/noble savage with stereotypes of sad figures who are

“social and cultural anomalies” (Bird, 1995, p. 49).

In contrast, Silko (Laguna) (1995) lauds *RB* for satirizing the illusion of success “in a greed-driven world” (p. 856); Patel (1997) contends Alexie’s project addresses ways Indians can “transform” their cultures “into emergent [ones] capable of challenging . . . the mainstream” (p. 3); Evans (2001) labels him a “moral satirist” for his “[b]old depictions of . . . contemporary reservation life” (pp. 48, 46); and Coulombe (2002) argues his humor “reveal[s] injustice, protect[s] self-esteem, heal[s] wounds, and create[s] bonds” (p. 94). My reading of Alexie’s work, and especially of *RB*, squares with the latter position. I argue that *RB* uses the blues’ paradoxical nature as expressed through its form, history, and ideology to warrant social commentary that speaks to the reality of oppression as it simultaneously affirms the value of individuals who face such conditions. The purpose of this essay, then, is to shed light on the way the novel creates a paradoxical ordering as it appropriates dialectical tensions characteristic of the blues to “reveal injustice, protect self-esteem, heal wounds, and create bonds.” In the pages that follow I . . .

### *1. Paradoxical Pairs in Reservation Blues*

Since emergence of the blues between 1880 and 1900, historians have debated its socio-political functioning. The product of specific artists, the genre is personal and individualistic, especially as compared with more communal forms like Gospel and spirituals. Scholars such as Oliver (1997) and Ramsey (1960) view it as an accommodation to segregation under Jim Crow, reflective of people too consumed with daily life to engage in protest. Various Black scholars, however, see it as evidencing a resistance misinterpreted because of its expression through “subtleties of black music” drawn from “traditional oral culture of African Americans” and/or forms of protest differing from those of white activists. Later thinkers argue that the blues “*both* preserved and innovated, *both* acquiesced and resisted” (Lawson, 2007, pp. 56, 58). This stance sees such tendencies as dialectically related, thereby reifying lived experiences *and* functioning as an “antidote to . . . racism and class segregation” (Gussow, 2006, p. 37). This paradox is emblematic of other juxtapositions associated with the blues, relationships between past and present, sacred and secular, and despair and hope. In the following pages, I detail the way these dialectical pairs play out in the argument Alexie crafts through his appropriation of the blues and conclude by addressing how the resulting paradox functions argumentatively.

### *1.a. Past and Present*

Alexie's affirmation of American Indians' right to perform the blues rests on a shared legacy of suppression. Paralleling black slavery and segregation is an indigenous narrative marked by war, disease, and U.S. policies aimed at relocating and/or transforming Indians through assimilation. Disease and military campaigns killed hundreds of thousands. Legislation in the 1880s uprooted whole nations and later appropriated their lands, eliminated tribes as legal bodies, and mandated individual rather than communal control of property. Although policies under FDR in the 1930s mitigated this trend, similar measures returned after World War II when the U.S. Congress revived relocation – this time to cities, and initiated the termination of some reservations, an aggressive policy aimed at detribalization. Subsequent measures more supportive of political and cultural sovereignty have not erased the impact of better than a century of repressive policies (Rasmussen, 2010).

Additionally, early colonists enslaved native peoples alongside Africans, a practice that continued until the late 1600s. Although fears of slavery and treaties requiring the return of runaway slaves impacted tribes, “acceptance and sharing” “often characterized” the “associations of blacks and Indians” (Pasquaretta, 2003, p. 282): they intermarried, shared languages and cultural practices, and slaves sometimes found refuge in Indian country. Musical icons like Jimi Hendrix, Duke Ellington, and Tina Turner are mixed race individuals whose art reflects their heritage. Toni Morrison's novels not only address this lineage, but employ motifs grounded in the blues (Pasquaretta, 2003). Alexie portrays the blues as starting with Africans and then being “transferred to Aborigines, whose performance adds to the . . . canon” (Cain, 2006, p. 2). For both Morrison and Alexie, “the blues . . . function[s] as signs that call attention to the . . . alliances of Africans and Indians as well as to the silences and omissions that have . . . resulted from a shared history of dispossession, slavery, and oppression” (Pasquaretta, 2003, p. 279).

Originated by blacks in American South in the late 1800s, the blues express the “experiences, pleasures, and pains of working people from rural sharecropping and segregation to urban . . . migration to Civil Rights” (Garabedian, 2000, p. 98). It draws on oral forms from the past – field hollers, *griot* music, folksongs, spirituals, and gospel. Its roots thus reside in communal expressions that integrate “traditional African . . . practices” with elements “appropriated from . . .

white culture,” an integration that was “essential to . . . survival . . . during slavery” (Barrow, 1989, p. xi). As blacks migrated to cities, rural blues became the urban blues of major metropolitan areas. Lomax (1993) describes this transformation as an “aesthetic conquest” through the “creative deployment of African style in the American setting” (p. xiv). Alexie posits a similar layering of past and present in *RB*.

The novel recounts events from U.S./Indian Wars, drawing them forward to argue that the genocide of the past manifests itself in contemporary cultural appropriation and commodification by mainstream forces. Such events involved campaigns against tribes in the Northwest by Generals Sheridan and Wright. The novel’s first chapter presents Big Mom’s experience of them:

One hundred and thirty-four years before Robert Johnson walked onto the Spokane Reservation, the Indian horses screamed. . . [Big Mom] had taught all of her horses to sing, . . . but . . . [this] song sounded so . . . tortured that Big Mom could never have imagined it before the white men came (p. 9).

She runs to a clearing to witness troops finishing the slaughter of hundreds of horses:

One soldier . . . walked over to [the] last remaining colt . . . [that] shivered as the officer put his pistol between its eyes and pulled the trigger. The colt fell to the grass, . . . to the *sidewalk outside a reservation tavern*, to the *cold, hard coroner’s table* in a Veterans Hospital (p. 10, emphasis added).

Alexie thus grounds present conditions in the past.

Parallel oppression plays out as Coyote Springs struggles for success. Thomas experiments with Johnson’s guitar only to have it broken by bullies Victor and Junior. But the guitar fixes itself and talks Thomas into asking the belligerent pair to help him start a band. With Thomas on bass, Junior on drums, and Victor now the property of the guitar, the band gains enough popularity to get a gig on the Flathead Reservation in nearby Montana where they acquire two other members, Chess and Checkers Warm Water. After the group wins a competition in Seattle, they return only to face opposition from their own people. Their fortune apparently shifts when “Phil Sheridan and George Wright from Cavalry Records in New York” offer them a “recording contract.” Sheridan and Wright pitch the band to Mr. Armstrong (Custer’s[v] middle name): Chess and Checkers will have an “exotic, animal” appeal; Junior is “ethnically handsome”; Victor has a “grunge/punk” image; Thomas contrasts with “Buddy Holly glasses and crooked

teeth" (pp. 189-190).

Coyote Springs self-destructs during their New York audition. Playing "Urban Indian Blues," they start well enough, "drop[ing] into a familiar rhythm" with Thomas on bass, Chess and Checkers on keyboards, Junior on drums. But they need lead-guitarist Victor "to define them." His talent, however, is courtesy of the guitar. "At first, the music flowed . . . like a stream of fire through his fingers. . . . But then . . . the guitar bucked in his hands, twisted away from his body." Stunned they regroup, but "Victor's guitar [keeps] writhing . . . until it . . . [falls] to the floor" (pp. 225-226). Disgusted, Armstrong leaves and the band returns to the reservation as failures.

Cavalry Records, however, doesn't give up on Indians. Wright and Sheridan had checked out a "[c]ouple of white chicks," blonde groupies who followed Coyote Springs named Betty and Veronica.**[vi]** Sheridan argues that since their "grandmothers or something . . . were Indian, . . . [Cavalry Records] can use . . . [them because they] have the Indian experience down." With time in the "tanning booth" and "a little plastic surgery" the company will have a safe, manageable product. Betty and Veronica want to play their own music but when told that they cooperate or they "don't play at all" they suddenly "hear the drums." Near novel's end, Thomas gets a package with a tape of a song that features "a vaguely Indian drum, then a cedar flute, and a warrior's trill, all the standard Indian soundtrack stuff" backing inane lyrics that talk about being "Indian in my bones" (pp. 193, 269, 273-274, 295-296).

Such events speak to victimization, commodification, and appropriation of Indians and their culture. Seeing Coyote Springs as "merely artifacts" (Delicka, 1999, p. 79), Armstrong, Sheridan, and Wright cast them aside when they no longer appear to be moneymakers. New Agers Betty and Veronica can take on Indianness without incurring its burdens. Betty says she envies Chess and Thomas because they "live at peace with the earth," to which Thomas responds, "you ain't really Indian unless, at some point in your life, you didn't want to be" (p. 97). Such appropriation is far from benign. As Chess explains, wannabes and "fractional" Indians can "*come out to the reservation . . . and remind . . . [us] how much we don't have. . . . [They] get all the Indian jobs . . . because they look white*"**[vii]** (pp. 169, 283).

RB, then, argues that contemporary commodification and appropriation are

extensions of the past. Interestingly, however, Alexie introduces ambiguity in his treatment of both success and white hegemony. Thomas and Chess are uneasy about seeking stardom: when their van refuses “to go more than forty miles per hour” while they travel to Seattle, Chess wonders whether it is “the only smart one”; similarly, Thomas says he’s afraid because, although the band could make them “rock stars,” it also could “kill” them; and in a dream he wonders whether they “*should have something better in mind*,” worrying that if they don’t “*something bad*” will happen (pp. 133, 211, 72). The novel thus critiques rampant materialism. In addition, whereas “Sheridan continues to enact old patterns of genocidal racism,” the reincarnated Wright evolves into a “penitent seeking to make amends” (Richardson, 1997, p. 46). When Sheridan gets Armstrong to take on Betty and Veronica, Wright walks out and takes a cab to a “cemetery in Sacramento, California.” There he looks at his grave dated July 30, 1965. He lies down to be comforted by his long-dead wife as he weeps, remembering “all those horses who had screamed in the field so long ago” (p. 271).

### *1.b. The Sacred and the Secular*

The relationship between music like spirituals and Gospel and the blues is paradoxical, for they possess sameness in their difference. Religious folk saw trickster-like bluesmen (and women) as disciples of the devil whose music therefore was blasphemous (Barrow, 1989). Yet blues and sacred genres share commonalities. Gospel, while proffering a Christian message, embraces a musical style grounded in African and slave discursive forms; similarly, the blues, while embracing Western individualism lyrically, simultaneously reifies a “distinctive Afro-American [communal] musical style” (Levine, 1977, p. 223). In addition, sacred and blues events serve parallel functions: both are supplications, one to God, the other to humans. Each involves sharing of personal experience, a speaking to God and community, respectively (Levine, 1997).

Levine’s (1977) telling description of a Louis Armstrong performance captures the blues’ sacred import:

Armstrong[’s] . . . trumpet solo [rose] clear and solid above the ensemble. It seemed like a terrible weight was on him and he was lifting it higher and higher. . . . A girl had her eyes half closed. . . . The song came out of her throat in a boom from deep within her bosom. . . . [H]er voice, and other vibrating voices, were . . . part of the inflecting band that gave Armstrong the base to improvise. . . . Nobody was alone. Each spine passed on its . . . feeling to another (p. 236).

Thus, blues performers “articulate deeply-felt private sentiments,” thereby promoting catharsis and “feelings of solidarity” (Firz & Gross, 2007, p. 429). Hostility toward the blues tended to be stronger than objections to other kinds of nonsacred music because it advanced a “gospel of secularization” (Barrow, 1989, p. 5) through ritualistic expression that “successfully blended the sacred and the secular” (Levine, 1977, p. 237), hence invading the church’s domain.

*RB*’s first chapter links music and stories with healing. Given that “nobody [believes] in anything on [the] reservation anymore,” Thomas shares “his stories with pine trees because people [don’t] listen.” To combat willful forgetting and denial, he repeats his stories so much that “that the words [creep] into [peoples’] dreams.” Thomas is dedicated to stories and songs because they can “save everybody.” Similarly, Chess’s default setting when facing a dilemma is to “[s]ing songs and tell stories” because that’s all anyone “can do” (pp. 28, 15, 101, 212).

The Spokane are no more open to Coyote Springs’s music than they are to Thomas’s stories. After a few rehearsals, “a dozen . . . showed up and started to dance. . . The crowds kept growing and converted the [session] into a semi-religious ceremony . . . [which made church people] very nervous,” so much so that some “Indian Christians” started to “protest the band.” One woman tells Checkers that “rock and roll music is sinful,” that “Christians don’t like . . . [the] devil’s music, . . . [and] traditionals don’t like . . . white men’s music” (pp. 33, 179). Like many in the black community, Indian religionists object to the “devil’s music” while non-Christian traditionalists are angry at a group they see as selling out to the dominant culture.

*RB* critiques certain manifestations of religiosity. For example, Thomas recounts dreaming about going “to the church one day and [finding] everybody burning records and books. . . . *These are the devil’s tools! . . . Thomas! . . . Come forward and help us rid this reservation of the devil’s work!*” In like manner, priest Father Arnold dreams of missionaries showing him how to make sure his congregation listens. “He preached for hours without effect” until the missionaries “walked in with black boxes in their arms.” “Whenever an Indian’s mind wandered [they] . . . threatened to open the black boxes.” Their secret is that they “*told the Indians the boxes contained smallpox.*” When Father Arnold protests, “[w]e should teach through love,” they respond, “*Don’t be such a child. Religion is about fear. Fear is just another word . . . for God*” (pp. 146, 164-165).

The novel's antidote for lost spirituality and for misuse of religion rests with Father Arnold and Big Mom who both promote love, healing, and cooperation. The priest tries to deflect his parishioners' antipathy toward Coyote Springs, telling them that "rock music" probably is "somewhere down near the bottom" of God's "list of things to worry about." He responds positively when "the oldest Spokane . . . Catholic, [presents] him with a dreamcatcher . . . decorated with rosary beads." Alexie links Big Mom to several Biblical figures: like Moses she descends a mountain; like Christ she walks on water, feeds the masses - with fry bread, not fish, and heals others. But she's not divine. She's "just a music teacher" (pp.34, 250, 209) who provides a "ritual site where music and healing" merge (Pasquaretta, 2003, p. 286). Big Mom plays a new flute song each morning to remind her people that "music created and recreated the world daily" (p. 10).

Shortly after Coyote Springs's return from New York, Junior commits suicide because, as his ghost tells Victor, he "wanted to be dead" because "life's hard" and because he "didn't want to be drunk no more." Big Mom persuades Father Arnold to help her comfort the band, telling him that they'll "make a great team" since he can "cover all the Christian stuff" and she can handle "traditional Indian" rites. They preside at Junior's funeral, an event attended by the remaining members of Coyote Springs, reservation drunk Lester Falls Apart, and three dogs named "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" who howl until Big Mom "whisper[s] to them" (pp. 290, 280-281). The novel thus enacts a complex concept of divinity (Jorgensen, 1997) as it portrays "two distinct worldviews" interacting and informing one another. Alexie tellingly places the Catholic Church at a crossroads, thereby foregrounding its potential for "interchange as well as interference and obstruction" (Ford, 2002, p. 204).

### 1.c. *Despair and Hope*

A "music of the downtrodden and disenfranchised," the blues articulates the "experience of loss and hardship" (Keegan, 1999, p. 121) as it reflects and comments on economic, political, and social oppression (Barrow, 1989). Its simple, repetitive lyrics often address "injustice, despair, loss, absence, [and] denial" (Baker, 1984, p. 7): Charlie Patton's "High Water Everywhere" describes a flood's devastation; Robert Johnson sings "Me and the Devil Blues" and "Hell Hound on My Trail" (Davis, F., 1995); Billie Holiday's theme song "Strange Fruit" presents images of lynching; and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's repertoire includes songs about bad luck, moonshine, and misery (Davis, A. Y., 1998).

Blues sounds form a counterpoint of energy which contrasts with its lyrics and heightens its impact: guitar, harmonica, fiddle, bass, harp, and singers produce melodies that "express rising emotions with falling pitch" punctuated by blues notes and the use of "guttural tones" or "falsetto" (Barrow, 1989, pp. 3-4); cross and poly rhythms often counter melodies, thereby adding complexity and tension; percussive elements - drums, molasses jug, washboard, train bells and whistles, make "onomatopoeic references." Hence, even as blues performances "speak of paralyzing absence, [they] . . . suggest . . . unlimited and unending possibility" (Baker, 1984, pp. 7-8). Such tension intimates that pain can be the ground for transformative healing.

*RB* reflects the despair attendant on the lives of many contemporary American Indians who experience high rates of malnutrition, alcoholism, infant mortality, unemployment, and premature death (Krupat, 1996). The novel focuses in particular on the ravages of alcoholism, featuring its impact on Junior, Thomas, and the Warm Water sisters. Junior dreams of his siblings' running off to "other reservations," to "crack houses" where they lie "down in the debris," to "tall buildings" from which "they [jump]." Coyote Springs returns to Thomas's house to find his father Samuel passed out on the lawn. Thomas tells them that Samuel once was a talented basketball player, the reservation hero; but without basketball he had nothing, so he drank, deteriorated, and lost jobs. As the band members keep watch over the result-an "overweight Indian" with "dirt under his fingernails" and "darkness around his eyes," they hold a "wake for a live man." Chess and Checkers lost their younger brother to poverty, their parents to resulting alcoholic despair. Chess tells Thomas that Luke Warm Water walked out into a raging storm seeking help for his dying child even though "[t]here weren't no white . . . or Indian doctors" and the "traditional medicine women all died years before." When he returned to find his son dead he "started to scream, a highly-pitched wail that sounded less than human." He and wife Linda turned to drink and rage until she "walked into the woods like an old dog and found a hiding place to die" (pp. 111, 98, 64-65, 69).

Heavy on despair, *RB* still proffers hope. At novel's end Junior commits suicide and Victor tries to quit drinking but relapses when a tribal leader refuses to give him a job and a chance. The novel, however, lays the ground for a more promising alternative as it posits parallels between Robert Johnson and Thomas. Early in *RB* when Thomas asks Johnson why he needs to find someone to fix him, the latter

explains that he made a bad deal after which he “[c]aught a sickness” he’s been unable to shake. Thomas identifies, for he 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 (p. 6).

The two men’s burdens – music and stories, are different yet share the potential for creation and healing.

The close of *RB* comes full circle, back to Robert Johnson and Thomas at a crossroads. As Thomas, Chess, and Checkers prepare to leave the reservation Big Mom persuades them to go with her to a “feast at the Longhouse” because, knowing they’re hungry, she thinks they “should eat before” they depart. The three encounter Johnson dressed in a “traditional Indian ribbon shirt, made of highly traditional silk and polyester.” He tells them he’s decided to stay because he thinks he “jus’ might belong,” that “the Tribe’s been waitin’ for [him] a long time,” that they might need his music. Earlier the Spokane had resisted the blues because such songs “created memories” that they “refused to claim.” Although the “blues lit up a new road,” they “pulled out their old maps” because they wanted to forget “generations of anger and pain” (pp. 299, 303, 174). Johnson has found a measure of peace for himself. Perhaps he will be able to help his adopted tribe hear so they can heal.

When Big Mom takes up a collection to help Chess, Checkers, and Thomas start their new life in Spokane, people give “a few hundred dollars” “out of spite, . . . guilt, . . . and . . . kindness.” So the three set forth buttressed by support – albeit qualified, from those they leave behind. As they depart, the horses appear, this time as “shadow” horses “running . . . close to the van,” leading them “toward the city, while other Indians were traditional dancing . . . after the feast, while drunk Indians stood outside the Trading post. . . . Big Mom . . . sang a protection song, so . . . no one would forget who they” were. The novel’s last two paragraphs merge dream and the present. In the dream, Thomas and the sisters attend a powwow with Big Mom, learning from her “a song of mourning that would become a song of celebration” declaring “we have survived, we have survived.” Big Mom “plays her flute, one note for each of the screaming horses,” for “each of the dead Indians.” In the present the three sing together “with the shadow horses” because they’re “alive” and will “keep living.” Chess and Checkers reach “out of their windows” and hold “tightly to the manes of [the] . . . horses running

alongside the . . . van" (pp. 304, 306). The ghosts of the horses that have screamed "like an open tribal wound" throughout the novel become spirits that lead them into an uncertain but hopeful future (Cox, 1997, p. 62).

## 2. *Paradox as Ordering Principle in Reservation Blues*

An "apparent contradiction," paradox goes "beyond opinion and beliefs . . . by challenging accepted ways of thinking and knowing" (Moore, 1988, pp. 19, 18). Chesebro (1984) argues that it manage tension between contradictory concepts in a way that "mediates" their interrelationships without "eliminating the tension of [their] opposition" so as to create "a kind of 'order' among phenomena typically felt to be at odds with one another." This ordering is a means of rendering the complexity of uncertain/complicated situations comprehensible through "paradoxical vocabularies" such as that of the blues which can give order to chaos (p. 165). The way paradoxical pairs central to the blues play out in *RB* functions argumentatively to define the roots of oppression (past-present), advance a potential antidote (sacred-secular), and posit an uncertain resolution/future (despair-hope), thereby making sense of a complex, uncertain life world.

Alexie's conflating of military oppression with contemporary makes past and present by *almost* (but not quite) *parallel*. He foregrounds cultural appropriation and commodification through Coyote Springs's being cast aside by Cavalry Records in favor of pseudo-Indians that reinforce Eurocentric images of Indianness. Coyote Springs's popularity grew because they shifted from doing covers[viii] to creating their own "tribal" music which appealed to both Indians and whites, to an "audience . . . [of] brown and white hands that begged for more music, hope, and joy" (pp. 79-80). Cavalry Records wants neither real Indians nor their authentic music. Hence, Alexie's paralleling of past and present enacts a cautionary tale, a warning intuited by both Thomas and Chess, about the pitfalls involved in efforts to "carve out spheres of agency and authority" (Garabedian, 2006, p. 98), thereby affirming the dominant culture's materialism. In addition, the novel stops short of imaging a monolithic, unilaterally repressive hegemony in its presentation of Wright's penitence and refusal to continue to participate in repression of American Indians. Viewed in this way, it implies that both Indian and white can avoid making a deal with the Devil, so to speak. Thus, it retains the tension between past and present in a narrative of flux and change implying that they *may* but not necessarily *will* parallel each other.

The novel possibility of redress rests in two moves which *blur* boundaries typically

dividing sacred and secular. First, it follows the blues in embodying a spirituality that breaks down divisions between everyday and sacred because it implies that the sacred permeates all existence rather than inhabiting a realm of its own. Big Mom is both mythic figure and (sort-of) ordinary person – she’s a music teacher who has extraordinary skills, wisdom, insight, and longevity, but neither foretells the future nor controls others. Second, its spirituality has room for multiple ways of healing body and soul. Father Arnold is open to the power of dreamcatchers; he and Big Mom cooperate as they perform funeral rites; both see music as a way to bridge the gap between people and God. Their actions effect cooperation between a Eurocentric religiosity that posits a linear *telos* moving toward salvation and an American Indian spirituality grounded in a cyclical ontology aimed at maintaining harmony (Allen, 1986). Thus the novel’s blurring of spiritual boundaries advances a “complex concept of divinity” which in turn intimates the possibility that differing cultures can complement each other (Jorgensen, 1997, p. 23). This blurring of boundaries redefines paradoxical tension between sacred and secular through a reconfiguration that contrasts spiritual/spirituality with the profane or blasphemous through its critique of divisive religious practices.

The relationship between despair and hope in *RB* initially appears to affirm the conventional structuring of paradoxical opposites since the novel’s resolution enacts a both/and dialectic that places them in perpetual tension with each other. Junior and Victor play out narratives of despair marked by escape through suicide, whether directly or on the installment plan via alcoholism. Johnson, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers look toward a hopeful future likely fraught with pitfalls and roadblocks as they embrace the healing power of music and stories within the confines of community. These competitive options, however, also are complementary. Blues artists were “oracles of their generation” who contrasted “the promise of freedom with the reality of . . . harsh living conditions” (Barlow, 1989, p. 6), thereby expressing “both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it” (Ellison, 1953, p. 94). Similarly, *RB*’s juxtaposition of despair and hope makes the former not only the precursor to its own continuance but also the grounds for a survival arising out of the strength necessary to meet life’s challenges. The music and stories to which characters (and readers/audience) can choose to attend may resurrect painful histories but such confrontation also is necessary for healing to begin. The novel’s closing paragraphs emphasize this paradoxical tension. Afraid of the unknown they’ve chosen, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers hold “their breath as they [drive] over the reservation border. Nothing

[happens]. No locks [click] shut behind them" (p. 305). Instead, they meet the shadow horses as they collectively sing their affirmation of being alive, of survival. Thus, Alexie's appropriation of the paradox that is the blues makes it "Indian . . . in the truest and most authentic sense" because such appropriation renders the lifeworld he presents "meaningful in . . . terms" (Ortiz, 1981, p. 8) that speak respectfully to the lives of everyday American Indians.

Jace Weaver (1997) captures the potential import of American Indian literary efforts when he observes that because such work "prepares the ground for recovery," such authors "write that the People might live" (53). Alexie's *Reservation Blues* sheds light on how paradox can help make sense of postmodern conditions marked by fragmentation and ambiguity. The parallel relationship between past the present *reaffirms* their tension because it stops short of conflating the two by joining similarity and difference-similarity since the genocide of the past plays out in cultural death through contemporary appropriation and commodification but difference given that the narrative's *telos* intimates the possibility of rapprochement and survival. It redefines the dialectic between sacred and secular through a *transformation* that minimizes otherizing as it contrasts Native and Eurocentric spiritualities collectively with profane and/or blasphemous practices born of rigidity and intolerance. And it reconfigures the dialectic between hope and despair by depicting pain as prerequisite to healing, thereby *transcending* the dialectic so as to make despair the source of strength and therefore hope. These ways of managing the tension characteristic of paradox—reaffirmation, transformation, and transcendence, point to diverse ways in which it can make sense of uncertain times through expressing the conventionally inexpressible in ways that make the enigmatic explicable.

## NOTES

**[i]** References to the novel appear inserted parenthetically into the text of this essay.

**[ii]** Robert Johnson died at age 27, allegedly poisoned by a jealous husband. Perhaps greatest among blues artists, he recorded only twenty nine songs before he died (Lawson 2007).

**[iii]** To date he has authored twelve poetry collections, four novels, two screenplays, and four books of short stories

**[iv]** Because he sees the label Native American as indicative of white guilt, Alexis

prefers Indian or American Indian.

**[v]** George Armstrong Custer was the cavalry commander whose troops were defeated by the Lakota at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876. Although the darling of the American public during the Indian wars, he symbolizes white cruelty and greed in works like the film *Little Big Man* and the surprisingly long-running television series *Dr. Quin, Medicine Woman*.

**[vi]** Betty and Veronica, characters in the Archie comics, epitomize the girl-next-door and the WASP princess, respectively.

**[vii]** The novel uses italics when narrating dreams or dream states.

**[viii]** Playing “covers” refers to performing the music of others rather than one’s own.

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