

Falling Down, Falling Apart, and Finding Home in *Reservation Blues*

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Abstract

This essay explores journeys toward and away from ‘home’ in Sherman Alexie’s 1995 novel *Reservation Blues*. The textual analysis is grounded in Janet Zandy’s (1993) literal and figurative conceptions of home. Situating Alexie’s magical realism within the matrix of poverty-class, race, ethnic, and postcolonial lenses, this essay reveals a range of tragic and hopeful responses to Indigenous colonization on the Spokane Reservation.

Keywords

American Indian, Spokane Reservation, fiction, working class, poverty class, historical trauma

Introduction

In Sherman Alexie’s 1995 novel *Reservation Blues*, set in the town of Wellpinit, Washington, in the early 1990s, a group of five American Indians, led by Thomas Builds-the-Fire, embark on a musical journey encouraged by Black Blues Legend Robert Johnson.¹ Appearing mysteriously at a reservation crossroads with his guitar, Johnson, ‘a small man with very dark skin and huge hands,’ is searching for Big Mom, the spiritual matriarch housed in the hills above Wellpinit (Alexie 1995, p. 3). Johnson, who has a striking resemblance to the Mississippi Blues guitarist of the same name, ‘made a bad deal years ago’ and needs help curing his ‘sickness’ (Alexie 1995, p. 6). Readers soon learn that Johnson is not the only character who needs help: Coyote Springs band members Thomas, Junior Polatkin, Victor Joseph, and Chess and Checkers Warm Water also need to heal. Seeking redemption, Johnson, as character motif, prompts others to confront emotional trauma that shapes their lives. Employing magical realism, dreams, and hauntings that collapse past and present, Alexie positions characters at the crossroads of economic, emotional, and spiritual (dis)comfort.²

¹ We follow Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart et al. in their use of the phrases *Indigenous Peoples*, *Indigenous Peoples of the Americas*, and *American Indian and Alaska Native* when describing Indigenous people. See Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart et al., 2011, ‘Historical trauma among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Concepts, research, and clinical considerations’, *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, vol. 43, no. 4, p. 288.

² Sherman Alexie grew up poor on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Born in 1966 of mixed ancestry, his mother (Spokane) was a quiltmaker and trading post clerk; his father (Coeur d’Alene) was

When studying American Indian and Alaska Native texts, critics have productively utilized race, ethnicity, and post-colonial lenses to analyze these works. We use an additional lens: class.³ To understand *Reservation Blues* in working and poverty-class contexts, we examine characters' movement toward or away from 'home.' Tracking movements along 'home' and 'unhomed' axes allows us to excavate choices, decisions, and consequences on the blues-laden Spokane Reservation. Finding home, in characters such as Thomas, Chess, and Checkers, generates, mutability, possibility, and hope; not finding home and instead 'falling down' or 'falling apart,' in characters such as Junior and Victor, leads to despair, stasis, and sometimes death.

Exploring the concept of home in *Reservation Blues* enables us to witness responses to historical trauma and the 'soul wound' that reverberates in the lives of working and poverty-class American Indians. As defined by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart et al., historical trauma is 'cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the life span, which emanates from massive group trauma' (2011, p. 283). Rooted in centuries of discrimination, racism, oppression, and violence, historical trauma can lead to unresolved grief and loss (Brave Heart et al. 2011, p. 285). This soul wound that develops from historical trauma manifests in Junior and Victor, who display '[r]age, hatred, self-defeating behavior, despair, loneliness, degradation, betrayal, and humiliation' (Lundquist 2004, p. 244).⁴ Despite the devastating force of historical trauma, through reconciliation, healing, and cultural hybridity, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers obstruct the effects of soul wound: their final departure from the Spokane Reservation signals regenerative transformation.

Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance suggests that American Indians have the potential for agency to avert what he characterizes as 'absence, deracination, and oblivion' should they enact an 'active sense of presence' (Vizenor 2008, p. 1). Disrupting erasure of individual and collective history is also reflected in Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy's assertion that working-class literature can have use-value as 'protest, mourning, celebration, affirmation, testimony, call to action, and transformation' (Coles and Zandy 2007, p. xxiv). The use-value of *Reservation Blues*, its cultural work, functions on several levels, including mourning, testimony, and transformation. Jan Johnson provides an additional conceptual lens when she asserts that Alexie's stories are 'narratives of trauma seeking witnesses to his characters' – and by extension, Native peoples' – grief and pain' which disrupts widespread historical amnesia (Johnson 2010, p. 227). As such, through Alexie's signature trickster lens comprising humor, popular culture, historical referents, and contemporary reality, *Reservation Blues* is a textual 'cultural commons' that reminds us of our collective past

randomly employed in blue-collar jobs. He left the reservation to attend high school and college. In 1992, Alexie published *The Business of Fancy Dancing: Stories and Poems*, which launched his writing career that continues today. A prolific writer, Alexie has produced works in various genres, including the novel, poetry, short story, film, and memoir. His many awards include the PEN/Faulkner Award, the National Book Award, and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas.

³ For class-focused, insightful analysis of American Indian literature, see Michele Fazio's 'Homeless in Seattle: Class violence in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*' (Tokarczyk 2011, pp. 141-158) and Tim Libretti's 2001 'The other proletarians: Native American literature and class struggle', *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 164-189.

⁴ See Jan Johnson's 2010 'Healing the soul wound in *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*' for information about historical trauma and soul wound in Alexie's fiction (Berglund and Roush, pp. 224-240). Also, Sherman Alexie has called the concept of soul wound 'blood memory.' See p. 157 of Åse Nygren's 2005 'A world of story-smoke: a conversation with Sherman Alexie', *MELUS*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 149-169.

while naming agents of oppression and envisioning alternative futures (Coles and Zandy 2007, p. xxiv).

As a people initially viewed as savage, and with contemporary views mired in damaging (mis)perceptions, American Indians in *Reservation Blues* struggle to feel comfortable in their (brown) skin.⁵ Physical discomfort is depicted in shoddy Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing, rancid commodity food, and broken-down vehicles (Alexie 1995, p. 7, 14, 19). Rooted squarely in the material conditions of the reservation, Thomas's first original song, composed amid the rhythm of his growling stomach, is aptly titled 'Reservation Blues' (Alexie 1995, p. 47). Due to the dearth of jobs and the general precariousness of employment on reservations, characters experience more absence than presence of work. For some, such as Junior, driver of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) water truck, there is a palpable sense of commitment and energy: 'I've got work to do . . . I need to finish. It's my job' (Alexie 1995, p. 20). For others, life exudes desultory stasis in a colonized space where '[a] job was hard to come by . . . even harder to keep' (Alexie 1995, p. 13).

Though it is tempting to consider the characters in *Reservation Blues* working class, it is more fitting to define their situation as poverty class.⁶ Vivyan Adair describes people in the poverty class as those who are marked by 'severe material deprivation, increased vulnerability to violence, and public scorn' (Tokarczyk 2008, p. 148). These terms characterize physical and psychological conditions on the Spokane Reservation. An example of this is when Thomas reveals how his mother divorced his father 'Indian style' after a party at their house. His father got drunk, kicked everyone out, put the furniture on the front lawn and burned it, and threatened to burn down the house with the family in it (Alexie 1995, p. 118). At the party, 'People got drunk. People fought. People got pregnant in the back rooms. A couple went to jail. One got his stomach pumped. Two died in a car wreck on the way home' (Alexie 1995, p. 119).

A collision of sub-standard material conditions and generations of emotional trauma usurp stability and a sense of belonging in the novel. Characters occupy the economic margins: they are 'unbanked,' they do not own land, and they are so poor that a dollar once changed the outcome of tribal elections (Alexie 1995, p. 46).⁷ A comforting sense of home is beyond reach for many characters. Zandy's conception of home offers a helpful framing device:

Home is literal: a place where you struggle together to survive; or a dream: 'a real home,' something just out of one's grasp; or a nightmare: a place in order to survive as an

⁵ We use 'brown' because that is the color Checkers uses to describe American Indians: 'She always thought they looked like brown-skinned zombies' (Alexie 1995, p. 99).

⁶ Despite our assertion to consider the characters poverty class, it is important to remember that, as Michelle Fine and Lois Weis indicate when writing about poor women, '[t]he categories of poor and [the] working-class . . . are fluid, with shifting boundaries: they cannot be isolated from each other' (qtd. in Tokarczyk 2008, p.148).

⁷ The 'unbanked' are those who do not have a checking or savings account. Low income, low net worth, and little to no safety net characterize their financial situation. For additional details, see Rhine and Greene 2013, pp. 28-29. In *Reservation Blues*, Victor's response to a clerk at the Super 8 Motel illustrates band members' unbanked status. The clerk asks, 'how will you be paying for your rooms?' Victor responds, 'Cash. . . What Indian has a goddamn credit card?' (Alexie 1995, p. 134). Additionally, we learn about band members' unbanked situation when the narrator reveals, '[Thomas] had forty-two dollars in his pocket and another fifty hidden at home, much more than Junior and Victor had together' (Alexie 1995, p. 46).

individual. Home is an idea: an inner geography where the ache to belong finally quits, where there is no sense of ‘otherness,’ where there is, at last, a community. (1993, p.1)

An exploration of the contours and textures of home as both physical and emotional terrain in *Reservation Blues* enables us to witness characters’ journeys toward or away from home – to wholeness, desperation, or destruction.

Falling Apart: Junior

The motif of falling apart is introduced with Patsy Cline’s song ‘I Fall to Pieces.’ Thomas’s singing of the song to Junior and Victor foreshadows the ‘falling apart’ that awaits Junior. The lyrics ‘Each time I see you again / I fall to pieces’ eerily correspond with Junior’s life; they reflect the moment Junior takes a final glance at his college girlfriend Lynn as she stands amid ‘an explosion of white skin and blonde hair’ (Cline 1961, lines 2-3; Alexie 1995, p. 240). He is devastated when she waves goodbye, and he feels himself ‘break into small pieces that blew away uselessly in the wind’ (Alexie 1995, p. 240). Junior, already haunted by painful memories of his poverty-class childhood, is devastated by Lynn’s abortion of their child and her rejection of his American Indian blood.⁸ Of all the characters in the novel, Junior moves furthest and most tragically from home: his ‘falling apart’ trajectory culminates in suicide.

During Junior’s brief stint in college, class and race mark his time there. Isolation and alienation prevail. During Christmas break, for example, he remained on campus because he could not afford to go home (Alexie 1995, p. 234). Disconsolate Junior ‘watched cars pass by and wondered if white people were happier than Indians’ (Alexie 1995, p. 234). After Junior and Lynn met on campus during this break, they dated for a few months. Junior knew that their interracial relationship garnered stares, that others were looking on at ‘[t]he Indian boy and the white girl walking hand in hand’ (Alexie 1995, p. 240). During their relationship, Lynn’s parents refused to talk to Junior during campus visits: they feared having a ‘half-breed’ grandchild (Alexie 1995, pp. 240-241). Unable to navigate the emotional terrain of assimilation into middle-class university life, including the crossroads of racial and ethnic expectations, Junior, the only American Indian on campus, dropped out (Alexie 1995, p. 234). W.E.B DuBois’s concept of double-consciousness explains Junior’s pain – he has ‘a sense of always looking at [himself] through the eyes of others, of measuring [his] soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’ (DuBois 1994, p. 2).

Even though he was alienated at college, Junior discovers a sense of home when he drives the BIA water truck back on the reservation. This job provides structure to his desultory life. Nicholas Coles and Peter Oresick help us understand the role of work in people’s lives: ‘Whether we want it there or not, for most of us work takes up its position at the center of our lives. What we do for a living organizes our time, consumes our energy, and to a large extent determines our experience

⁸ These memories include the absence of his siblings at their parent’s funeral because they had ‘long since dispersed to other reservations and cities, [and] couldn’t afford to come back’ (Alexie 1995, p. 24). Additionally, Junior’s past, presented in a dream through magical realism, depicts he and his siblings in below-freezing temperatures sharing a sleeping bag outside the Powwow Tavern. While their parents were inside the tavern, the children could not turn on the car because there was only enough fuel to get home. Later, the stumbling parents shoved their children’s dinner through an open car window: potato chips and Pepsi (Alexie 1995, p. 111).

in every other activity of living' (1990, p. xxi). Junior, who was a good driver, deftly navigated the 'reservation obstacle course of potholes and free-range livestock' (Alexie 1995, p. 18). Junior organizes his schedule around his job and ignores Victor's insistence to skip out on work. His rebuttal indicates an identity shaped by work: 'I've got work to do . . . I need to finish. It's my job' (Alexie 1995, p. 20). The devastation of losing this job due to his and Victor's coarse words about Coyote contributes to his falling apart.⁹ Junior knows how to 'wake up in the morning, eat breakfast, and go to work,' but he is unable to face new challenges when he joins Coyote Springs (Alexie 1995, p. 18). The band is not ready musically to garner a steady income playing gigs or selling records, and without steady jobs, their lives are precarious.

Instability and insecurity characterize the band's employment. They rely on word-of-mouth recommendations, newspaper reviews, and chance battle-of-the-bands competitions to secure gigs and bring in sporadic money. Perceptions about their Indigenous identity sometimes work against them. A tavern owner reveals, 'I was kind of nervous about hiring Indians . . . Worried they might not show up or maybe they'd stir up trouble' (Alexie 1995, p. 90). Despite his skepticism, Coyote Springs showed up and played well; they 'served up a healthy dish of country music, spiced it with a little bit of rock, and even through in a few old blues tunes for dessert' (Alexie 1995, p. 90). Their rising trajectory falters later in the novel. Having spent all their earnings from gigs, they frantically contact record companies. A record producer in Spokane responded, 'Indians? . . . You mean like drums and stuff? That howling kind of singing? We can't afford to make a record that ain't going to sell' (Alexie 1995, p. 187). Sub Pop Records in Seattle sent rejection letters. Alexie's biting humor envelops the response: 'Black letters on white paper, just like commodity food cans. U.S.D.A. PORK. SORRY WE ARE UNABLE TO USE THIS. JUST ADD WATER. WE DON'T LISTEN TO UNSOLICITED DEMOS. POWDERED MILK. THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST. HEAT AND SERVE' (1995, p. 187). Junior, who wanted 'to be good at something,' curses their predicament as he eats his 'failed dreams,' commodity peanut butter, one of the few sources of protein on the reservation (Alexie 1995, p. 228, 188).

Prior to Coyote Springs' departure to Cavalry Records' New York studio, the narrator signals a poverty-class marker through an Indigenous cultural practice: stickgame. If a player chooses a bone correctly, the player wins; if a player chooses incorrectly, the player is eliminated forever. There is no safety net for Coyote Springs, they had 'one chance to choose the correct hand' (Alexie 1995, p. 220). The band's failure devastates Junior, who wanted 'a bigger house, clothes, shoes, and something more' (Alexie 1995, p. 18, 228). Beyond material comfort, Junior desires meaning in life, 'something more' than physical objects. Junior's emptiness and contemplation of death is telegraphed on the plane trip home from New York when he 'looked out his window and wondered how he would feel if the plane lost power and began the long dive to the ground' (Alexie 1995, p. 252). In a prescient moment, Junior's guilt about his severed connection to Spokane Indigenous practices is revealed when he imagines the announcement prior to crashing: 'And if you do survive the impact, survive the flames and toxic smoke, then you will hear music. A cedar flute perhaps. Follow that music. Even though you don't deserve it' (Alexie 1995, p. 253). After arriving safely back in Wellpinit, the narrator hints at symptoms of depression when Junior and Victor 'found it was easier to just sleep, rather than wake up and face the day' (Alexie 1995, p. 260).

⁹ Junior responds to Thomas wanting to name the band Coyote Springs, 'That's too damn Indian. . . . I'm sick of Coyote' (Alexie 1995, p. 45). Victor exclaims, 'Fuck Coyote' (Alexie 1995, p. 45).

Junior's life ends abruptly atop the Wellpinit water tower by a self-inflicted bullet wound. His suffering, a soul wound both personal and tribal, is rooted in historical trauma, which is a psychic response to centuries of 'death, dispossession, and denigration' of Indigenous Peoples (Johnson 2010, p. 225). Through magical realism, the deceased Junior initially explains to Victor that he killed himself because 'life is hard'; however, among the myriad of reasons for his death, this is a fragment (Alexie 1995, p. 290). A fuller portrait is revealed moments later when Junior explains, 'when I closed my eyes like Thomas, I didn't see a damn thing. Nothing. Zilch. No stories, no songs. Nothing' (Alexie 1995, p. 290). Junior's life is torn asunder; he falls apart after decades of living through unreconciled strivings (DuBois 1994, p. 2). Unable to navigate hybridity necessary for survivance, Junior falls apart 'and [can] never be put back together again' (Alexie 1995, p. 287).

Falling Down: Victor

Junior's suicide devastates Victor, who is already morose about Coyote Springs' failure at Cavalry Records. Unlike Thomas, Chess, and Checkers – emotionally adept characters who travel toward 'home' as the novel unfolds – Victor is angry, culturally dislocated, and unwilling to forgive. As the novel unfolds, he becomes increasingly 'unhomed.' Homi Bhabha's notion of the 'unhomely' and its attendant 'unhomeliness,' rooted in colonialism and post-colonialism, informs our analysis. The unhomed concept describes 'an estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world,' a displacement that forces 'a division that is as divided as it is disorienting' (2004, p. 13). Lois Tyson describes these situations as characters not feeling at home even in their own home because they are not at home in themselves – they are psychological refugees (2014, p. 403).

Despite his tough exterior and 'warrior disguise,' Victor is 'fragile as eggs' (Alexie 1995, p. 16). Victor's first appearance in the novel reveals his anger: his tattered 13-year-old silk and polyester wardrobe make him 'an angry man' (Alexie 1995, p. 12). In 1979 he bought some clothes after winning a few thousand dollars in Reno, just after graduating from high school, but since then his poverty restricted the purchase of new clothes. The sources of Victor's anger are manifold. Most prominent, however, is his insecure masculinity. Stripped of recognizable traditional gender roles during colonization, he flounders in his attempts to enact warrior practices. Further, suffering duress from the disruption of traditional food and customs, American Indian men like Victor mask their displaced frustration with violence:

These little wars were intimate affairs for those who dreamed in childhood of fishing for salmon but woke up as adults to shop at the Trading Post and stand in line for U.S.D.A. commodity food instead. They savagely, repeatedly, opened up cans of commodities and wept over the rancid meat, forced to eat what stray dogs ignored. Indian men like Victor roared from place to place, set fires, broke windows, and picked on the weaker members of the Tribe. (Alexie 1995, p. 14)

Victor, who repeatedly bullied Thomas and even scarred him by pressing his face into wet cement, ‘had enough anger inside to guide every salmon over Grand Coulee Dam’ (Alexie 1995, p. 14, 230).¹⁰

In addition to being unhomed due to his anger, Victor exhibits another effect of colonization: mimicry. This entails normalizing colonizers’ organization of society and an attendant rejection of one’s ethno-cultural heritage. Bhabha contends that the ‘slippage produced in the ambivalence of mimicry’ in a colonized subject that is ‘almost the same, but not quite [white],’ fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial presence’ (2004, p. 123). Mimicry, in this sense, is ‘at once resemblance and menace’ (Bhabha 2004, p. 123). Victor’s harsh critique of Big Mom signals mimicry through departure from an Indigenous spiritual mooring: he once saw Big Mom walk across Benjamin Pond but quickly erased the experience from memory because he was ‘damn good at denial’ (Alexie 1995, p. 199). When told he will meet Big Mom, Victor exclaims, ‘don’t tell me she’s some medicine woman or something. That’s all a bunch of crap’ (Alexie 1995, p. 199). In a cruel exchange, Victor harangues Big Mom by repeating Jim Morrison’s name, despite her protest (Alexie 1995, p. 207). As the lead singer of the 1960s-70s rock band The Doors, Morrison appropriated the Ghost Dance during concerts; he is understandably reviled by some American Indians. Further, Victor’s acceptance of colonizers’ binary savage/civilized lens does not serve him well; accordingly, he behaves in ways that are ‘logical as a white man’ (Alexie 1995, p. 218). This logic separates him from Indigenous practices, for example, when he refuses to accept an eagle feather Thomas offers for protection on the flight to New York. He bellows, ‘[g]et that Indian bullshit away from me!’ (Alexie 1995, p. 218).¹¹

Victor’s unwillingness to forgive, signaling shame and anger, propels his ‘falling down’ trajectory. The origins of his fragile psychological condition are revealed during Coyote Springs’ rehearsals under Big Mom’s tutelage: Victor refuses to follow her advice to forgive the priest who molested him when he was nine (Alexie 1995, p. 148). Big Mom urges, ‘you should forgive that priest who hurt you when you were little. That will give you power over him’ (Alexie 1995, p. 203). Victor, who ‘still felt the priest’s hands on his body after all those years,’ had ‘prayed for his death for years, had even wanted to kill him,’ but ‘never once considered forgiveness’ (Alexie 1995, p. 203). At this crossroads with a path toward healing, Victor chooses a dark road: he does not forgive the priest. As a result, he remains ensnared in shame and mired in anger as the memory of the event diminishes his self-worth. Alexie reveals the power of forgiveness in the fate of Cavalry Records’ George Wright, when he allows redemption for the non-fictional Colonel George Wright during his transformation from Indian killer, in U.S. history, to Indian ally, in the novel. Wright departs Cavalry Records disgusted with its appropriation of Indian culture; he also admits to Coyote Springs that when he ‘looked at his own white hands . . . [he] saw the blood stains there’ (Alexie 1995, p. 244). Wright returns ‘home’ to his grave in Sacramento, sobbing, ‘I was the one who killed them all. I gave the orders [to kill nearly 800 horses during the 1858 horse slaughter]’ (Alexie 1995, p. 271). His wife, Margaret, whispers, ‘I forgive you. . . . You’ve come home . . . You’re

¹⁰ For further information about the negative consequences brought on by colonization caused by the damming of waterways, see pages xii, xx, and 2 in *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun*, by Robert H. Ruby et al., University of Oklahoma Press, 1970.

¹¹ We also see in Victor a strong sense of individualism (Alexie 1995, p. 227, pp. 125-126), a feature of mimicry portrayed by Frantz Fanon: ‘The colonialist bourgeoisie hammered into the colonized mind the notion of a society of individuals where each is locked in his subjectivity’ (2004 [1963], p. 11)

home now' (Alexie 1995, p. 271). Released from the haunting of his nightmarish actions against American Indians, Alexie shows us how forgiveness can enable one to find a sense of home.

The consequences of Victor's refusal to forgive are grave: Victor is responsible for Coyote Springs' failure in the recording studio.¹² Victor angrily throws a saxophone across the studio, linking him symbolically to unhomed and increasingly unhinged saxophone savant Michael Whitehawk, a student Big Mom instructed to channel the healing power of music, but he instead perpetrated violence (Alexie 1995, p. 229, 208).¹³ Victor's failure at the studio initiates the process of his (and Junior's) eventual erasure. In a bar after the failed session, '[a] single tear ran down . . . [Victor's] face, and then he passed out face first onto the table. . . . Junior picked him up and carried him out the door. The bartender, watched them leave, cleaned the glasses they had drunk from, and erased their presence from that part of the world' (Alexie 1995, p. 241).¹⁴

Victor's projected alcohol-related death is telegraphed following the humiliation he suffers when applying for Junior's job driving the BIA water truck.¹⁵ Invoking the rewards of work, the deceased (and enlightened) Junior relays to Victor what might help him: 'I think you should go get yourself a goddamn job' (Alexie 1995, p. 291). Victor worked up the courage to ask Tribal Chairman David WalksAlong for Junior's job. Victor, unusually polite and meek with WalksAlong, remarks: 'They said you're the one who decides who gets to work. I want a job. . . . Please' (Alexie 1995, p. 292). Victor seeks home and tries to put the broken pieces of himself back together. Despite Victor's earnest plea for a job, after reading Victor's resume, WalksAlong crumples it, throws it at him, and tells him to 'Get the fuck out' (Alexie 1995, p. 292). Victor reiterates why he is there: 'I want to drive the water truck . . . like Junior used to' (Alexie 1995, p. 292). WalksAlong turns his back

¹² The text indicates that Victor is responsible for their difficulties in the studio. We attribute these problems to Victor's deal with the Devil (the Gentleman) personified in his guitar, which formerly belonged to Robert Johnson. We contend that had Victor forgiven the priest – and therefore opened a path for healing – the Devil, embodied in the guitar, could not wield power over him. In the studio Coyote Springs 'needed Victor to rise, needed his lead guitar to define them' (Alexie 1995, p. 224). Initially, the chords came to him, but, as the song moved forward, 'his fingers slipped off the strings and frets. The guitar bucked in his hands, twisted away from his body' (Alexie 1995, p. 225).

¹³ It is not clear why Coyote Springs fails in the studio. We contend that Victor's guitar, inherited from Robert Johnson and embodying Devil-esque characteristics, exploits those who are most vulnerable and therefore easier to manipulate. Victor, who is angry, ashamed, and unwilling to forgive, provides an ideal vessel for the Devil. But Coyote Springs' failure is a conundrum. Had they not failed, they would sign a recording contract with Cavalry Records, a crossroads deal fraught with class and ethnic exploitation: an extraction of surplus value through manipulation of culture, as witnessed in appropriators Betty and Veronica's vapid song produced at Cavalry Records: 'And my hair is blonde / But I'm Indian in my bones / And my skin is white / But I'm Indian in my bones' (Alexie 1995, p. 295). Ironically, Victor's failure saves Coyote Springs from exploitation: Phil Sheridan and George Wright wanted to 'give them war paint, feathers, etc., and really play up the Indian angle . . . [because] this band could be very lucrative for Cavalry Records' (Alexie 1995, p. 190). Scott Andrews is also bewildered by Coyote Springs' failure in the studio. After providing possible reasons for the band's failure, he writes: 'My only conclusion is that the novel itself is too conflicted about the implications of the band's potential success; the studio scene is the novel's moment of narrative crisis—the band's success seems unimaginable for Alexie. Although Thomas is trying to be a postindian warrior of survivance, the novel will not allow the transformation' (1997, p. 148).

¹⁴ Ironically, during this evening, Thomas and Chess experience another kind of erasure at [Kit] Carson's All-Night Restaurant. Kit asks, '[y]ou sure there are still Indians around at all?' (Alexie 1995, p. 239). He adds, '[t]hey don't look nothing like those Indians in the movies. They look Puerto Rican to me' (Alexie 2005, p. 239).

¹⁵ In a 2005 interview, Alexie indicates humiliation is a component in Native literature: 'there is definitely a lot of humiliation in Native literature. We write about being humiliated a lot. And that takes physical forms, emotional forms, and mental forms. I think Native literature is the literature of humiliation and shame' (Nygren 2005, p. 155).

without responding. Victor ‘feels something slip inside,’ and his assumed death spiral begins (Alexie 1995, p. 292). He steals money on his way out of WalksAlong’s office, purchases a six-pack of beer, and whispers ‘Fuck it, I can do it, too,’ when opening the first can (Alexie 1995, p. 292). The narrator signals Victor’s demise when remarking that the explosion of the beer can opening ‘sounded exactly like a smaller, slower version of the explosion that Junior’s rifle made on the water tower’ (Alexie 1995, p. 293).

In the closing chapter, Victor declines Thomas’s invitation to move to Spokane; he is apathetic toward music; he wanders around the reservation with three dogs; his personal hygiene has diminished; and there is speculation he will soon begin drinking sterno (Alexie 1995, p. 298, 297).¹⁶ Victor has reached the brown-skinned ‘zombie’ stage: broke, broken, and spiritually unmoored, he is ‘gone,’ a ‘ghost’ physically alive but emotionally dead (Alexie 1995, p. 96, 112, 119).

Finding Home: Thomas, Chess, Checkers

Thomas, who is ‘polite and traditional’ and ‘neither loud nor aggressive, neither calm nor silent,’ does not ‘pretend to be some twentieth-century warrior, alternating between blind rage and feigned disinterest’ (Alexie 1995, p. 4). This misfit storyteller is a painful reminder of a fading oral history tradition: his stories ‘hung in your clothes and hair like smoke’ (Alexie 1995, p. 5, 15). Thomas observes the despair of the reservation and wants to save his people from the ravages of colonization: he ‘wanted a story to heal the wounds’ (Alexie 1995, p. 6). Johnson’s arrival at a Wellpinit crossroads incites Thomas to shift from stories to songs since Johnson insists that they ‘need to play songs for [their] people’ (Alexie 1995, p. 23). Amid the general mood of listlessness on the Spokane Reservation, where ‘nobody believed in anything . . . All the Indians just dropped their quarters into the jukebox, punched the same old buttons, and called that music,’ Johnson offers a path to healing, a musical route to re-form severed ethno-cultural heritage (Alexie 1995, p. 28).¹⁷ Johnson’s arrival on the reservation also signals the notion that the blues as musical formation, though often considered to have originated during the post-Civil War reconstruction period, is rooted deeper in U.S. history. The blues feeling extends farther. Thomas proclaims, ‘an Indian woman invented the blues a day before Columbus landed’ (Alexie 1995, p. 157).

Thomas begins the novel close to home since he retains a sense of traditional Indigenous culture. His journey closer toward home through cultural hybridity and forgiveness departs vividly from Victor’s anger, shame, and unremitting rejection of traditional culture. Thomas tries to be as ‘traditional as the twentieth century allowed’ while Victor is as ‘contemporary as cable television’ (Alexie 1995, p. 49). Thomas reflects Spokane tribal genealogy: his long, black hair that he pulled into braids, his skin that ‘tanned to a deep brown, nearly dark as the black man [Johnson],’ and his ‘short, muscular legs . . . low center of gravity . . . and long torso and arms for the leverage to throw a spear at salmon’ link him to tribal heritage (Alexie 1995, p. 4). Diminutive when compared to other men on the reservation, Thomas projects deficiency in traditional Western masculinity;

¹⁶ Sterno is a fuel derived from denatured and jellied alcohol. Its primary use is for heating food in catering and camping settings. It is an inexpensive, surrogate alcohol that is poisonous. Earlier in the novel, American Indian ‘cousins’ are described as having started drinking a different concoction, a ‘Rubbie Dubbie’— rubbing alcohol mixed with commodity grape juice (Alexie 1995, p.100).

however, his thoughts, words, and actions display a 21st century warrior in the colonized spaces where tradition and (post)modernity coincide. Regardless of his effort, the band falls apart and he is forced to give up his dream of saving his 'little country' (Alexie 1995, p. 16).

Thomas's material conditions are reflected in his house on the reservation where he grew up. Built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the agency cut funding halfway through construction resulting in deficiencies where '[t]he water pipes froze every winter, and windows warped in the hot summer heat' (Alexie 1995, p. 7). During his childhood, Thomas slept in the half-finished basement, with 'two blankets for walls and one blanket for his bed' (Alexie 1995, p. 7). His house lacks necessities for sustaining life and contains an empty fridge. Thomas opens and closes his refrigerator in a 'ceremony that he had practiced since his youth' which illustrates his poverty (Alexie 1995, p. 47). Thomas expects 'an immaculate conception of a jar of pickles' to ease his hunger pains, but to no avail (Alexie 1995, p. 47).

Thomas comes to terms with his failed dream to save the reservation and resolves to leave his childhood home and his alcoholic father, Samuel, nicknamed 'Drunk and Disorderly' (Alexie 1995, p. 95). He is not fleeing from his father, who he loves deeply, as evidenced in the 'individual, not tribal' tears he cries during 'a wake for a live man,' but rather the reservation that is obstinate toward his music, the blues that 'created memories for the Spokanes' (Alexie 1995, p. 98, 174). They refused to acknowledge that '[t]hose blues lit up a new road . . . [and instead they] pulled out their old maps' and tried to manage their lives with the same, old methods of coping with pain (Alexie 1995, p. 175). Mired in denial, and refusing to find new solutions, they 'buried all of their pain and anger deep inside' until it festered (Alexie 1995, p. 175). Unlike Samuel who drinks to deflect the effects of historical trauma, Thomas escapes by leaving the reservation with Chess and Checkers. Thomas embarks on a journey to end a cycle of hopelessness, and he forgives his father for his emotional absence. He visits his house a final time before moving on. With tightness in his chest he takes a deep breath, gets in the old, blue van, and leaves on his own terms (Alexie 1995, p. 298). Despite his failure with Coyote Springs, and even though he was 'a reservation storyteller without answers or stories' when the recording session abruptly ended, he succeeds at saving himself, which is a step toward healing (Alexie 1995, p. 231).¹⁸

Thomas's bandmate and girlfriend, Chess, leads him out of the reservation. Their relationship began during Coyote Springs' first gig at the Tipi Pole Tavern on the Flathead Reservation in Montana. Chess was in the audience with her sister Checkers when Thomas invited her to sing a ballad with him on stage. An immediate attraction led to a duet where 'Chess felt like a Flathead Reservation Cher next to the Spokane Indian version of Sonny, but the music happened, clumsy and terrifying' (Alexie 1995, p. 58). Like Thomas, Chess, lives at the crossroads of Indigenous and contemporary culture: she is a storyteller who had 'fancydanced when she was a teenager and shook to Three Dog Night on her childhood radio. She danced well in both the Indian and white ways' (Alexie 1995, p. 55). During their first night together, Chess mesmerizes Thomas with a lyrical story about her family. It concludes, 'I once bit into a huckleberry, and it tasted like my [deceased] brother's tears' (Alexie 1995, p. 67). Seconds later, the narrator alludes to love and poverty when Thomas reflects on Chess's life story: 'Thomas smiled at her. He had just met the only Indian who told stories like his. . . . How do you fall in love with a woman who grew up in

¹⁸ The levity of Coyote Springs' failure is evidenced when the narrator reveals that Thomas 'touched his body and felt the absence, like some unnamed part of him had been cut away' (Alexie 1995, p. 231).

such poverty that other poor Indians called her family poor?’ (Alexie 1995, p. 67). Thomas had found his ideal partner: Chess had dark, ‘Indian grandmother eyes that stayed clear and focused for generations’ (Alexie 1995, p. 60). Their romance is christened with a goodnight kiss: ‘She leaned over quickly and kissed him on the cheek. A powerful kiss, more magical than any kiss on the mouth. She kissed him like he was a warrior; she kissed him like she was a warrior’ (Alexie 1995, p. 68).

Poverty and violence shape Chess and Checkers’s lives. The sisters, who were ‘just elbows and collarbones,’ were hungry while growing up (Alexie 1995, p. 64). After the tragic deaths of their mother (Linda) and brother (Backgammon), their father, Luke Warm Water, brought the young sisters gifts from his trips to town: ‘ribbons, scraps of material, buttons, pages torn from magazines, even food, candy bars, and bottles of Pepsi’ (Alexie 1995, p. 69). Luke’s pent-up rage and emasculation stemming from the (colonized) disasters in his life are released when Chess and Checkers accidentally freeze the Pepsis he bought them in Missoula. They exploded after Chess and Checkers placed them in a snowbank because they did not have a refrigerator. After the sodas explode in the snow, Luke grabbed Checkers, shook her violently, and screamed, ‘Goddamn it . . . you’ve wasted it all!’ (Alexie 1995, p. 69). After falling to their knees and weeping, Chess scooped up the brown snow and they enjoyed a snow cone. Chess, comforting Checkers, tells her that their father’s actions are not her fault (Alexie 1995, p. 70). Chess’s soothing words signal a deep wound in the novel: when they were young, Luke sexually abused Linda and, ostensibly, molested Checkers (Alexie 1995, p. 68, 66). Layered within the pain and discomfort of poverty and violence is the sense of shame Chess and Checkers felt in their brown-skinned bodies when they were young: white people stared at them at the supermarket, where they purchased shoes made of cheap canvas and plastic (Alexie 1995, p. 137). Additionally, after traveling to town in a wagon driven by their father, Checkers, muddied from the trip, ‘brown-skinned . . . [in a] muddy brown dress . . . [was] so dark that white people thought [she] was a black girl’ (Alexie 1995, p. 140). Checkers and Chess implicitly knew the advantages of whiteness. Checkers, wanting to feel a sense of home, ‘where the ache to belong finally quits,’ pined for acceptance, dignity, and respect, wanted to be like ‘those little white girls . . . [who were] so perfect, so pretty, and so white’ (Zandy 1994, p. 1; Alexie 1995, p. 140).

As adults, Chess and Checkers strive to control their lives. They forfeited their seasonal jobs as BIA firefighters and left the Flathead Reservation to join Coyote Springs. Chess, who, befitting her name, ‘planned all her moves in advance,’ is uncomfortable with a patriarchal measuring tape: ‘All her life, she has been measured by men. Her father, her priest, her lovers, her employers, her God. Men decided where she would go, how she would talk, even what clothes she was supposed to wear’ (Alexie 1995, p. 55, 212). To her dismay, even gentle Thomas overshadowed her: ‘She sang his songs, she played his music . . . [he was] there with his shadow.’ Distraught from being ‘pulled from limb to limb,’ in DuBoisian fashion, Chess does not know if she should ‘run from that shadow or curl up inside it’ (Alexie 1995, p. 212). Ultimately, she remains with Thomas but retains control of her life. Checkers, on the other hand, struggles to recoup control of her body, undoubtedly a consequence of her childhood trauma. She has troubling encounters with men, especially the archetype ‘*Super Indian Man*,’ pseudo-warriors who are ‘[a]ble to leap tall HUD houses in a single bound. Faster than a BIA pickup. Stronger than a block of commodity cheese’ (Alexie 1995, p. 114). Checkers tries to ignore these men who overcompensate for their failed and murdered dreams (in a system rigged against them), but they hold power over her. When visiting

her in her dreams, they exult, '[l]ook at my big cowboy hat. Look at my big boots. Look at my big, big belt buckle' (Alexie 1995 p. 114). These broken men, these ghosts, 'crawled into her bed at night, lifted her nightgown, and forced her legs apart' (Alexie 1995, p. 114).

Checkers's troubling relationships with men continue when she has a romantic tryst with Father Arnold. Although seemingly innocuous when compared to the brutality of other priests, and certainly a tender man in many respects, Father Arnold views American Indians as 'exotic' (Alexie 1995, p. 36). Near the end of the story, after Checkers has gained confidence and has decided to leave the Spokane Reservation, she refuses to forgive Father Arnold for entangling her in the relationship (Alexie 1995, p. 287). Father Arnold agrees with Checkers's reason for not offering forgiveness, and he accepts her decision. In her relationship with Sheridan, a darker ending ensues. During a harrowing dream sequence after Coyote Springs's failure at Cavalry Records, Sheridan enters Checkers's hotel room, objectifies her, and assaults her:

Sheridan studied Checkers. He had watched her during the last few centuries. She was beautiful. But she was Indian beautiful with tribal features. She didn't look anything at all like a white woman. She was tall with narrow hips and muscular legs. Large breasts. She had arms strong as any man's. And black, black hair that hung down past her shoulders. Sheridan wanted to touch it. He had always been that way about Indian women's hair. (Alexie 1995, p. 237)

The assault occurs when Sheridan 'reached across the years and took Checkers's face in his hands. He squeezed until she cried out and saw white flashes of light' (Alexie 1995, p. 238). This scene that ends close to rape compresses two features of United States history: men wielding power over women through physical assault, and colonization offering justification for those who dominate the 'exotic' other.

Collective and personal histories intertwine when Sheridan no longer returns to Checkers in her nightmares; however, now her father visits her nightly in her dreams (Alexie 1995, p. 284). Checkers tells Chess: 'He stands in the doorway of the bedroom. Just like he used to. He's been drinking. I can smell him. He doesn't say nothing. He just stands there in the doorway, holding his arms out to me. Then I wake up' (Alexie 1995, p. 285). She tells Chess she knows it is him because 'he's crying the whole time' (Alexie 1995, p. 285). Luke's tears and open arms are gestures asking for forgiveness, which is granted, as witnessed when the sisters sit for a long time in silence, hold hands, and cry (Alexie 1995, p. 285). Having forgiven her father, Checkers is ready to move on literally and figuratively: she will no longer be controlled by the men in her life, the figures who haunt her reality and dreams.

One way that Chess and Checkers control their lives is through travel. No longer in men's shadows and, having overcome the desire to be accepted by men to ameliorate childhood trauma, they confidently leave the Spokane Reservation on their terms. In her study of early to mid-nineteenth century female Blues singers, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998), Angela Davis helps us understand Chess and Checkers's departure: 'For women especially, the ability to travel implied a measure of autonomy, an ability to shun passivity and acquiescence in the face of mistreatment and injustice and to exercise some control over the circumstances of their lives, especially their sexual lives' (74). For Blues women, like the Warm Water sisters, mobility, an 'autonomously

constructed activity that brings with it a taste of liberation,' brings no guarantee that the traveler will reach a satisfactory conclusion or that the process will be free from pain (Davis 1998, p. 77). Despite the uncertainty of a life beyond reservation borders due to ongoing gendered circumscription and socially constructed diminished labor value for women, Chess and Checkers persist.

Conclusion: Home Beyond Reservation Borders

In *Reservation Blues* characters experience Dubois's notion of double-consciousness emanating, in part, from the panoptic Anglo gaze. For Junior and Victor, the effects are tragic. For Thomas, Chess, and Checkers, who move closer to home, they 'attain self-conscious [human]hood . . . merg[ing] [a] double self into a better and truer self' (DuBois 1994, p. 3). These characters find comfort in a 'third space' illuminated in Bhabha's concept of hybridity where, as Chinua Achebe has asserted, there is a productive crossroads of cultures inhabiting 'inbetweenness' (Farahbakhsh and Ranjbar 2016, p. 106). When considered in the framework of the novel's use-value, we see that *Reservation Blues* offers routes for agency, survival, and hope in the contemporary world. As a result, Alexie offers a novel response to colonization in the United States. In her analysis of Alexie's fiction, Jan Johnson asserts that it was not until the 2007 publication of *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* that Alexie offers possibilities for reconciliation, healing, and hopefulness in response to the painful legacies of colonization (2010, pp. 224-225, 233-237). We see these themes in *Reservation Blues*.

Throughout *Reservation Blues*, characters negotiate literal and figurative crossroads in their journeys toward contentment, destruction, or death. In culmination of their journeys, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers leave the Spokane reservation with no safety net as they head toward Spokane to build lives around Chess's operator position at Western Telephone Communications. Despite their hesitation, rooted partially in their precarity, the narrator hints that they made the right decision: 'They all held their breath as they drove over the reservation border. Nothing happened. No locks clicked shut behind them' (Alexie 1995, p. 305). The reservation did not imprison them as they had feared. Evidence mounts toward a positive vista when the narrator reveals the ever-growing presence of 'hot and wet' shadow horses leading the characters across the reservation border toward Spokane. We interpret 'hot and wet' to symbolize vigor. Chess and Checkers reach out to touch them as the horses were 'leading Indians toward the city' (Alexie 1995, p. 306). The shadow horses signal urgency in leaving the reservation to find home, 'an inner geography where the ache to belong finally quits' (Zandy 1993, p. 1).¹⁹

In the final paragraph, amid the characters singing with the horses, the narrator suggests a collective Indian identity when exclaiming, 'we are alive, we'll keep living' (Alexie 1995, p. 306). This phrase implies that Indigenous ethno-cultural identity will continue in the city where songs await Thomas, Chess, and Checkers (Alexie 1995, p. 306). Scott Andrews points out that early in the novel we are told that Thomas's stories can offer the troubled community on the reservation a

¹⁹ Additionally, throughout the novel the horses 'scream' when a crossroads decision is impending that could ameliorate or harm Indigenous People or their cultural practices. The foundation for this trope is laid when Big Mom recounts the 1858 Horse Slaughter, where nearly 800 American Indian horses were rounded up and killed in the Spokane area. Led by Colonel George Wright, the slaughter is, of course, only one of many examples of the U.S. government asserting domination and control during colonization (Alexie 1995, pp. 9-11).

‘new road,’ a ‘new way of seeing problems and defeating them.’ However, despite his efforts to ‘save his little country,’ the novel ‘cuts short the possibilities of this ‘new road’ and the music is silenced’ (Andrews 2007, p. 137). Where Andrews sees despair and merely survival in the closing chapters of the novel, we see hope and transformation.²⁰ We see music as healing not only for Thomas, Chess, and Checkers, but also for Robert Johnson who, having discovered a sense of home and belonging under Big Mom’s guidance, is seen in the closing stages of the novel wearing ‘a traditional Indian ribbon shirt, made of highly traditional silk and polyester’ in a musical exchange with the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota (Alexie 1995, p. 303). In this crossroads zone of contact signifying transcultural trafficking across time and space, Johnson plays harmonica and the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota plays the hand drum (Alexie 1995, pp. 304-305).²¹ Johnson, gesturing toward the merit of alliance, tells Thomas he will stay on the reservation: ‘I think I jus’ might belong here. I think there’s been a place waitin’ at this Tribe’s tribal for me. I think this Tribe’s been waitin’ for me for a long time. I’m goin’ to stay right here. . . . I think these Indians might need me. Maybe need my music’ (Alexie 1995, p. 303). For Johnson, there is, at last ‘a community’ (Zandy 1993, p. 1).

As Thomas drives and Chess and Checkers hold the horses’ manes in the closing line of the novel, readers witness survivance. Vizenor elucidates that survivance is ‘more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence,’ and ‘survivance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry’ (1998, p. 15). As they travel toward home in a contemporary world that enjoins hybridity, the characters are ‘hanging on to ancient principles while eagerly embracing change . . . [and] doing whatever is necessary to keep [Indigenous] cultures alive’ (Wall text for ‘Our Peoples’). Having buried their grief and fear, they cross into the larger, original Spokane ancestral lands for personal and collective reclamation.²² The epigraph song of the final chapter, ‘Wake,’ foreshadows their departure: ‘And I think it’s time for us to find a way / Yeah I think it’s time for us to find a way / To wake alive, to wake alive, to wake alive, to wake alive’ (Alexie 1995, p. 276). Leaving a reservation inhabited by American Indians numbed by suicides, car wrecks, violence, alcoholism, and wakes for the living dead, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers discover, within themselves, how to be alive.²³

²⁰ Other critics have described the ending with varied degrees of positivity: Karsten Fitz and Klaus-Dieter Gross call the ending ‘slightly’ and ‘moderately’ optimistic (2007, p. 424, 428); P. Jane Hafen characterizes the ending as a ‘positive resolution’ (1997, p. 74); and Nazia Saleem contends that the ending ‘proffers hope’ (2015, p. 17). Janine Richardson, focusing on Thomas, sharply observes that ‘knowing that the part of his identity which is ‘Indian’ he carries in his heart and soul, Thomas can leave the reservation with Chess, the woman he loves, in a world where that value is in short supply’ (1997, p. 49). She adds that when leaving Thomas does not follow a ‘traditional’ path of ‘depression, poverty, and self-destruction’ (1997, p. 50). In a broader perspective, Joseph Coulombe asserts that Alexie’s fiction ‘falls squarely within an Indian literary tradition advocating growth and change. . . . with a keen historical awareness . . . transform[ing] past traditions—whether dancing, drumming, or story-telling—to fit a new world reality’ (2002, p. 104).

²¹ Our sense of cultural exchange in the novel is informed by Douglas Ford’s 2002 ‘Sherman Alexie’s Indigenous blues’, *Native American Literature*, vol. 27 no. 3, pp. 197-215, and Karsten Fitz and Klaus-Dieter Gross’s 2007 ‘Native American literature as a transcultural and multimedia experience: Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*’, *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3, pp. 417-433.

²² The larger ancestral lands are described on page xix in *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun*, by Robert H. Ruby et al., University of Oklahoma Press, 1970. For more information and images, see <http://www.spokanetribe.com/reservation>.

²³ A *Wizard of Oz* theme of characters already having within themselves what they desire winds through the novel. An example includes Big Mom carving Robert Johnson a cedar harp (harmonica). Johnson, who sold his soul to the Devil to be the greatest guitar player ever, was a fantastic harp player. Big Mom tells Johnson: ‘You don’t need that

In the novel's final chapter, Alexie enacts Zandy's notion that writing becomes a tool for confronting life's tragedies and hardships; as such, within the body of working-class literature, *Reservation Blues* elevates possibility above despair while eschewing the vanishing Indian trope utilized in Western representations of American Indians (Zandy 1993, p. 11). Ultimately, in their journey toward a place where they may finally be 'at home,' representations of working and poverty-class lived experience on the Spokane Reservation and beyond reveal a vital, usable past as we contemplate historic and contemporary relations forged by personal, institutional, and collective power (Zandy 1994, p. 7).

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guitar anymore . . . You were supposed to be a harp player. You're a good harp player. All by yourself, you can play a mean harp' (Alexie 1995, p. 266, 278). See also the backstory on Johnson playing harmonica: 'He felt loved when he was on stage, singing and blowing his harp. But it still wasn't enough. Johnson wanted to play guitar' (Alexie 1995, p. 262).

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