"Y'ALL NEED TO PLAY SONGS FOR YOUR PEOPLE": (P)RESERVATION VERSUS ASSIMILATION AND THE POLITICS OF WHITE-INDIAN ENCOUNTER IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Sherman Alexie very deftly raises some of the complex issues related to the interplay of cultural assimilation and cultural preservation —or, more aptly, *reservation*— and he does so by way of the central theme of definition. After all, what makes for assimilation if not an agreement to assign the same meanings —the same definitions— to particular places and events? What makes for reservation but an unwillingness to accept or to offer alternative definitions, or, considering the externally enforced nature of the reservation for native Americans, a hegemonic disavowal of the viability of a particular set of definitions that does not match those maintained by the hegemony?

The central complication of Sherman Alexie's short story "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona" invokes the great mythic archetype of the male's achieving maturity and identity through the recovery of the lost father or of that father's remains. In Alexie's story, Victor Joseph, a young Indian man of the Spokane reservation in eastern Washington, joins forces with his estranged childhood friend, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a young Spokane storyteller whose constantly repeated tales have alienated his entire community. Victor needs Thomas's help in recovering the ashes of his father, who had left the reservation some years before, abandoning Victor's family. As the story opens, Victor has just received notice that his father has died and been cremated in Phoenix, Arizona.[1] Using a series of flashbacks on Victor and Thomas's youth together, Alexie paints, in Victor, a portrait of the standard disillu-

sioned (and dis*allusioned*) reservation Indian: stuck with poverty, getting drunk and beating up other Indians (in this case, Thomas), and generally trying to avoid thinking about his own situation —in short, robbed of a mythic center.[2] Thomas Builds-the-Fire stands as contrast and complement to Victor. He has, we learn, become outcast on the reservation because he insists on maintaining the narrative heart of cultural identity, thereby reminding a frustrated people of a potential they view as unfulfillable: "Nobody talked to Thomas anymore because he told the same damn stories over and over again" (*LR* 62).[3] His name too invokes responsibility for the communal heart of the tribe: to build the fire is to bring light and warmth to the darkness and to provide the focal point for sustenance, ritual, and narrative. His first name is also not without significance. It is, as is Victor's, a mark of encounter with and assimilation by white European culture. In this sense, Victor's name takes on considerable irony as he appears to be one of the more thoroughly defeated tribal members. The meaning of Thomas's name —"twin"— suggests that we ought to view him as a spiritual brother to Victor. Indeed, we learn, along with Victor, that some years earlier, Victor's father has acted paternally toward a thirteen-year-old Thomas, whose own father "died on Okinawa in World War II, died fighting for this country, which had tried to kill him for years" and whose mother, Thomas tells Victor, "died giving birth to me, died while I was still inside her (*LR* 73).[4] The adolescent Thomas had gone, as the result of a dream, to Spokane Falls in the heart of Spokane to receive a vision; Victor's father spots him and performs a series of significant acts that set the man up as a spiritual father for this orphaned and sibling-less boy:

> Then your dad came walking up. *What the hell are you doing here?* he asked me. I said, *Waiting for a vision*. Then your father said, *All you're going to get here is mugged*. So he drove me over to Denny's, bought me dinner, and then drove me home to the reservation. For a long time I was mad because I thought my dreams had lied to me. But they didn't. Your dad was my vision. *Take care of each other* is what my dreams were saying. *Take care of each other*. (*LR* 69)

Victor's father acts as protector, nourisher, shelterer, and exemplar. And, as if this weren't sufficient to establish him as a father to Thomas, we learn one more piece of information: the care he has given Thomas has a price: "... he said I had to watch out for you... Your father said you would need the help. He was right' (*LR* 70). The requirement is spiritual brotherhood: Thomas must be Victor's keeper. In fact, by telling Victor the story of his father's insight into Victor's needs and his father's concern for his future well-being, Thomas may be said to "give" Victor his father. Victor is going to Phoenix to recover the man's ashes —the dead remnant of the body—but en route Thomas resurrects an image of his father for Victor— an image that shows him as *father*, aware of and concerned for his son, and as *vision*, a symbol for the communal responsibilities of his people. In the vague pronoun of the story's title and in that title's challenge to establish meaning, Alexie may be consciously invoking the classical Greco-Roman meanings of Phoenix; in Western culture we often hear of the phoenix as the bird that is reborn or rebegotten out of the ashes of its own death; however, in the context of Alexie's story, it is interesting to recall that Tacitus and Ovid stress the filial obligation in the story of the phoenix: the young phoenix, born of his father's

dead body, must, when fledged and able to bear the weight, carry the body of the father to the altar of the Sun where the body is consumed in fragrant flames.[5]

The phoenix, a conventional medieval Christian symbol of resurrection through sacrifice of the self, is not the sole nor, indeed, the ultimate totem animal of this story, nor do Victor or Thomas at any juncture of the story note the irony of their journey to *Phoenix* to recover *ashes* —it would appear that the myth, not being their own, is not available to aid them in conferring meaning or significance on their action. That Alexie may have been deliberately invoking the phoenix myth seems possible, especially considering the title's invitation to the reader to discern the meaning of saying Phoenix, but it seems equally clear that Alexie's co-protagonists never make the connection.[6] The phoenix itself then, whether or not Alexie is intentionally referring to the Greco-Roman myth, becomes a figure for the issues of encounter and assimilation. As Susan B. Brill has noted, Alexie's writing is a "transformation into written literature of an American Indian "oral storytelling tradition" in which the listeners are as much part of the story and of the storytelling event as are the storyteller and the story's characters (5). Certainly then, whether the application of the phoenix myth comes from author or reader, makes it no less a part of the story, and Alexie would probably enjoy the fact that a Spokane culture totem and a white culture totem appear in the event of the story's telling to underscore that the boundary between the two cultures is indeed permeable and that even the effort toward connection and understanding may simultaneously highlight separation and difference. However, as the story suggests, the effort is what gives the story whatever meaning it will have.

When Thomas and Victor return home and each "son" takes half of the legacy of ashes, they independently decide to carry those ashes to the very same "sun altar —okane Falls, *personally* central because it is the site of their fraternal bond, established by the father; and *culturally* central, because it is the waterway of the tribe, the river from which the Spokane traditionally took salmon. Interestingly, although these two "brothers" decide on the same site and plan the same gesture of throwing the ashes into Spokane Falls, each assigns the act a very different meaning. Victor, the flesh-and-bone son, is driven (the narrator tells us early on) by "genetic pain" to retrieve his father and requires Thomas Builds-the-Fire's assistance because he feels "a need for tradition, "which the storyteller *repre*sents (and Victor normally *re*-sents). Victor views the watery burial as a practical and mythless "attic cleaning": "Like letting things go after they've stopped having any use" (*LR* 75).

Victor, being the representative of the disenfranchised reservation Indian, lacks the cultural underpinning of tribal myth; his assimilation into the modern American culture of the disposable leaves him only a superficial reading of the act and a virtually emotionless and literal response to the reality of death. It is Thomas who must provide the mythic, transformative perspective. Therefore, he creates, out of his own cultural background, a story of resurrection and renewal that centers not on the phoenix that might seem the "natural" and poetic choice to a Eurocentric audience but on the central totem animal of a salmon-fishing people —an animal that, like its "classical" counterpart, struggles and dies to give life to its young and to return to the place of its beginning to reinitiate the cycle of life, an animal that traditionally struggled and died to give sustenance and life to the Spokane Indians in the days before the invading culture built its dams and cities on the great rivers.[7] Thomas, as he did earlier when he told Victor of his

encounter with the other's father in Spokane, again returns Victor's father to him out of the Falls. This time that father is the life-giving spirit not just of two radically different "twins" but of the tribe itself: "I'm going to travel to Spokane Falls one last time and toss these ashes into the water. And your father will rise like a salmon, leap over the bridge, over me, and find his way home. It will be beautiful. His teeth will shine like silver, like a rainbow. He will rise, Victor, he will rise'" (*LR* 74).

The roles Victor and Thomas take here have been prepared for by an earlier flashback to a boyhood Fourth of July when the two boys (who, like poor siblings, share the same bicycle[8]) are on their way to see a fireworks display:

> "You know," Thomas said, "It's strange how us Indians celebrate the Fourth of July. It ain't like it was our independence everybody was fighting for."
> "You think about things too much," Victor said. "It's just supposed to be fun. Maybe Junior will be there."
> "Which Junior? Everybody on this reservation is named Junior." (*LR* 63)

The conversation is light, but the implications are serious. In Victor's statement that Thomas "thinks about things too much," Alexie demonstrates that assimilation is already part of the reservation. In this story, Alexie very deftly raises some of the complex issues related to the interplay of cultural assimilation and cultural preservation —or, more aptly, *reservation*— and he does so by way of the central theme of definition. After all, what makes for assimilation if not an agreement to assign the same meanings —the same definitions— to particular places and events? What makes for reservation but an unwillingness to accept or to offer alternative definitions, or, considering the externally enforced nature of the reservation for native Americans, a hegemonic disavowal of the viability of a particular set of definitions that does not match those maintained by the hegemony? Even the story's title exploits the reader's impulse toward assimilation: at no point does the story directly address the meaning of Phoenix, Arizona. As we have seen, the title is something of a mythic booby-trap, reminding us that meaning is an assimilative enterprise, a matter of communal agreement, concession, treaty.

The young reservation boys' disagreement over the fireworks display links directly to this reservation/assimilation "choice": the impressive historical power display of the hegemony distracts the dominated culture from "thinking too much" about its relationship to that hegemony, for such thinking is a counter-assimilative activity. The difficulty for the dominated culture is the same difficulty these Indian boys confront: how does one reject the myth of genuine assimilation and inclusion —the myth of participation in freedom— when one is being distracted by the power display that that myth can muster. Indeed, Thomas tells us that his own biological father was sacrificed to this very myth of participation — "died fighting for this country, which had tried to kill him for years"(*LR* 73). When Victor wonders if "Junior" will be at the fireworks, Thomas's response that the reservation is full of Juniors marks the loss of individual and cultural identity, as well as the imposition of subordinate and diminutive status, that attend this surrender to the lure of assimilation.

As divided doppelgangers, Victor and Thomas represent the fundamental psychic split of the modern American Indian: the reservation maintains a nominal pre-

serve against assimilation and yet the "bread and circuses" (or more correctly, the alcohol and fireworks) of assimilation serve to undermine any preservational possibilities that the preserve might claim to offer. Victor and Thomas's one encounter with the white hegemony comes in the form of a "tiny white" female Olympic gymnast named Cathy whom they meet on the plane to Phoenix. This encounter is brief and friendly but it once again suggests the dividing line between the cultures. Against Victor's better judgment, Thomas strikes up a mildly flirtatious conversation with the woman, the flirtatious element of which she fends off with a rather practiced nonchalant reference to her husband, a response which causes Thomas to note internally that "[s]he was a mental gymnast, too" (*LR* 66).

The threesome laugh comfortably when Thomas proves himself unable to match the gymnast's world-class physical "flexibility" and again when, having been asked by Cathy if they are "Indian," Victor has immediately proclaimed himself "[f]ull-blood" but Thomas refuses the tribal identification in favor of a more individual one: "Not me... I'm half magician on my mother's side and half-clown on my father's" (*LR* 66). They talk "for the duration of the flight" and the only uncomfortable moment that occurs comes when Cathy, who was a "first alternate on the 1980 Olympic team," begins to complain about how the team was "screwed" by the government's decision to boycott the Olympics. Thomas takes this opportunity to compare Cathy's plight with his and Victor's when he says, "Sounds like you all got a lot in common with Indians'"(*LR* 67). But at this clever remark, no one laughs. The narrator does not interpret this absence, but it would seem to suggest that the incongruity of the comparison has been too great to evoke a humorous response and has taken the previously light conversation into a too deeply serious vein. The encounter has not been unpleasant and yet the ultimate connection —the connection of shared plight— seems to have been refused. Interestingly, when they have deplaned, it is Victor, rather than Thomas, who expresses skepticism about the genuineness of Cathy's pleasantries: he notes that "everybody talks to everybody on airplanes," crediting the special circumstances for the momentary connection and, in the next breath, expressing disappointment at the fact that "we can't always be that way." The moment is a significant one because the adult Victor seems to have acquired some of the thoughtful realistic analysis that he could not manage as a boy on the Fourth of July. Indeed, Thomas himself, who has been a bit more superficial and accepting in his reaction to Cathy, notes the role reversal: "You always used to tell me I think too much... Now it sounds like you do" (*LR* 67). Victor credits Thomas with influencing him —or accuses him of it: "Maybe I caught it from you"(*LR* 67), and Thomas agrees. This brief encounter highlights Victor's movement from innocence to understanding of the realities of reservation —of race. However, as I noted earlier, his response to that knowledge has been an enraged desensitizing —the common response of the frustrated— while Thomas, who demonstrated a precocious grasp on the realities, has maintained a stoic majority of one, dedicated to the saving value of narrative. However, since oral narrative necessarily depends for its meaning on a communal relationship between teller and listener, a majority of one is not only paradoxical but self-defeating and so Thomas's commitment must be to community, to the lesson that his paternal vision had imparted: "*Take care of each other*." He has learned already, and painfully at times, that to force his stories on an audience is ineffective —he must find another means of attracting and contracting with an audience.

Finally, the story is not without hope for an integration of the force and passion of the Victor-side with the commitment and tradition of the Thomas-side because Thomas extracts a promise from Victor to stop "[j]ust one time when I am telling a story somewhere"(*LR* 75). And in that oral contract lies the hope for community —the willingness to participate together in the construction of meaning. The title reasserts itself here, I think, because for Victor and Thomas at least, Phoenix, Arizona, means connection and community, however momentary.

For Alexie, then, it is the loss of storytelling and the inherent communal quality of that tradition that constitutes a genocidal threat to Indian culture. Yet this is by no means the only threat to that culture. Alexie consistently takes the hegemony to task for its treatment of Native peoples —particularly for its economic exclusion of Native Americans from the possibilities of gaining power and "a political voice" in America. In a bitingly satiric essay entitled "Love, hunger and money... and other not-so-facetious reasons why the Spokane Indians want to bet on casinos," Alexie calls America to account for its continuing genocidal agenda:

> I have the distinct feeling that America is not placing any bets on the survival of Indians. America will not even allow Indians to become citizens of the 20th century. We're trapped somewhere between Custer and Columbus, between the noble and the savage. I've heard it said that Indians shouldn't become involved in high-stakes gambling because it tarnishes our noble heritage. Personally, I've never believed in the nobility of poverty. Personally, I believe in the nobility of breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Elsewhere Alexie has said, "I have a very specific commitment to Indian people, and I'm very tribal in that sense. I want us to survive *as* Indians"(qtd. in Marx 40). This desire for survival leads Alexie to scalding critiques of America's treatment of Indians, but he also assigns considerable responsibility to Indians who are complicitous in their own genocide because they refuse their communal responsibilities: "It's a two-way street. The system sets you up to fail, and then, somehow, you choose it" (qtd. in Marx 40). The permeable nature of the reservation boundary, then, is at once a means and a threat to Indian survival, with the challenge lying in the Indians' attempt to connect with economic (and political) possibility without sacrificing identity —a challenge that also arises in Alexie's first novel, *Reservation Blues*.

RESERVATION BLUES

Reservation Blues reintroduces the characters of Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor Joseph with some small alterations of background, but the narrative once again centers on the motifs of encounter, reservation, and assimilation. The novel, however, extends and complicates the dialogue by adding the element of integration, so that the problems of assimilation —especially that of the dilution of the traditional reservation culture— become physically manifest in the mixing of white and Indian blood.

The central setting, from which the protagonists depart and to which they return at several points during the novel, is once again the Spokane Indian Reservation. But,

the narrative technique of "This Is What It Means" was one of relatively straightforward third person realism with a peppering of realistic flashbacks conveyed either by the narrator or in tales told by Thomas, some of which take on more deeply mythic tones. The technique of *Reservation Blues* is quite different. In the novel, for instance, the narrator is much more willing to comically and sardonically assess the central action. Also, the narrative may at times delve into the dream lives of its characters and blur the distinctions between the waking and dream worlds, thereby undermining that distinction and undercutting any suggested dominance of one world over the other.

News clippings, journal entries, a police report, a radio interview, letters, running basketball scores: all these documents intermingle to further and comment on the narrative. Culturally mythic figures like the Mississippi blues legend Robert Johnson and the reservation earth mother figure Big Mom, a character modeled on Alexie's grandmother, interact with the more mundane, "realistic" inhabitants of the reservation. Historical figures such as U.S. Cavalry Generals George Wright and Philip Sheridan, who stand as the oppressive nineteenth-century governmental functionaries of the Spokane tribe's nightmare past, are present in this twentieth-century narrative in the form of talent scouts for the Cavalry Records label: no names are changed to protect anyone —"the analogy" collapses under the absurdity of recycling the exact names and the social commentary is blistering and unavoidable. Finally, the novel's main symbol is a guitar —passed from Johnson to Thomas to Victor— which has the magical properties of self-regeneration and speech.

The novel's title and its epigram from Robert Johnson, the refrain from his famous "Crossroads Blues," overtly equate the African-American and Native American experiences of encounter with white men and their false offers of assimilation into the hegemony. The blues are a music of the downtrodden and disenfranchised —a music that by definition cannot be genuine unless it is sung out of a genuine experience of loss and hardship.[9]

In *Reservation Blues*, Robert Johnson has come to the reservation seeking Big Mom, about whom he has dreamed, because he thinks she may be able to "fix" the "bad deal" he made years earlier with the Mephistophelean "Gentleman." This large Spokane woman who has appeared in earlier works by Alexie, is modeled on his maternal grandmother, Etta Adams (Marx 39), seems, in her present manifestation, to have been at least partly inspired by the novel's other epigram, which is taken from blues artist Charlie Mingus: God's old lady, she sure is a big chick." Johnson, then, has come to this reservation crossroads in an effort to rid himself of the burden of his own music which has so damaged his hands that he can no longer play. Ironically, the guitar that has been so hurtful to Johnson becomes the catalyst for uniting Thomas, Victor, and Junior Polatkin: its message to Thomas carries overtones of the message Victor's father had given Thomas in "This Is What It Means." The guitar's version of the injunction to "take care of each other" establishes music as a metaphor for communal spirit: "'all need to play songs for your people. They need you'" (*RB* 23).

Big Mom, who, like the archetypal guru she is, lives on top of a mountain (Wellpinit Mountain), does not age.[10] We learn in the first chapter that she was present, "one hundred and thirty-four years before Robert Johnson walked onto the Spokane Reservation," that is, in 1858, when, on September 8, the U. S. Cavalry,

led by then-Colonel George Wright, carried out a massacre of some 800 horses captured from the Spokane chief, Til-co-ax (Alexie, *Lone Ranger* 96). The horses slaughtered by Wright and his Bluecoats were living symbols of the Indians' mobility and war power and are therefore easily read as representative of the Indians themselves. Big Mom, who had taught the horses to sing, heard them scream a new song "not... of her teaching... so pained and tortured that Big Mom could never have imagined it before the white man came" (9). Big Mom becomes a witness to the massacre carried out by Wright: "One soldier, an officer, stepped down from his pony, walked over to the colt, gently touched its face, and whispered in its ear... put his pistol between its eyes and pulled the trigger"(10). But she is witness also to the historical echo of that gunshot, and Alexie does not allow the reader to miss the symbolic import of the fallen horses: "That colt fell to the grass of the clearing, to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern, to the cold, hard coroner's table in a Veteran's Hospital" (*RB* 10).[11] Big Mom, however, is no mere passive, sorrowing witness; her impulse is toward generation —it is the impulse of the artistic spirit— and out of the ribs of "the most beautiful horse" she builds a flute and plays "a new flute song every morning to remind everybody that music created and recreated the world daily" (*RB* 10). We also learn that the horses do not symbolize only the Native American spirit because the slaughtered horses return in "different forms and with different songs" and include names like Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Marvin Gaye. So the horses that "rose from everywhere" and "all fell back into the earth again" are all those who have "turned to Big Mom for rescue," all those spirits who have sought the connective possibilities —the communal elements— inherent in music. Indeed, the entire plot of the novel is founded on a musical trek —a group's effort to bring a genuine tribal music into the world beyond the reservation.

Inspired by John Fusco's *Crossroads* screenplay, Alexie establishes the subplot of Robert Johnson's legendary "deal with the devil" to stand as a foil to the narrative's main plot in which Thomas, Victor, and Junior form a rock/blues band that eventually is offered the possibility of a modern-day version of the Mephistophelian pact. In this case, the diabolical figures take the Mammonesque form of executives from the highly exploitative recording industry. To hammer home the oppressive nature of these business-suited, limousine-driven demons, Alexie makes his two executives George Wright and Phil Sheridan, two U.S. Cavalry officers —now Cavalry Records "officers"— who were instrumental in the violent suppression of Northwest Indian uprisings in the 1850s. Indeed, Sheridan, fresh out of West Point, cut his military teeth during this decade in campaigns against the Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Yakima, and Nez Perce tribe (Schuster 72). Following his Civil War experience, he would return to campaigning against Native American tribes and is now notorious as the source of the famous statement: "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (Brown 172).

In "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona," Thomas Builds-the-Fire was the character who, as storyteller, stood as the repository for and representative of the traditional tribal culture and identity. In *Reservation Blues*, he retains his symbolically central position, not only as storyteller, but to an even greater degree as the artistic heart of the band. In one of the book's wonderful running jokes concerning celebrity, whenever the band finds itself in a new situation, one of the first questions new people ask is "Who's the lead singer?" The lead singer, of course, is Thomas,

who christens the band Coyote Springs and notes in his journal that the name invokes one of the most widely known Native American trickster figures, and has a poetic ambiguity in that the second word may be read as a noun —making the band a natural source of life (music) from out of the earth — or as a verb —suggesting overtones of both joy and attack (*RB* 48). One of the notable qualities of tricksters is their ability to cross the boundaries between worlds, and such border-jumping is indeed what Coyote Springs does at several junctures in the narrative, with the most significant crossing being their anticlimactic trip to the recording studio to attempt initiation into celebrity and assimilation into the popular music world.

Ultimately, the initiation (at least as the band has envisioned it) fails and the offered assimilation is rejected. Wright and Sheridan, who offer the band an opportunity to record its music, betray their exploitative designs in a fax to their superior, Mr. Armstrong:

> Overall, this band really looks and sounds Indian. They all have dark skin. Chess, Checkers, and Junior all have long hair. Thomas has a big nose, and Victor has many scars. We're looking at some genuine crossover appeal. We can really dress this group up, give them war paint, feathers, etc., and really play up the Indian angle. I think this band could prove to be very lucrative for Cavalry Records.
> We should fly the band out to New York to do a little studio work perhaps. To see what they can do outside their home environment.
> Peace,
> Phil Sheridan
> George Wright (*RB* 190)

From an Indian perspective, such a closing preceding these two military, "peacekeeping" names can only be darkly laughable. This crucial transmission reveals the attitude not only of avaricious capitalists but of the dominant white culture in general, a culture which for hundreds of years has not only sequestered the native people in physically bound reservations but has also refused to view them outside of the ideologically confining stereotypes —the "Indian angle." Sheridan and Wright's final desire to see what Coyote Springs can do "outside their home environment" is entirely undercut by their previous strategy of dressing the group up like "Indians," as understood by a white culture weaned on Hollywood westerns. Sheridan and Wright seem to offer assimilation with one hand while fingering the money-clip of dehumanizing exploitation with the other.

When the band does arrive in the New York recording studio, they are confronted with Sheridan and Wright's boss, Armstrong, the CEO of Cavalry Records —the Great White Father figure and opposite of Big Mom; his name denotes both his power and his tactics. Whatever promises Wright and Sheridan have made "on location" at the reservation are summarily dispatched when Armstrong, after the magical guitar seems to sabotage Victor's attempt at playing "Urban Indian Blues," decides that Coyote Springs doesn't "have it" (*RB* 226). Just as the guitar has previously seemed both to enable Robert Johnson to achieve fame and to hurt him with its diabolical power, the instrument once again seems to betray its bearer —this time, Victor:

> At first, the music flowed as usual, like a stream of fire through his fingers and the strings. Victor remembered how much the music had hurt him before. That guitar had scarred his hands, yet he had mastered the pain. He thought he could have placed his calloused hands into any fire and never felt the burning. But then, as the song moved forward, bar by bar, his fingers slipped off the strings and frets. The guitar bucked in his hands, twisted away from his body. He felt a razor slice across his palms. (*RB* 225)

This particular studio encounter then is not solely about the dismissive attitude and decisive finality leveled on Indian culture by the white opportunistic capitalist hegemony. The two elements of Victor's failure to manage the music and the instrument's apparent resistance to the success of the song suggest a psychological or psycho cultural fear of and withdrawal from assimilation into the mainstream culture on the part of reservation Indians. As a symbol, the relationship between the guitar-player and the guitar could be viewed as imaging the relationship between the artist and his art: that art is the means to express the self or the truth as the individual artist perceives it, and that truth may often be hurtful to the one who must make contact with it and present it, *and* may ultimately resist being sold to an opportunistic and unappreciative audience.

Alexie adds biting irony to the scenario when Cavalry immediately signs a duo of white female, New-Age, Seattle, bookstore-owners-turned-folk-singers who have formerly been both groupies of and backup singers for Coyote Springs, as well as sexual partners of Victor and Junior. Alexie names this pair of Native American wannabes, Betty and Veronica, an obvious allusion (at least to a particular cross-section of readers) to Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge, the ever-present white middle- and upper-class girlfriends of Archie Comics fame. To ensure that readers don't miss the allusion, Alexie draws particular attention to the "comic" coincidence of these women's names during Thomas's radio interview: when Thomas tells KROK Seattle's D.J., Adam the Original (another name that has its archetypal resonances), the women's names, Adam replies with an incredulous "really?", to which Thomas replies in the affirmative (158). For an American comic book culture, there are perhaps no two names that are more immediately identifiable as stereotypes of the sweet, white, all-American girl (Betty) and the privileged wasp princess (Veronica). Just as Cathy the gymnast —a name perhaps intended to invoke the wholesome image of the first widely famed American gymnast, Cathy Rigby— represented limited white sympathy for and with Native Americans in "This Is What It Means," Betty and Veronica provide *Reservation Blues* with another level of encounter between Indian and white cultures. Wright and Sheridan presented the age-old strong-arm tactics of their namesakes, strategies which find their twentieth century equivalent in the form of commodification of the Indian culture, which entails a reinstating and reinforcing of stereotypes founded on the perceptions of the hegemony. Betty and Veronica, although they seem to be sympathetic with Indians, suffer a kind of cultural myopia regarding Indians that leads them to a response that is perhaps, because of its insidious nature, worse than the response offered by Wright, Sheridan, and Armstrong.

During Thomas's radio interview, Adam the Original, having gotten Thomas to talk about Betty and Veronica, asks what these two women have to gain from their

involvement with the band, to which question Thomas replies with a satiric portrait of New Age Wannabe Indianism:

> Look at them. They got more Indian jewelry and junk on than any dozen Indians. The spotlights hit the crystals on their necks and nearly blinded me once. All they talk about is Coyote this and Coyote that, sweatlodge this and sweatlodge that. They think Indians got all the answers. (*RB* 158)

This statement resonates against one made earlier in the novel by Chess Warm Water: "You ain't really Indian unless there was some point in your life that you didn't want to be"(*RB* 98). Chess and her sister Checkers are Flathead Indians, from the reservation in Arlee, Montana; they join Coyote Springs during a performance at a cowboy bar in Ellensberg, Washington. That we are intended to see them as spiritual doubles or contraries of Betty and Veronica seems clear. Their names, like those of the white women, are closely related to one another —two games of different levels of complexity and different strategy but played on the same board. At another point, we discover that Betty and Veronica's bookstore was named "Doppelgangers," implying that we should either view them as doubles for one another or as doubles for some other pair. Both sets of women act as singers for Coyote Springs, and while Betty and Veronica pair off with the more earthy, less spiritual, Victor and Junior, Chess gravitates almost immediately toward the more spiritual and traditional Thomas, and Checkers ends up developing a crush on Father Arnold, the Spokane Reservation's resident Catholic priest —a spiritual leader of another kind.

Perhaps most interesting for this essay's discussion of encounter and assimilation is the way in which these two different sets of women enable Alexie to examine and comment upon the desire for the other that is a complex component of the contention/fascination that exists between the dominating culture and those it dominates. As representative white women, Betty and Veronica embody an Indian male fantasy of reconquest or at least of revenge on the oppressor; when Betty and Veronica go home with Junior and Victor, Indian boys sneak around the house in hopes of seeing the white women naked:

> All of them swore they saw the white women naked, then bragged it wasn't the first time they'd seen a naked white woman. None of them had seen a naked Indian woman, let alone a white woman. But the number of naked white women who had visited the Spokane Indian Reservation rapidly grew in the boys' imaginations, as if the size of their lies proved they were warriors. (*RB* 42)

Later, when Thomas and Chess discover Betty and Veronica naked with Victor and Junior in the back of the Coyote Springs van, Chess demonstrates a strong preservationist bias against Indian-white sexual involvement:

> She hated Indian men who chased after white women; she hated white women who chased after Indian men... "And you know," Chess said, "as traditional as it sounds, I think Indian men need Indian women. I think only Indian women can take care of Indian men. Jeez, we give birth to Indian men. We feed them. We hold them when they cry. Then they run off with white women. I'm sick of it." (*RB* 81)

Thomas agrees with Chess's preservationist instincts, and yet he cannot help imagining the possibility of assimilation through love, the possibility of transcending a racial division that causes so much persecution: "he also knew about the shortage of love in the world. He wondered if people should celebrate love wherever it's found, since it is so rare. He worried about the children of mixed-blood marriages. The half-breed kids at the reservation school suffered worse beatings than Thomas ever did" (*RB* 82). Thomas even goes on to create a story of love between a pair of "half-brothers," one Indian, one white, who live on the reservation. Just as Alexie as storyteller ransacks white popular culture sources for resonant names, so Thomas as storyteller uses the names of the quintessential battling-but-supportive-brother icons of American television reruns, Wally and Beaver of *Leave It to Beaver*:

> A long time ago, two boys lived on a reservation. One was an Indian named Beaver, and the other was a white boy named Wally. Both loved to fancydance, but the white boy danced a step fancier. When the white boy won contests, all the Indian boys beat him up. But Beaver never beat up on the white boy. No matter how many times he got beat up, that white boy kept dancing... Maybe it means drums make everyone feel like an Indian. (*RB* 82-83)

This issue of crossbreeding as a barometer of feelings and attitudes on both sides of the reservation/assimilation/integration complex recurs throughout the novel. Chess will ultimately "propose" to Thomas a union based largely on reservation and preservation of race, telling him she wants to "have lots of brown babies" with him so that they can give those babies "the best thing... [t]wo brown faces" (*RB* 284). Thomas agrees.

Chess's choice comes as the result of Junior's suicide, which Alexie presents as caused by feelings of loss connected with a white woman named Lynn with whom Junior shared an intimate relationship and conceived a child when he was in college. Lynn rejected Junior's proposal of marriage because he was Indian and would be unacceptable to her parents as a son-in-law, and she aborted the child, which fact the reader learns of from a note she wrote to Junior which he always carried in his wallet. Chess actually makes her decision, ironically enough, based on a fiction; Victor tells her that Junior's child is a ten-year-old boy named Charles, whom Junior was never allowed to see because the mother's parents had sent the child away. The story may be fiction in detail, but situationally it carries the truth of Junior's dilemma. In Junior's case, he had been the "side" willing to integrate, to assimilate, to give up the self-preserving reservation, but he met with rejection and a jettisoning of the embodiment of the union he had sought.

Chess makes her decision from the preservationist stance: she envisions Junior's half-breed child as being comprised of two halves constantly at war with one another —a counterpoint to Thomas's Wally and Beaver story— and she envisions nothing but pain for that child and his white mother whom she apostrophizes in an internal monologue. Chess first advises the white woman on how to spare her son the torment of being accepted by neither the white nor the Indian cultures, of having neither reservation nor assimilation; next she envisions a race of future "fractional" Indians who would result from such interracial unions —fractions produced, and progressively

reduced, by the white side's efforts to breed the Indian blood back down to insignificant and acceptable levels. From this vision of the future, Chess makes a plea against interracial reproduction because the partially Indian later generations would become a threat to full-blood Indians by being more acceptable for assimilation into the hegemony as white-looking Indians than would their pure-bred cousins:

> Those quarter-blood and eighth-blood grandchildren will find out they're Indian and torment the rest of us real Indians. They'll come out to the reservation, come to our powwows, in their nice clothes and nice cars, and remind the real Indians how much we don't have. Those quarter-bloods and eighth-bloods will get all the Indian jobs, all the Indian chances, because they look white. Because they're safer. (*RB* 283)

And Chess's reasoning here is not without support within the events of the novel. Betty and Veronica win the contract with Cavalry Records based on this very mechanism of workable racial fractions. Armstrong signs Betty and Veronica to a recording contract on the day after Coyote Springs' studio fiasco, based on the ability to genuinely sell them from the "Indian angle." Sheridan makes the pitch on precisely the "part-Indian" line of reasoning that Chess has warned about:

> "I mean, they had some grandmothers or something that were Indian. Really. We can still sell the Indian idea. We don't need any goddamn just-off-the-reservation Indians. We can use these women. They've been on the reservations. They even played a few gigs with Coyote Springs. Don't you see? These women have got the Indian experience down. They really understand what it means to be Indian... We dress them up a little. Get them into the tanning booth. Darken them up a bit. Maybe a little plastic surgery on those cheekbones. Get them a little higher, you know? Dye their hair black. Then we'd have Indians. People want to hear Indians." (*RB* 269)

The absurdity of physically altering these two white women to look like the buying public's stock version of just-off-the-reservation Indians highlights the genocidal impulse hidden within the white culture's offers of assimilation: in Alexie's view, the white wielders of economic power are willing to accept only their own controlled and superficial version of reservation Indian culture —Cavalry Records had Indians in their studio but prefer to construct their own white-centered version. Nineteenth-century white culture pursued a military genocidal agenda against the Indians; and the twentieth-century culture appears to be pursuing an ideological agenda that is no less genocidal in that it does not seek to accept Indians on their own terms but must instead redefine them into some spiritual visionary movement open for membership to any white who comes looking. Earlier, when Betty and Veronica decide to leave the reservation because it does not meet their expectations, Chess points out the one-sidedness of their perspective on Indian life:

> "You want the good stuff of being Indian without all the bad stuff, enit? Well a concussion is just as traditional as a sweatlodge... You come running to the reser-

> vations, to all these places you've decided are sacred. Jeez, don't you know *every* place is sacred? You want your sacred land in warm places with pretty views. You want your sacred places to be near malls and 7-Elevens, too." (*RB* 184)

When Thomas drives Betty and Veronica off the reservation and drops them off at the Spokane bus station and asks them if they will be alright, they ask him what the difference is between where they are and the reservation, to which he replies, "More pine trees on the reservation' (186). Thomas's comment hammers home the idea that only whites who do not comprehend the hardships of reservation life see the reservation as some kind of spiritual oasis, protected by tradition from material struggle and emotional despair.

Near the close of the novel, Betty and Veronica send Thomas and the other members of Coyote Springs a tape of the first song for their debut CD. The song begins with "a vaguely Indian drum, then a cedar flute, and a warrior's trill, all the standard Indian soundtrack stuff" (*RB* 295). The song's refrain unabashedly states the appropriation of an easy version of Indian culture for use as a spiritual salve by the exploitative and spiritually bankrupt white hegemony:

> *And my hair is blond*
> *But I'm Indian in my bones*
> *And my skin is white*
> *But I'm Indian in my bones*
> *And it don't matter who you are*
> *You can be Indian in your bones (RB 295)*

Thomas has an immediate violent response to this theft that is tribal and personal, highlighting the very experiences of being Indian that Wannabe Indians can neither claim nor appreciate, but which they can threaten by commandeering and altering the criteria for identification as an Indian. Thomas's reaction is, to risk a Christian allusion, an expulsion of the money-changers from the temple:

> Thomas hit the eject button, threw the cassette on the floor, and stomped on it. He pulled the tape ribbon from its casing until it spread over the kitchen like pasta. Using a dull knife, he sliced the tape ribbon into pieces. Then he ran around his house, grabbing photos and souvenirs, afraid that somebody was going to steal them next. He had photographs of his mother and father, a Disneyland cup even though he'd never been there, a few letters and cards. He gathered them all into a pile on the kitchen table and waited. (*RB* 296)

But ultimately Thomas and Chess and Checkers do not simply wait on the reservation. The three decide to move into Spokane where Chess has secured a job as an operator with the telephone company, an occupation involved with connections and communication. Their choice to leave the reservation alters the relationship between reservation and preservation that has been implied at earlier points in the narrative, for although Chess and Thomas have earlier made a commitment to preserving a racial purity, they do not seem to feel that fulfilling this commitment requires the

setting of the reservation. In fact, the implication seems to be that their commitment to a unified and hopeful future is precisely what requires their courageous passage into the world beyond the reservation. And as they leave the borders of the reservation in the novel's final pages, having received Big Mom's blessing and the support of the Spokane tribe, Alexie returns to his opening image of horses as symbols for Indian mobility and bravery and creates a transformative vision of the blue van carrying Thomas, Chess, and Checkers, accompanied by shadow horses running alongside. The final paragraph is a beginning and provides a celebration of life: "They were alive; they'd keep on living. They sang together with the shadow horses: we are alive, we'll keep on living" (*RB* 306). The novel's close returns also to the motifs of music and of dream as unifying forces holding Indians together. Big Mom's final song is "a protection song, so none of the Indians, not one, would forget who they are" (*RB* 306).

The implication of the novel's final scene, then, is that preservation is not a matter of reservation, that identity is always at risk from the lures of assimilation and integration, and that the tribal responsibility —the protection against forgetting each other— exists regardless of setting, and holds all Indians together, whether they are moving "toward the city," or "traditional dancing in the Longhouse after the feast," or standing "drunk... outside the Trading Post, drinking and laughing" (306). This final song that binds the tribe together recalls the injunction of Victor's father in "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona" —"Take care of each other"— and recalls too the promise Thomas extracts from Victor —the promise to listen to one story. Like the song purely sung, the story purely told and received embodies the instant of connection, communication, and community that is the central fire of the tribe.

For Sherman Alexie, then, assimilation would seem to be a necessary component of Indian survival in the twenty-first century, whether that assimilation be a matter of continued urban migration of reservation Indians or the establishment of casinos on Indian lands. That Alexie is conflicted about assimilation and its relationship to Indian survival seems clear; the fear of a loss of cultural purity, of a dilution of identity as a result of integration with mainstream America, is palpable at the close of *Reservation Blues*. Yet elsewhere, he contends that "discussions about self-hate or cultural dislocation... the loss of land and language" are complicated issues that can hardly be expected to concern Indians who are "worrying about where their next meal is coming from" ("Love, hunger"). Assimilation in Alexie's understanding seems a function of economic need: Alexie applauds the casino on the Spokane Indian Reservation as "proof that the Spokanes have embraced capitalism" ("Love, hunger") But, while he approves the choice, he does not pretend it is unproblematic: "Does that frighten me? Of course. But I think it's more important to ask the non-Indians why they are frightened of it" ("Love, hunger").

This statement may provide a key to grasping Alexie's vision of the twenty-first century American Indian will need to do and be: he or she must move (indeed, has already moved) to assimilate with mainstream American culture on an economic level but remain embattled on a political level, seeking more money as a means to more political power, while simultaneously seeking to maintain community with other Indians. Storytelling —and this is certainly true for Alexie as a writer who appeals to both Indian and non-Indian audiences— becomes yet another permeable boundary in

the dialectic of assimilation and reservation; through storytelling (whether it be in the form of novel, short story, oral narrative, poem, or blues song) Indians can connect with one another through shared experience, humorous and painful, and can offer non-Indians a view of reservation life that may help to make them aware of the abuses suffered by Indians at the hands of the dominant culture. For Alexie, storytelling can achieve this only through a rejection of romanticized versions of Indians: "I don't try to mythologize myself, which is what some seem to want, and which some Indian women and men writers are doing, this Earth Mother and Shaman Man thing, trying to create these `authentic, traditional' Indians. We don't live our lives that way" (qtd. in Marx 40). I do not think, particularly after looking at the salmon symbol in "This Is What It Means" and Big Mom in *Reservation Blues*, that Alexie is saying that mythology has no place in writing, but that its inclusion must be balanced by realistic detail —the hard facts of suicide, alcoholism, hopelessness, and hunger— and a satiric tone —the not-so-gentle reminder of complicities, or else readers, both Indian and non-Indian, may be distracted by grand spiritual concepts of cultural identity and forget the necessity of simple economic survival. Both "This Is What It Means" and Reservation Blues suggest in their endings that the possibility for survival is present for American Indians, but it would be naive to say that the outlook at the end of either work was entirely positive —in each case, the protagonists remain at risk, but in each case, they are not alone, sharing the bond of song, of narrative, of history.

Notes

[1] Originally published in *Esquire* in 1993, "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona" was also selected by Tobias Wolff for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories of 1994* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994) 1-11. The "Contributor's Notes" to that volume incorporate brief statements by each contributor concerning the background and genesis of the selected story. Alexie's statement reveals the autobiographical origins of the story, including the fact that immediately after returning to Spokane and learning of the suicide of a high school friend named Thomas, Alexie made an actual trip to Phoenix, Arizona, to help a childhood friend named Steve settle his father's affairs. Steve had learned of his father's death from a heart attack immediately after informing Alexie of their friend's suicide:

> Steve and I flew to Phoenix to take care of his father's affairs just a few hours after Thomas's funeral. Steve and I talked about death on the flight down, in Phoenix, and on the long drive back home. We haven't talked about death since. I needed to write about it, however, so I dropped two of my cast of characters into the story line and blurred the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. As Simon Ortiz, the Acoma writer, says, "If it's fiction, it better be true." (qtd. in Wolff 330)

The note does not state whether Steve's father was cremated or whether this was a detail suggested to Alexie by the flight to Phoenix. Either way, the origins of the story do demonstrate the gifted writer's alertness to and willingness to accept the serendipitous even when its source is loss.

[2] Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire are part of what Alexie calls his "cast of characters" and therefore appear throughout his works. Interestingly, in "Every Little Hurri-

cane," another story from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, a nine-year-old Victor witnesses the same kind of anger born of frustrated love when he watches a pair of "blood" brothers —his uncles Adolph and Arnold— fighting drunkenly with one another during the course of a New Year's Eve party in his parents' house:

> Adolph soon had the best of Arnold, though, and was trying to drown him in the snow. Victor watched as his uncle held his other uncle down, saw the look of hate and love on his uncle's face and the terrified arms of his other uncle flailing uselessly. Then it was over. Adolph let Arnold loose, even pulled him to his feet, and they both stood facing each other. They started to yell again, unintelligible and unintelligent... Victor could almost smell the sweat and whiskey and blood. (*LR* 3)

An important detail to note here is that the sudden break in hostility, averting any fatality, does not relieve the tension and animosity. Although Thomas and Victor do seem to achieve a momentary truce at the close of "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona," when the reader encounters them again in *Reservation Blues*, Victor —accompanied by Junior Polatkin— is once again treating Thomas with cruelty, attempting to get him to cease his storytelling, and smashing the guitar that Thomas will later give to Victor, but Victor's deeper feeling of connection with Thomas pulls him up short of hurting Thomas further:

> Still, Victor never actually hurt him too seriously. Victor's natural father had liked Thomas for some reason. Victor remembered that and seemed to pull back at the last second, left bruises and cuts but didn't break bones. After Victor's father died, Thomas had flown with Victor to Phoenix to help pick up the ashes. Some people said that Thomas even paid for Victor's airplane tickets. Thomas just did things that made no sense at all. (*LR* 17)

[3] All quotations from Sherman Alexie's short stories refer to his collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and are designated by *LR*; all references to Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues* are designated by *RB*.

[4] Thomas Builds-the-Fire has a different parental situation in *Reservation Blues*. In the novel, Thomas's mother, Susan, "died of cancer when Thomas was ten years old," while his father, Samuel, who "had been drunk since the day after his wife's wake," appears in the novel as a pathetic picture of the reservation drunk, at one point laid out on Thomas's kitchen table in a kind of mock wake. This scene creates the impetus for a discussion between Thomas and the Warm Water sisters, Chess and Checkers, who are Flathead Indians from Montana who have joined the band; the conversation examines the undermined nature of fatherhood on the reservation, resulting from the pervasive poverty, alcoholism, and despair.

[5] It is the custom of the phoenix when its course of years is finished, and the approach of death is felt, to build a nest in its native clime, Arabia, and there deposit the principles of life, from which a new progeny arises. The first care of the young bird, as soon as fledged and able to trust to its wings, is to perform the obsequies of its father. But his duty is not undertaken rashly. He collects a great quantity of myrrh, and to try his strength, makes frequent excursions with a load on his back. When he has made his experiment through a great tract of air, and gains sufficient confidence in his own vigour, he takes up the body of his father and flies with it to the Altar of the Sun, where he leaves it to be consumed in flames of fragrance. Such is the account of this wonderful bird. (Tacitus, qtd. in May 633-34)

Then from his father's body is born
A little Phoenix, so they say, to live
The same long years. When time has built his strength
With power to raise the weight, he lifts the nest—
The nest his cradle and his father's tomb—
As love and duty prompt, from that tall palm
And carries it across the sky to reach
The Sun's great city, and before the doors
Of the Sun's holy temple lays it down. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Book XV) 377)

[6] Alexie's conscious use of the allusion is further strengthened by a similar allusion in "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire," another story in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. In this surreal story, Thomas is put on trial for his storytelling and as a scapegoat for historical Indians who resisted the white man —Indians who live on in him as part of the stories he tells. After relating the story of U.S. Cavalry General George Wright's September 1858 slaughter of 800 Spokane horses, the judge asks Thomas to continue his testimony. At this point, Alexie's narrator uses an allusion to the phoenix myth to characterize the nature of stories: "Thomas closed his eyes, and a new story was raised from the ashes of older stories" (*LR* 98).

[7] In a May 10, 1993, "Talk of the Town" piece on Sherman Alexie, entitled "Fancydancer," *The New Yorker* writer wittily noted that perhaps the only "legacy" of the 1974 World's Fair held in "the nondescript Northwestern city of Spokane" was removal of an innercity rail yard, which had obscured from view "a roaring stretch of the Spokane River." The article goes on to note that the Spokane Falls were "a spiritual center for the Spokane, a nomadic American Indian tribe whose name means `children of the sun'"(38). The article also takes special note of Alexie's use, in his early work, of the term "salmontraveling," which calls to mind "the salmon's sometimes bloody fight upstream, hurling itself over falls and rocks to spawn" (39).

[8] Thomas's and Victor's sharing of a bicycle seems particularly apt in that it parallels their other "sharings" in the story: the airplane trip to Phoenix, the pickup truck drive home, and the ashes of Victor's father. Also, the bicycle can be seen as symbolizing the relationship of these two men, for just as they each need the other in order to move forward so the two wheels of a bicycle are part of a single vehicle and therefore require each other —even though they may be said to "move in different circles" —if the bicycle is to function and move forward.

[9] In Walter Hill's 1985 Columbia Pictures film, *Crossroads*, the influence of which Alexie acknowledges, the black bluesman, Willy Jones, ridicules his young white apprentice when the boy calls himself a "blues man." Willy explains to the young Eugene that a white boy from Long Island who lives in a dorm room at Julliard is hardly a candidate for playing genuine blues. It is a notion that Eugene, through his aid to Willy and his own confrontation with the devil, must and does disabuse Willy of by the film's end —but only after Eugene has left his educational haven to acquire the blues musician's necessary road education of loss and hardship.

[10] While Big Mom's longevity in *Reservation Blues* suggests that she is an immortal of some kind, elsewhere in Alexie's fictions her longevity is presented as limited. In the short story "A Drug Called Tradition," in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Victor relates his and Thomas's and Junior's visions of one another after each has taken some of

the "new drug" Victor has acquired. This drug, tradition, gives them visions of themselves accomplishing heroic feats: Victor steals a horse named "Flight"; Thomas, sole survivor of a tribal smallpox epidemic dances to resurrect his dead tribe "from the ashes," to bring buffalo crashing down on white settlements, and ultimately to drive the white men back to Europe; Junior plays songs that are "little pieces of Indian wisdom" to a crowd that is primarily Indian and which includes an Indian President of the United States, Mr. Edgar Crazy Horse. Later, having cast away the remainder of the drug, Victor sits with Junior in their usual pose in Junior's good-looking but barely functional Camaro in front of the Trading Post. Big Mom, described here as "the spiritual leader of the Spokane tribe" with "so much good medicine... she may have been the one who created the earth" (*LR* 23), confronts Victor with her knowledge of his tradition-drug-trip vision and gives him a ancient and tiny drum that she refers to as her "pager," implying his ever-present ability to call upon tradition. In the story's final paragraph, Victor refers to Big Mom's death "a couple years back," but Victor does not appear to view her death as necessarily obfuscating her answering his summons: "I'm not sure she'd come even if the thing did work," he says, but the fact that he keeps it "really close... just in case" illustrates his belief in the possibility of Big Mom's immortal power and aligns with his response to Thomas, whom he seeks at the time of his father's death because he feels a "need for tradition."

[11] In "Every Little Hurricane," in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie writes bitterly of the passivity endemic to the role of witness:

> "They're [Victor's uncles, Adolph and Arnold] going to kill each other," somebody yelled from an upstairs window. Nobody disagreed and nobody moved to change the situation. Witnesses. They were all witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale. Victor's uncles were in the midst of a misdemeanor that would remain one even if somebody was to die. One Indian killing another did not create a special kind of storm. This little kind of hurricane was generic. It didn't even deserve a name."(3)

As in "This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona," names and meanings are indicative of ones's political position and relationship to power.

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