

## Coyote Springs' White Shadows: Confrontation and Coexistence of White and Indian Worlds in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

MARÍA LAURA ARCE ÁLVAREZ  
CENTRO IBN GABIROL

---

**ABSTRACT:** Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, as one of the most important literary works written by a Native American, becomes the space where the White European culture and the stereotypes that the former has created about Native American people coexist and are confronted. Moreover, Alexie transforms the literary space into the frontier where the interchange between these two discourses results in the construction of a new identity, a new Native American who challenges the stereotypes while voicing their silence. All this is symbolized by the reservation as the barrier they have to cross everyday, leading them to the negotiation of two different identities at the same time.

**Keywords:** Native American literature, Postcolonial literature, multiculturalism, race.

**RESUMEN:** La novela *Reservation Blues* de Sherman Alexie, como una de las obras literarias más importantes escrita por un Nativo Americano, se convierte en el espacio donde la cultura americana europea y los estereotipos que ha creado de los nativos americanos se confrontan y coexisten. Alexie transforma el espacio literario en la frontera donde el intercambio entre estos dos discursos desemboca en la construcción de una nueva identidad, un nuevo Nativo Americano que desafía los estereotipos y le da voz a su silencio. Todo ello simbolizado en la reserva como el obstáculo que deben cruzar todos los días, y por lo tanto, el salto hacia dos identidades diferentes al mismo tiempo.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura nativo-americana, literatura poscolonial, multiculturalismo, raza.

In his essay *Native American Indian Literature* Gerald Vizenor (1996: 26) states that “the name Indian is a convenient word, to be sure, but is an invented name that does not come from any native language, and does not describe or contain any aspects of traditional tribal experience and literature”. This claim for cultural representation and identity definition continues in Vizenor’s words: “Indian, the noun, is a simulation of racialism, an undesirable separation of race in the political and cultural interests of discovery and colonial settlement of new nations” (Vizenor, 1996: 26). It can be concluded from this assertion that the Native American community, as a group who suffers a situation of internal colonization, is the victim of a process of cultural annihilation and, at the same time, cultural reconstruction in order to falsely integrate it in a society that paradoxically needs to maintain them in its margins. As in every colonized society, the Native Americans, although they were the truly Americans who wrote American history until the arrival of the Europeans, were relegated to the “other” category. However, this social restructuring could only occur if they were redefined by the White Europeans. In terms of colonialism, history is always written by the winners and, consequently, oppressors. In this sense, the alternative discourse that these individuals in the margin create, thrown out of their own lands, is one of cultural change, cultural loss, cultural reconstruction, which is summarized in a discourse of identity. Part of the colonialist process consisted in cultural erasure in order to establish a new political, economic and social system ruled by different cultural and traditional principles, and to establish a racial system which, according to Richard Drinnon, quoted in Vizenor (1996: 28), was principally dedicated to transforming the Indian into the other who, consequently, would become nobody and therefore would be exterminated:

Racism defined natives as nonpersons within the settlement culture and was in a real sense the enabling experience of the rising American empire: Indian-hating identified the dark *others* that white settlers were not and must not under any circumstances become, and it helped them wrest a continent and more from the hands of these native caretakers of the lands. (Vizenor, 1996: 28)

Hartwig Isernhagen (in Bataille, 2001: 176) states in the essay *Identity and Exchange* that “the procedure of separating The Indian from history tries to do two incompatible things at once - to legitimize the conquest and to develop a ‘good’ view of history”. However, and in spite of colonialism and postcolonial efforts, America’s essence resides in its multiculturalism, a plurality that nowadays seems to be constituted by those who are not White Europeans but which originally marked the difference with the Natives who populated American land. The problem with the Native American goes beyond those problems immigrant groups have to face in the United States. Whereas first and second generations of

immigrant communities are looking for integration in a new space, Natives are completely lost in their land; they have been deprived from their vital area and, moreover, displaced to the margins in order to make them gradually disappear. In this way, race, a social frontier rather than a genetic distinction, becomes a strategy to protect what the White Americans want to set up as the American community. Homi Bhabha (1998: 70) explains in *The Location of Culture* what the role and function of race are in the colonial discourse:

It is an apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for a “subject peoples” through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited. [...] The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. [...] I am referring to a form of governmentality that in marking out a “subject nation”, appropriates, directs and dominates its various spheres of activity.

Since total extermination was not and is not possible, Native Americans found in literature a space to voice their history, where their existence seemed, at least for them, permitted. David L. Moore (in Bataille, 2001: 52) formulates this idea when he asserts that in order for the new American community to constitute itself as the most powerful empire, it had to make the Indian vanish “whose *pluribus* nature has never found a welcome in the *unum*”. Hence, he continues, native literary formulations “suggest patterns by which Americans might conceive of a *pluribus unum* as community built on difference rather than on making differences vanish” (Bataille, 2001: 53). At this point of the analysis, it is important to introduce the concept of postcolonialism as the immediate historical consequence of colonial discourse. The American Revolution implied a disassociation from the British Empire but left the European colonies autonomous in a Native American land. For this reason, the supposed decolonization of America never took place, since natives were still under the control and domination of a group of White Europeans who had stolen their lands and had manipulated their way of living. In relation to this, Louis Owens (in Bataille, 2001: 14-15) states that

America never became postcolonial. The indigenous inhabitants of North America can stand anywhere on the continent and look in every direction at a home usurped and colonized by strangers who, from the very beginning, laid claim not merely to the land and resources but to the very definition of the Natives.

In this context, I am going to bring back Vizenor’s clarification of the Indian concept which certifies that the Indian is a colonial invention, the White

Europeans' artifact. Likewise, the discussion of the "other" emerges with this false representation of the Native American. In order to be considered as the "other", the difference that separates the Indian from the *unum* would be marked by race and, as a result, visibility stands as one of the most important features of identity. Bhabha (1998: 81) explains the concept of the *other* in these terms:

The visibility of the racial / colonial Other is at once a *point* of identity ("Look, a Negro") and at the same time a *problem* for the attempted closure within discourse. For the recognition of difference as "imaginary" points of identity and origin - such as black and white - is disturbed by the representation of splitting in the discourse.

As I have mentioned before, David L. Moore proposes the figure of the vanishing Indian, or in other words, the invisible Indian, who results in a contrary reception of what the colonial discourse expects, since his racial difference is a visible sign of the *pluribus* that characterizes America. On this account, the "other", essential for the sustenance of the colonial structure, becomes the central pillar of multicultural society. Although other ethnic groups suffer the same racial discrimination, represent the "other" in American society and share with the Natives the marginal areas, they can be considered postcolonial subjects who live, in terms of Homi Bhabha, in an "in-between space" that constantly crosses cultural barriers. Natives have been surrounded by geographical and cultural frontiers which are part of the cultural assimilation they are forced to undergo. Hartwig Isernhagen (in Bataille, 2001: 174) makes a comparison between Native Americans and African Americans in an essay that discusses the representation of the Natives in the WPA Federal Writing Project, concluding that the African Americans "constituted the more urgent social, economic, and cultural problem - and therefore had those special programs assigned to them". In comparison to the Natives, Isernhagen (in Bataille, 2001: 175) writes that "there was simply no perception of Native Americans as a topic of comparable interest or sensitivity in the FWP central administration's day-to-day work, and this reduces the presence of Indians almost to zero".

It can be argued that Natives have been cornered to reservations; this separated space is the place where Natives are allowed to exist, but stripped of their lands which, according to their traditions, contain all their history as well as the essence of their existence and culture. Once they were removed from there, it seems that a brutal disconnection with life and, accordingly with their identity, occurred. Since then, they had to try to live enclosed by the limits of the reservation. It is remarkable how the aim of this process of incarceration, apart from being a colonial political strategy, is, in relation to colonial politics, a process of identity and cultural erasure. If the immigrant ethnic groups that take part in American society live a situation that, in Bhabha's words, can be described

as an existence in an “in-between space”, Native Americans actually live in a physical “in-between space” with real frontiers that must be crossed everyday. The boundary marks the difference, as Bill Ashcroft (2000: 108) indicates when he explains in the “frontier” entry that

the frontier or boundary that limited the space so defined was a crucial feature in imagining the imperial self, and in creating and defining those others by which that “Self” could achieve definition and value. That which lies “beyond the pale” is often defined literally as the other, the dark, the savage and the wild.

Thus, the jump to the other side for the Native American is daily, especially when the frontier in terms of cultural preservation is blurred, and many of the Native traditions have been contaminated by American popular culture. Not only that, but contamination becomes necessary in order to survive in a world where at present not even reservations have a space.

Louis Owen presents the European American representation of Native Americans as a mirror game in which one side of the mirror reflects the Native and the other, the European American. In Owen’s (in Bataille, 2001: 17) words:

European America holds a mirror and a mask up to the Native American. The tricky mirror is that Other presence that reflects the Euro-American consciousness back at itself, but the side of the mirror turned toward the Native is transparent, letting the Native see not his or her own reflection but the face of the Euro-American beyond the mirror. For the dominant culture the Euro-American controlling this surveillance, the reflection provides merely a self-recognition that results in a kind of being-for itself and, ultimately, as Fanon suggests, an utter absence of certainty of self.

This interpretation describes very neatly the position as Other that the Natives finally have through the eyes of the powerful. Although it is a fake representation, as Louis Owen explains, the Natives must position behind that mask the European Americans have created for them in order to be visible for the society they live in. Owen (in Bataille, 2001: 17) asserts:

In order to be recognized, and to thus have a voice that is heard by those in control of power, the Native must step into that mask and be the Indian constructed by white America. Paradoxically, of course, like the mirror, the mask merely shows the Euro-American to himself, since the masked Indian arises out of the European consciousness, leaving the Native behind the mask unseen, unrecognized for himself or herself.

Accordingly, Natives, in a way, are condemned to be Indians in the terms that Vizenor defined them as the White Europeans' artifact. They have the necessity to play their stereotypes because only in that way they will have a place in society. Still, the individual who interacts in American society is not the Native but the Indian, in other words, the Native disguised in his or her stereotype. Undoubtedly, this false process of social integration has as a result an identity conflict which seems not to be solved, and which would be translated into what Isernhagen calls a "discourse of exchange". Once the Native sacrifices his or her indigenous existence to become part of the colonial discourse, it can be argued that one of the ways in which this individual can partially maintain his or her culture and tradition is through a discourse that allows the Native to infiltrate, at least in an ordinary and trivial way, their real identity. I use the words "ordinary" and "trivial" to describe this process of intrusion in European American society because, in my opinion, it is one of the ways in which the dominant culture does not feel threatened by the Other. Isernhagen (in Bataille, 2001: 184-185) explains the principles of the "discourse of exchange" in the following terms:

It has been suggested by the thought that in focusing on the everyday this discourse tends to represent interaction across ethnic boundaries in terms of similarity rather than dissimilarity and with a focus on shared problems that may be capable of resolution more easily through exchange than through separation.

This is the type of discourse presented by Alexie in *Reservation Blues*. It could be stated that his characters are trapped in these two means of expressing identity: on the one hand, maintaining the everyday customs, but, on the other hand, completely adapted to what the White American society expects of them in order to be integrated. Although I think Alexie's characters are aware of the fact that they are destined to destroy their Native identities, they try hard to participate of their indigenous traditions. For this reason, the novel becomes a cultural intersection between White European traditions and the stereotypes they have invented for the Natives. In the middle, in the thin frontier that separates these two paths is what Isernhagen defines as the "discourse of identity", that is, the one that foregrounds identity and considers the ethnic individual separated from the dominant stream of society but which, for instance, will "save a form of ethnic identity from 'vanishing'". This discussion gets complicated in terms of separation or integration in society; however, it is very difficult to establish a balanced discourse in which White American society's power and dominance are not endangered. In this context, *Reservation Blues* becomes the interchange of these different discourses to make a new one emerge, in which stereotypes are deconstructed in order to give way to a real vision of the Native American.

As the backdrop of a discourse of exchange, *Reservation Blues*' principal topic is music. It is the instrument through which Thomas and his friends will meet with popular American culture, since they have a rock band that plays popular American music and not traditional Native songs. The title summarizes the novel as a blues dedicated to the reservation, in other words, the music sang and played by the African slaves as a way to release their spirit in contrast with their impossibility of being free. Moreover, the blues makes reference to the "blue devils" meaning low spirits, depression and sadness. This idea is represented in the novel in the figure of Robert Johnson, who is considered one of the founders of the blues and whose mysterious death has inspired numerous legends. He is introduced in the novel as a wonderful guitar player whose genius resides in his magic guitar. It seems that Robert Johnson's mission is not only to meet Big Mom in the Spokane reservation, but also to leave his witchcraft guitar there, in the hands of Victor, one of Thomas's friends and future member of the band "Coyote Springs". It may be argued that by doing so, Robert Johnson is leaving those devils that characterize blues music to be spread all over the reservation.

The novel opens with a very painful episode that occurred in the Spokane reservation in the past. In 1858, a group of US cavalry soldiers slaughtered a group of Indian horses in that reservation. Douglas Ford (2002: 200) explains that, according to John A. Brown's history of the Spokane people, the reason for this mission was that "without horses the Indians are powerless". Alexie makes Big Mom, the oldest Spokane Native of the reservation and archetypical guru, witness the episode, thus creating a metaphor of the Native American's situation of the past and the future. The screams of the horses are going to be heard throughout the whole novel in the characters' experiences and in the music notes they play. Therefore the metaphor is extended to the present:

Big Mom wept as the soldiers rode away on their own pale ponies and heard their trumpets long after. She walked to the clearing where the horses had fallen, walked from corpse to corpse, and searched for any sign of life. After she counted the dead, she sang a mourning song for forty days and nights, then wiped the tears away, and buried the bodies. But she saved the bones of the most beautiful horse she found and built a flute from its ribs. Big Mom played a new flute song every morning to remind everybody that music created and recreated the world daily. (*Reservation Blues*: 10)

Similar to Ford's argument, James Keegan (1999: 122) states that "The horses slaughtered by Wright and his Bluecoats were living symbols of the Indians's mobility and war power and are therefore easily read as representative of the Indians themselves". With the flute made of bones, Big Mom is transforming memory into music, and in this sense, the episode of the horses symbolizes the



Natives' situation in America. The flute, played every morning by Big Mom, contains the painful history of Natives that must be remembered by every member of the reservation. Music becomes in the novel a way of keeping alive Natives' tradition. Indeed, the blues is connected to the devils, that is, the suffering of the spirit. Thus, music embodies two topics: on the one hand, the pain suffered by Natives and, on the other hand, the contamination of American popular culture in the realm of the reservation, since the music played by Thomas's band is American rock and roll. If music represents the main metaphor of the novel, the principal symbol is Johnson's guitar, which is passed from his hands to Thomas's hands and finally to Victor's.

Whereas music seems to be the force that symbolizes the syncretism between Native traditions and American culture, Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, the central character, stands as the figure at the crossroads that infiltrates and maintains Native history and traditions in his band and in the reservation. In order to do this, he uses storytelling as his main discourse. He is known in the reservation for his stories, which he repeats constantly as if he wanted to engrave them in the memory of those who pretend to be listening to him. Oral tradition is a recording technique used by many ethnic groups in North America. It emerges in opposition to the colonial discourse which supports the written history recorded by those who had the power. Storytelling appears as an alternative history which gives these minorities the possibility of knowing that part of history which was deleted by the colonial discourse, allowing them to construct a new identity with their found roots. Throughout the novel Thomas will be identified with these stories that, as the narrator explains, become very disturbing in the reservation's life:

Thomas Builds-the-Fire's stories climbed into your clothes like sand, gave you itches that could not be scratched. If you repeated even a sentence from one of those stories, your throat was never the same again. Those stories hung in your clothes and hair like smoke, and no amount of laundry soap or shampoo washed them out. Victor and Junior often tried to beat those stories out of Thomas, tied him down and taped his mouth shut. They pretended to be friendly and tried to sweet-talk Thomas into temporary silences, made promises about beautiful Indian women and cases of Diet Pepsi. But none of that stopped Thomas, who talked and talked. (*Reservation Blues*: 15)

The passage illustrates how Thomas's stories are part of the clothes, bodies, voice, to sum up, the identity of the members of the reservation, who are shaken by these fragmented pieces of their own history reflecting their fragmented identities. In order to escape their own reality they hide behind the Diet Pepsi,



one of those masks defined by Louise Owen and with which they see themselves as the definition European Americans have given them.

Being the singer and founder of the band, Thomas's stories carry the same suffering Johnson's guitar does, explaining his desire to translate the pain of the reservation's old stories into the music as a more useful way to preserve them. In this sense, he chooses *Coyote Springs* as the name of his band. This time Thomas is stepping into the mask European Americans have prepared for him, more specifically, he is making himself, his band and his native stories, disguise with the Indian clothes. Douglas Ford (2002: 205) explains that the "coyote" is a recurring figure of Native American trickster stories. Junior and Victor corroborate this idea when they give their opinions about the band's name:

"We need a name for this band", Thomas said after another well-attended rehearsal.

"How about Bloodthirsty Savages? Victor asked.

"That's a cool name, enit?" Junior asked.

"I was thinking about Coyote Springs," Thomas said.

"That's too damn Indian," Junior said. "It's always Coyote this, Coyote that. I'm sick of Coyote."

"Fuck Coyote," Victor said. (*Reservation Blues*: 44-45)

Two clear stereotypes are used here to delineate the barrier between the White American and the Indian, and therefore, the *pluribus* and the *unum*. Victor complains about Thomas's choice on the band's name, but his is not very far from being also "too damn Indian". In his case, Victor chose a destructive stereotype: one of the arguments to justify Natives' persecution was that they were considered savages thirsty of blood. Again, Thomas and his band stay in a cultural crossroads where Thomas is the one who gets closest to what Owens defines as a discourse of identity. Although he is not at all separated from the dominant society, he is the representative of traditional roots and, accordingly, brings to the novel the Native American identity path.

On the opposite side of the White European mirror is Victor. Friends since they were kids, Victor has a contradictory friendship with Thomas. Sometimes he needs him and sometimes he wants to get rid of him. For Thomas, Victor is his unconditional friend; for Victor, Thomas is a nuisance and he is especially because Thomas represents what Victor wants to leave behind: his Indian identity. Victor is trapped in that side of the mirror where he can only see the Euro-American image of the Native, and, as many other reservation Indians, he cannot recognize himself in that reflection. It could be stated that Victor leaves in a permanent attempt to erase his identity through White American stereotypes, trying to be what the White Europeans have created for him. Yet, he is one of the characters that fluctuate in the frontier the reservation represents. In other words,

Victor seems to live with one foot in the reservation and another in American society. On the one hand, he desperately wants to leave behind the ghosts and suffering his own identity and traditions mean for him, but, on the other, he is unable to cut the umbilical cord that reminds him who he is. The narrator describes Victor's personality in comparison to Thomas's:

Thomas was not surprised by Victor's sudden 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. Thomas had been the weakest Indian boy on the whole reservation, so small and skinny, with bigger wrists than arms, a head too large for its body, and ugly government glasses. When he grew older and stronger, grew into an Indian man, he was the smallest Indian man on the reservation. (*Reservation Blues*: 14)

Victor represents the identity fragmentation experienced by Native Americans in the reservations. In a way, he is condemned to survive from the leftovers of American society and become a victim of the original violent usurpation. Victor's violence is the consequence of the horse slaughter committed by the American soldiers and witnessed by Big Mom, the metaphor this time reverberating on Victor's existence. Indeed, Big Mom saw "the future and the past, the white soldiers in blue uniforms with black rifles and pistols. She saw the Indian horses shot and fallen like tattered sheets" (*Reservation Blues*: 10). The horses write and mark the torn pages of the unknown Native American history and, at the same time, break Victor's identity into pieces. Thus, he is completely lost in a justified violence that tries to destroy everything that reminds him of being an Indian, not the real Indian seen through the eyes of his community, but the image created by White Europeans. Actually, this is the way in which he gets a respectable place in the community and attacks its weaker members, one of which is his friend Thomas, who, in comparison, becomes stronger with time, since he maintains his communion with his Native culture and traditions. Thomas grew into an Indian man who, in the reservation, is the smallest one, whereas Victor is a big, strong and feared member in the reservation, but almost invisible in Native tradition. In fact, James Keegan (1999: 116) states that: "Thomas Builds-the-Fire stands as a 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". In this context, while Thomas lives in harmony with his cultural roots, Victor lives in a limbo where he can only pretend to be someone he is not, and sees himself reflected on Thomas' personality.

If Thomas and Victor are contrastive and complementary figures, the third member of the band, Junior, Victor's shadow and unconditional mate, is a victim of American society. They represent in the novel Bhabha's "in-between space". Although Thomas lives in the reservation and that directly implies a forced cultural assimilation, he represents, in a way, as I have said before, cultural preservation. In this game of symbols, Victor and Junior, stand for cultural syncretism, in other words, they live in the middle of the reservation's frontier. In fact, Junior is presented in the novel as the only one who had access to university, therefore, he has experienced American society and an attempt at integration:

In Psychology 101, Junior had learned from Freud and Jung that dreams decided everything. He figured that Freud and Jung must have been reservation Indians, because dreams decided everything for Indians, too. Junior based all of his decisions on his dreams and visions, which created a lot of problems. (*Reservation Blues*: 18)

Junior's experience depicts the permanent cultural clash that Indians live in American society. Later on, he will suffer society's refusal when his American girlfriend, who is pregnant, rejects his marriage proposal and decides to abort without his consent, because she knows her parents will not accept Junior for being an Indian. After this event, Junior seems to half live under Victor's shadow, although he maintains a stronger link with his Native identity. At the beginning of the novel their friendship represents loyalty, a value protected by Junior but betrayed by Victor at the end when he sells his friendship to get anything he wants from the guitar. This disloyalty destroys Junior's relationship with Victor but also the last connection they both had with Indian traditions and the essence of their values. The guitar talks to Victor and says:

*I think you left something behind in New York, said the guitar.*  
Victor stepped inside the bathroom, shut the door behind him, and reached for it.  
*Take it easy there, the guitar said. You can have me back. You can take me and you can be anybody you want to be. You can have anything you want to have. But you have to trade me for it.*  
*Trade what?* Victor asked.  
*You have to give up what you love the most, said the guitar.*  
*What do you love the most? Who do you love the most?* (*Reservation Blues*: 255)

The guitar stands for everything related to the White American world, a contamination that brings destruction and extinction. What Victor loves the most is his friend and, consequently, after this, Junior kills himself. He is the one who could not cope with the ghosts especially when his "twin" abandons him for a guitar, in other words, for the White world. It is true that the fact of having created the band and playing White American songs is in itself a contamination, a

betrayal to Native traditions; however, trading Junior means, in the case of Victor, selling his Native identity, destroying preservation and facilitating assimilation.

A firm example of Victor's and Junior's mixture with American society is their relationship with Betty and Veronica, representatives of a part of American society that creates an image of the Native full of stereotypes. Moreover, they become the voices that govern the mainstream of American popular culture. Kathryn Shanley (in Bataille, 2001: 28) defines this type of American as the "would-be Indians", those "who reinscribe nineteenth-century, romantic images of 'noble savages'":

Two long-standing American cultural phenomena come together in the above drama: first, that pretending to be Indian or believing that it is possible to "know" what it means to be "Indian" is within the purview of most Americans; and second, that being preoccupied with national hypocrisies is also within the American experience - a preoccupation that rarely leads to genuine insight.

Shanley describes perfectly Betty's and Veronica's role in the novel. The only reason why they get to know *Coyote Springs* is because they believe they know what it means to be an Indian and they want to become one of them. The narrator describes them in these terms: "both had long blonde hair and wore too much Indian jewelry. Turquoise rings, silver feather earrings, beaded necklaces. They always appeared in sundresses with matching Birkenstocks" (*Reservation Blues*: 41). Through these two characters and their relationship with two Spokane Indians, Alexie is introducing an ever-lasting identity conflict in American society: they represent the vision Americans have about Natives and, especially, how they contaminate with their vision Native's culture and identity. One of the characters, a reservation Indian woman named Chess, explains this corruption:

"Seriously, I think Junior and Victor are traitors," Chess said. "I really do. They keep running off with white women and pretty soon, ain't no Indian women going to touch them. We Indian women talk to each other, you know? We have a network. They're two of the last full-blood Indians on your reservations, enit? Jeez, Junior and Victor are betraying their DNA."

"Well," Thomas, a full-blood Spokane himself, said, "do you like me or my DNA?"

"I like you and your DNA." (*Reservation Blues*: 82)

This idea is reinforced by an episode that happens almost at the end of the novel. The *Coyote Springs* finally get an audition with a record company called "Cavalry Records", in explicit reference to the initial horses metaphor, and extended to the name of the company's agents, Wright and Sheridan, alluding to the real Cavalry officers George Wright and Jim Sheridan, who were crucial

in the violent suppression of Northwest Indian uprisings in the 1850s (Keegan, 1999: 122). The agents were looking for a band who could play Indian sounds at a moment when Indian music and culture are fashionable. Instead of recording the “just-off-the-reservation” Indian’s music they decide to choose Coyote Spring’s fans, Betty and Veronica, to record an album that will sell Indian culture from a white centered perspective. Armstrong, the owner of the record company, comments about this:

“Can’t you see the possibilities? We dress them up a little. Get them in to 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”. (*Reservation Blues*: 269)

As Thomas and Victor play the role of complement opposites, the same happens with Betty and Veronica. Their contraries in this identity game are Chess and Checkers, two reservation Indians too, who met *Coyote Springs* in one of the first concerts and became members of the band. Together with Thomas, Chess represents preservation, a way of living in which Indians can stay away from assimilation as much as they can, if that is possible. Through Chess’ eyes, the reader sees reservation reality as something broken that has to be fixed by protecting the last damaged parts left. As a woman, Chess bases all her arguments about preservation on women, their relationship with men and the descendants they can leave behind:

“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”. (*Reservation Blues*: 81)

Like Thomas and Victor, or Victor and Junior, Chess is not alone. She also has a doppelganger, her sister Checkers. Again, comparing it with the male characters, Checkers has her parallel in Junior. Both represent assimilation, that is, they stand as victims of American society, a condition that has made them weak and easily influenced. Whereas Junior is absorbed by one of the pillars of American society, university, so is Checkers, but this time by a different strong entity, church. Checkers finds in the Catholic religion and church a comforting way of understanding her terrible reality as a reservation Indian. Indeed, she confuses this balance with love and she eventually falls in love with the priest of the Spokane reservation, Father Arnold. Impossibility determines Junior’s and Checker’s assimilation. If Junior cannot integrate in American society and start a family with a white woman because of his Native origins, a similar thing happens

to Checkers since she falls in love with a white man who will never be able to return her. Besides, she finds shelter in Catholic faith, a doctrine that completely misunderstands Native culture and justified in a way Indian extermination:

Thomas closed his eyes and told Chess this story: “We were both at Wounded Knee when the Ghost Dancers were slaughtered. We were slaughtered at Wounded Knee. I know there were whole different tribes there, no Spokanes or Flatheads, but we were still somehow there. There was a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow. All those soldiers killed us in the name of God, enit? They shouted ‘Jesus Christ’ as they ran swords through our bellies. Can you feel the pain still, late at night, when you’re trying to sleep, when you’re praying to a God whose name was used to justify the slaughter? (*Reservation Blues*: 167)

In conclusion, Alexie depicts in his novel the confrontation between Indian identity and the representation the dominant white European Americans have created of it. In order to do this he weaves a net of characters in which each represents, either the reservation Indian who tries to maintain his or her native roots, or the contaminated Indian victim of society’s rejection and assimilation. Thus, this net becomes an identity game that confronts each character with its doppelganger, in other words, the coexistence between the white world and the Indian world. At some point in the novel, Thomas, the protagonist, states that “I’ve always had a theory that you ain’t really Indian unless, at some point in your life, you didn’t want to be Indian” (*Reservation Blues*: 169). Although Alexie creates characters that represent Indian identity preservation, he situates them in a reservation, a space that fragments their identities, since contamination from the white world is permanent. In this sense, his characters inhabit an “in- between space”, a White American place surrounded by a silenced Indian world. However, in the thin frontier that separates the reservation from American society, there exists the discourse constructed by these characters, intermittently voicing the silence where they are trapped. By extension, the whole novel becomes Alexie’s claim for an Indian voice with which Natives can name their identities, but always in the presence of their white shadows.

## Works Cited

- ALEXIE, S. ( 1995): *Reservation Blues*, New York, Warner Books.  
 ASHCROFT, B.; G. GRIFFITHS; H. TIFFIN (eds.) ( 2000): *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, New York, Routledge.  
 BHABHA, H. ( 1998): *The Location of Culture*, New York, Routledge.

- BATAILLE, G.** (2001): *Native American Representations: First Encounters, Distorted Images, and Literary Appropriations*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.
- FORD, D.** ( 2002): “Sherman Alexie’s Indigenous Blues”, *Melus*, 27(3): 197-215.
- KEEGAN, J.** (1999): “Y’all need to play songs for your people: (P)Reservation Versus Assimilation and the Politics of White-Indian Encounter in Sherman Alexie’s Ficton”, *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 39: 115-134.
- VIZENOR, G.** (1996): *Native American Indian Literature*, León, Taller de Estudios Norteamericanos.