

The Symbolic Significance of History in Sherman
Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

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Introduction

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* provides the reader with a comprehensive view of hardships Native Americans experience in the 20th century, and as I will demonstrate in my paper, throughout white – Indigenous relations. The historic past plays a significant role in the plot and its manifestations in various characters' dreams require further analysis to understand how the past influenced characters' personal lives, and, in a broader sense, the life of Native Americans in general. A "fiction is historical if it includes reference to customs, conditions, identifiable persons, or events in the past [...]" among factors considered are literary excellence, readability, and historical value" (qtd. in Groot 50). There are different allusions regarding the past, and they enhance a better understanding of Native life and current standing in US society. In the following, I explore the symbolic significance of history through the dreams that appear in the novel. In my reading, Alexie's novel combines and also draws a parallel between the modern, individualistic world and the former, collective - tribal one through dreams. Some dreams evoke factual information while others provide us with general historical allusions.

Dreams are symbols of the past in *Reservation Blues*; they represent events and relationships of former events, and provides us illustration of current situation. Symbol is the use of a concrete object to represent an abstract idea, something other than itself (Virágos 167). In literature, with the help of symbolism, an author can add a deeper meaning to a story. *Reservation Blues* is full of symbolism; Alexie perfectly uses this literary tool to give an intense and unique overview of Native American life.

In *Reservation Blues* Alexie constructs a "Faulkner-like microcosmic space through which to investigate larger social, cultural, and psychological issues" (Grassian 78). By placing Robert Johnson, an African American blues musician, and forming a contemporary rock band in the present-day context, and then "having the individuals from the reservation move into mainstream white America, *Reservation Blues* straddles the lines between ethnicities, cultures, time frames, religions, gender perspectives, and literary genres (Grassian 79). Thomas, the founder of Coyote Springs music band, tries to preserve tribal and Spokane cultural traditions, while other band members, like Victor and Junior, seem to forget and ignore them. The "man-who-was-probably-Lakota," a reservation inhabitant, "captures the bleak atmosphere with his daily mantra, [The end of the world is near,] a fair representation of

the unconscious desires of the hopeless, despondent residents” of the reservation (Grassian 81).

Chapter 1 focuses on *Reservation Blues* as a Native American novel. It testifies the claim that “American Indian literature reflects not only tribal cultures and the experience and imagination of its authors but Indian-white relations as well” (Arteaga 154). Chapter 2 demonstrates the connection between history, dreams, and symbolism in the novel. I introduce the relevant definitions and ideas, and explain their manifestation in *Reservation Blues*. Chapter 3 introduces several U.S. federal acts aimed at solving the “Indian problem.” I elaborate on how former political actions affect Native American life today. We will see how unforgettable characters from the past “bleed across the ages, wandering through [...] daily lives and nightmares” of the characters of *Reservation Blues* (Sublett n.pag.). I introduce the main concepts and goals of the U.S. assimilationist attempts, and explore how they appear in *Reservation Blues*. Through dreams, I explain how off-reservation boarding schools generate alcoholism, suicide, lack of economic self-sufficiency and dependency even at the end of the 20th century.

1. *Reservation Blues* as a Native American novel

“Native American literature has arrived. It has best-sellers. It has anthologies. It gets widely taught” (Parker vii). By this quotation, Parker draws our attention to the existence, importance, and growing prominence of Native American literature. Parker claims that Native American literature was not born with recent writings, it has a long history and “builds continuity, ongoing dialogue, a sense of shared history and identity” (x). Today, Native American writers are “remaking the old and forging the new,” in a way, they are reshaping Native literature (Parker x). This also happens in Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*. Alexie brings to surface the “sense of shared history and identity” (Parker x) of Native Americans especially by reliving them through dreams, and he draws a parallel between the modern, individualistic and the former, collective - tribal worlds.

David Treuer states that “a Native American novel is not a Native American novel simply or only because an Indian wrote it, or someone who is an Indian claims that the product of his/ her imagination is fundamentally and essentially Indian” (3). According to Treuer, there are particular expectations towards literary works to qualify as Native American literature. He emphasizes the importance of style and unique literary values of Native literature: “The study of Native American fiction should be the study of style. Native Americans more so than any other group are experienced through image and text and story more than through shared, lived experience” (Treuer 4). I believe *Reservation Blues* is a perfect example for Treuer’s point of view, Native Americans are represented through “shared, lived experience” especially with the help of dreams. Alexie often in a sarcastic style provides the reader a complete view on Native American reservation experience.

“Sherman Alexie is the reigning - world heavyweight poetry bout champion in the second generation of a Native American literary renaissance begun in the 1960s” (Porter and Roemer 297). “His ironic attitude and sometimes, direct style makes him different from canonized Native writers such as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko” (qtd. in Porter 297). At the same time, Alexie shares some common literary features with other Native writers like the “central motif reaffirming Native lives and Native nationhood” (Porter and Roemer 277).

According to Treuer “Alexie deftly intuited his readers’ automatic response” to some phrases and images “thereby mobilizing what the reader thinks he knows about Indians” (24). He criticizes Alexie’s “stereotyping,” but, in my view, Alexie brings to surface existing problems that Native Americans still face at the end of 20th century. It is not simply

stereotyping, it is a portrayal of hardships and struggles of Indigenous peoples. I believe Betty and Veronica's song to be the best illustration to Native American clichés:

Can you hear the eagle crying?

I look to the four directions

And try to find some connection

With Mother Earth, Mother Earth (Alexie, *Reservation* 237).

It is not by accident that the two white characters of the novel sing this song. In Alexie's view, this is expected of Native people. Alexie represents Native Americans from a new point: he utilizes and deconstructs stereotyped images and clichés and "expresses the irredeemably modern and mixed nature of Indian identity" (Murray 128) in the present-day mainstream American society.

Alexie brings to the surface "internalized oppression; violence; addiction; [...] and racial tensions, particularly white guilt" (Porter and Roemer 277) and creates a kind of "AlterNative" (Horne 96) plot in the novel with different literary genres such as articles, sketches, interviews, diaries, and police reports. These written documents stand in contrast with dreams – they are kind of documentary evidence while dreams are believed to be "mere" illusions. Yet, both provide aspects of the past in a different way. Humor becomes a central element of these newspaper clippings and journal entries. N. Scott Momaday claims that humor is "one of the strongest elements of language within Indian culture" (qtd. in Lincoln 3) and Alexie perfectly introduces this notion to the reader.

Alexie employs magic realism in *Reservation Blues*. Magic(al) realism relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings (Bowers 3). With representation of "Hunger and survival, [...], broken treaties, manifest destiny, [...], commodity food, US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) houses, [...] , promises, and dreams" (Porter and Roemer 277) as parts of Native Americans past and present, and with appearance of two American military officers who rose from death, Alexie confronts the real with the fantastic. Magic realism "often display[s] a deep connectedness between character and place" (Zamora and Faris 252).

"This is a beautiful place," Johnson said.

"But you haven't seen everything," Thomas replied.

"What else is there?"

Thomas thought about all the dreams that were murdered here, and the bones buried quickly just inches below the surface all waiting to break through the foundations of

those government houses built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. (Alexie, *Reservation 7*)

Sense of place has an important role for *Reservation Blues*' characters too. It is a continuous theme in Native American literature. Early literature romanticized it, but as Alexie presents in the novel it turns into run down reservation.

2. Representation of history and dreams *Reservation Blues*

2. 1. History

What is history? According to Nies: “History is a context. We choose it by selecting certain events to include in the narrative. Those events take their meaning in relation to other events” (1). In my opinion, *Reservation Blues* supports this definition. Characters’ personal dreams “narrate” the most important aspects of collective Native American history. There is no culture without traditions. Traditions are not simple habits: not only do they belong to the past, there is a transcendent affiliation with the present and also with the future (Ancsel 100).

The character of Big Mom is the most perpetual one in *Reservation Blues*. She is a living connection between the past and present, and she helps the others improve their future lives. She is timeless and she is “a part of every tribe” (Alexie, *Reservation* 199). Thomas claims “Victor and Junior pretend they don’t know about Big Mom, but we heard her sing all the way” (Alexie, *Reservation* 27). In my view, this indicates that even if someone wants to forget traditions, they are always present in the subconscious, and Alexie brings them to surface with the help of dreams. No one can discard their own traditions and culture, in a wider sense, history: “Because when I closed my eyes like Thomas, I didn’t see a damn thing [...]. No stories, no songs. Nothing” (Alexie, *Reservation* 290). Junior’s suicide is a kind of proof that a person who lives without traditions and culture is condemned to ultimate despair.

There is a strong connection between Big Mom and music. The character of Big Mom appears as a medicine woman who heals with the music. She “created” a flute from ribs of a dead pony that was shot by American soldiers, and she “played a new flute song every morning to remind everybody that music created and recreated the world daily” (Alexie, *Reservation* 10). Big Mom also plays a guitar “made of 1965 Malibu and the blood of a child killed in Wounded Knee” (Alexie, *Reservation* 266). Alexie suggests the connection between music and history. The past is painful, but music can be an alternative for self-expression and healing.

History is also a process of social changes; the most important aspects are collective, but those changes would or could not have happened without individuals (Ancsel 131). This is true to the characters of *Reservation Blues*. By forming a music band Coyote Springs brings about change, and it is impossible without individuals. Every member of the band is important, and they have to cooperate to gain success. In a way, the rock band can symbolize an entire Native culture. It is a kind of modern “battle,” a Native American music band wants

to be successful in a business world and entertainment, both of which are dominated by whites (Grassian 94). Thomas wants to return to the reservation with Coyote Springs as heroes, but Junior's statement that "the only famous Indians are dead chiefs and long-distance runners" (Alexie, *Reservation* 73) forecasts Coyote Springs' downfall.

Non-Indian America "has been notably uninterested in the people who lived here before the European invasions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries," but the Natives "perspective changed the narrative of time and challenged the conventional myths of the Americas" (Nies 1). Until the middle of the 19th century Native Americans were mostly represented and perceived as brutal, barbaric savages both in non-Native literature and in every day life. When Christopher Columbus discovered America, he "found not only land but peoples" (Prucha 6). He was convinced that he reached the Indies, so he called the inhabitants Indians. These people were different from Europeans in appearance and behavior. But for both nations, Natives and non-Natives, it was unavoidable to get in contact with each other. A lot of nations, such as the Portuguese, the French, the English, the Dutch and the Russians followed the Spanish to America, and all of them had their own "tales," myths, and images about Indigenous people. There was one common denominator in all of them: they called Native people "savages" (Prucha 5-6). The general concept was the "ignoble savage," cruel, perverse, even brute beasts who lived in the wilderness (Prucha 7). White settlers needed Indian land for expansion, agriculture, so the Indigenous people were forced to leave their former territories. The first settlers in today's U.S. were the Puritans, and they believed themselves to be superior to Natives. In 1630 John Winthrop held his famous speech, in which he declares that "We shall be as a city upon a hill" (qtd. in Virágos 17).

In *Reservation Blues* we get a different point of view on Native American history, an "AlterNative" history: "American Indians are not negated by positions of alterity; instead, they are positioned as subjects who have agency" (Horne 96). *Reservation Blues* is not a story of triumph, although all characters have "agency," sometimes they do not seem to know how to use it. Even more, they seem to be passive, aimless with a "nothing to do" attitude (Parker 44). Junior is the only one who has a job, for the other characters forming a music band is the one and such as the best opportunity to improve their lives.

In contrast with the above mentioned passivity, "Indians make up 1 percent of the population of the United States," yet they "overpopulate the modern imagination – from the first Thanksgiving to the Boston Tea Party to Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* to the Battle of the Little Big Horn to *Dances with Wolves*" (Treuer 11). Treuer claims, that Natives "created on the page" are much more active than "the Indians in life," and "the result is a very loud

silence” (11). It becomes a kind of “ghostly presence,” and ghosts can be “manipulated and misinterpreted” (Treuer 11). On the one hand, Alexie wants to break this “ghostly” silence through dreams, but on the other hand, all characters of *Reservation Blues* are much more active in their dreams than in real life.

2. 2. Dreams

Junior claims that “Indians were supposed to have visions and receive messages from their dreams” (Alexie, *Reservation* 18). Dreams have always held an important place and have been regarded with great respect in Native American cultures. Spirits provided assistance through dreams. According to Ruth Benedict, the famous American anthropologist, the “centrality of the role of dreaming and the vision complex among Native Americans” is “the largest and most basic concept of Indian” identity (qtd. in Irwin 3). Dreams can interact to pattern social behavior and “enhance identity through personal empowerment and an enhanced sense of self, the intent of the dreamer can be shaped by both the dream experience and its social correlates” (Irwin 4). By analyzing different dreams, we can provide various explanations by their manifestations in both communal and individual contexts. In modern consciousness, dreaming can be strongly identified with a kind of “pre-rational” and “primitive” instinct and emotion (Irwin 10). As a matter of fact, the notion is far more complex: “The unbound depth of dreaming touches not only the immediate, lived world of everyday existence and perception, but it also enters into both our individual and our collective history” (Irwin 10). In *Reservation Blues* all the dreamers are “part of an ongoing encounter or drama of cultural enactment by which culture itself is transformed” (Irwin 11). On the one hand, most of the dreams in *Reservation Blues* do not have a positive aspect; they are rather nightmares. On the other hand, “[the] continual merging and expertise of the waking and dreaming states” may “effect a positive result” (Irwin 239). In my opinion, Irwin’s point of view perfectly represents the main aim of dreams in *Reservation Blues*: with the help of dreams it becomes visible that the past still exerts influence on Natives’ present. Native characters have to face different kind of social problems like poverty, discrimination, and harassment. The question is: can Native Americans relive the past with the help of dreams and thus improve their future and do dreams have a therapeutic function?

Dreams in *Reservation Blues* show us the relationship between whites and Indigenous peoples through different historical events that influenced, and still influence Native

American life. Dreaming is a dynamic, transformative experience; dreamers can unite and develop a “meaningful continuity between the dreaming and waking worlds” (Irwin 11). Most of the dreams in *Reservation Blues* are connected to the collective history of Native Americans, but some of them are very personal. “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” (Alexie, *Reservation* 18). Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung were the two leading psychologists who emphasized the significant role of dreams in everyday life. The Freudian psychoanalytic model examines the unconscious mind, and according to German philosopher Sir Christopher Riegel dreams belong to it. Freud claims that with the help of psychoanalysis we can solve psychological and neurotic problems by bringing the unconscious conflicts into the conscious mind, for example with the help of dreams (Atkinson 175). Jung believes that dreams present “a spontaneous self-portrayal, in a symbolic form, of the actual situation in the unconscious” (229). The past as presented in the dreams determines today’s Native present: “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” (Alexie, *Reservation* 14). Native Americans passivity in present stands in contrast with their active way of life in the past, instead of “fishing,” they just “stand” and wait, activity only appears in their dreams.

According to Jung, dreams express not only personal, but collective contents too. Jung introduces the idea of collective unconscious: it is universal, every human being is endowed with this psychic archetype-layer since his/her birth (213). Through the dream word Indigenous people rewrite their history, and with this we get a different view on Native American history. Unfair policies and broken treaties revive and become central elements of the novel. We can mostly see facts in dreams: they represent real historical data, and, according to Alexie, Native American pain is inherited; it is derived from ancestors and passed on through generations (St. John n. pag.). This collective unconscious appears in individual dreams. All characters who dream in *Reservation Blues* are Native Americans, even if some of them come from different tribes they do share a common past. Even if the dreams are painful, and bring past grievances to the surface, they do not fill the function of healing as Freud claims dreams to have. According to Junior “dreams decided everything for Indians,” and if these dreams are nightmares and they do not hold any positive aspects, then the dreamer’s attitude will not change in a constructive way.

3. Dreams as allusions to the past in *Reservation Blues*

3. 1. Broken treaties

“To read about Native American reservation life is usually to read about illness and despair” (Busch n. pag.). In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* Thomas Builds-the-Fire reports: “It’s hard to be optimistic on the reservation,” (Alexie, *The Lone* 49) and his attitude is the same in *Reservation Blues*. “More than anything, [Thomas] wanted a story to heal the wounds, but he knew that his stories never healed anything” (Alexie, *Reservation* 6). Storytelling has an important role in healing process in Indigenous cultures, and it is essential both for personal, communal, and cultural survival of Native Americans. Language has the power to change the world:

But recently Thomas had begun to make small noises, form syllables that contained more emotion and meaning than entire sentences constructed by the BIA. A noise that sounded something like *rain* had given Esther courage enough to leave her husband, tribal chairman David WalksAlong [...]. WalksAlong walked along with BIA policy so willingly that he took to calling his wife a *savage in polyester pants*. She packed her bags the day after she listened to Thomas speak. (Alexie, *The Lone* 94)

Characters of *Reservation Blues* dream and tell stories about “[the] diminished life of so many of the Spokane and other American Indians” (Busch n. pag.). Alexie particularly does not divide Spokane from Native American experience in the novel, it indicates that Indigenous people may have the same understanding of culture and history. “Thomas thought about all the dreams that were murdered here, and the bones buried quickly just inches below the surface, all waiting to break through the foundations of those government houses built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development” (Alexie, *Reservation* 7). The quotation shows that the past wants to “break through” injustices and HUD houses that represent white American culture, just as dreams break through the characters’ consciousness. Actually, they are close to the surface, and waiting for the right time to break out as a volcano to provide healing that brings change and growth for Native Americans.

“Junior dreamed about the horses. He rode a horse along a rise above the Columbia River, leading a large group of warriors. They all wanted to attack a steamship” (Alexie, *Reservation* 142). According to Jung, dreams are not mortified form remains but they belong to our live psyché and form archetypes (213). Archetypes have a great emotional and motivational power not just inside one’s personality but, in a wider sense, in cultural communication, too (Jung 452). Junior’s dream reflects Indigenous peoples’ old days,

strength and courage, and the will to fight against the conquerors. The Columbia River flows through the Spokane reservation, and has always held an important role in the Spokanes' lives: "We're a salmon tribe. At least, we were a salmon tribe before they put those dams on the river" (Alexie, *Reservation* 36). The steamship, and also the dams represent the expansion of white culture. As Alexie says "Indians cried in frustration" (*Reservation* 142) because they could not do anything against the steamship, and in a wider sense against the expansion of white Americans.

Junior's dream continues with a massacre of his warriors and horses. As Jung says horses are an archetype, and this way they have a great emotional power in cultural communication (452). H

No one can see white soldiers, they are ghost-like figures when they shoot Native Americans and their horses: "Where are they? the Indian men screamed as the bullets cut them down. They fell, all of them, until only Junior remained" (Alexie, *Reservation* 143). "The frontiersman," "the pioneer," "the Indian trader" were all discribed as faceless, nameless heroes during the white American expansion period in the U.S. mainstream history (Klein 85), but for Indigenous peoples it was a faceless and nameless conquest. White Americans were also called pale-faces by Natives, and this term also indicated their ghost-like appearance. General George Wright and General Sheridan are the leaders of white soldiers, and Wright sentences Junior to death because of killing eighteen settlers unless he signs something:

Just sign it, Sheridan said.

What am I signing?

Just sign it, and God will help you. (Alexie, Reservation 145)

The quote recalls Manifest Destiny. Native American interests were neglected, and white Americans justified their deeds with their assumed racial, ethnic, and religious superiority. From a Euro-American perspective it was justified to take land - and in way lives - from Native peoples: Natives did not transform the wilderness into farms and lasting settlements. Indigenous people were also considered inferior because they were not Christian, and, from a Western perspective they had no culture and no legitimized social structures, and no property rights. Treaty after treaty was broken with the same explanation: Native Americans needed to conform to Euro-American attitudes to the land: it had to be owned and cultivated. According to mainstream American view, Indigenous people should be "made to work, sow and do all that is necessary and to adopt" Euro-American ways of life (Brown 1).

It is never stated what Junior has to sign – it is a “white, clean paper,” but in view of Native history it must be a treaty. During the treaty making period, “negotiations were fraught with many linguistic and cultural misunderstanding. Many treaty negotiations were conducted not only in a language (English) that many Native participants did not completely understand, but according to assumptions of European property rights that were foreign to them” (Johansen xiv). The American government offered compensation, resettlement in exchange for the lands it intended to occupy, but to many Native Americans selling the land was an alien concept. Land was essential to life and could not be owned by anyone. In my view, “white paper” is a symbol of unfair treaties, anything can be written on it even without Native peoples’ consent. “It was a buyer’s market,” Natives were “simply” forced to sell their land in most of the cases (Deloria 30). Indigenous people had a solid legal position as the treaties were federal law, “and under the Constitution federal laws and federal court decisions interpreting them override any conflicting state laws” (Wilkinson 171), however treaties were broken in most cases by white Americans. Native Americans were powerless against the “federal laws and federal court decisions” as Junior and his warriors were against the steamship.

3. 2. Cavalry Records

Alexie chooses an ironic name for the music company. The U.S. Cavalry conquered Native Americans. The managers of Cavalry Records are Sheridan, Wright, and Armstrong. By choosing these names Alexie forecasts Coyote Springs’ future. All names are well known both in Native and white American history. Colonel George Wright led American troops in 1858 and defeated Spokane and other Columbia Plateau tribes on Spokane Plains, and gave an order to kill more than 700 horses (Kirk 4). There is a recurring image regarding this sad event in *Reservation Blues* “One hundred and thirty-four years before Robert Johnson walked onto the Spokane Reservation, the Indian horses screamed” (Alexie, *Reservation* 9). This “scream” constantly reminds the characters of *Reservation Blues*, as well as the reader, that they cannot “rest in peace,” their “souls” cry for justice. Wright can even hear the horses in his grave, and he cannot find his peace either: “The grief rushed into his lungs” (Alexie, *Reservation* 271). Wright relives history just as Native characters of *Reservation Blues* do. I believe, Alexie suggests that injustices against Native Americans affect Indigenous people but they also haunt entire white American society.

Philip Henry Sheridan was a United States Army officer, he is most known for a saying “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” (Brogan 63). He appears in Checkers’ dream and his character remains negative, there is no regret in his behaviour. Sheridan is the one who claims that “Cavalry Records, has an economic need for a viable Indian band. As you know, Coyote Springs self-destructed. We were thinking we needed a more reliable kind of Indian” (Alexie, *Reservation* 272) and asks Betty and Veronica to form an “Indian” band. Cavalry Records are interested only in profit, they do not care if they have to cheat and also break their contract with Coyote Springs.

3.3. The “Indian Problem”

In 1879, General Nelson Miles, describes his and, in a wider sense, the general mainstream attitude towards Indigenous peoples *The Indian Problem*:

The real issue in the question which is now before the American people is, whether we shall continue the vacillating and expensive policy that has marred our fair name as a nation and a Christian people, or devise some practical and judicious system by which we can govern one quarter of a million of our population, securing and maintaining their loyalty, raising them from the darkness of barbarism to the light of civilization and put an end to these interminable and expensive Indian wars. (304)

Through representative federal acts America wanted to solve the Indian problem: “solve” and “problem” express mainstream white Americans’ standpoint toward Natives (Szathmári 39). The main aim of the U.S. government was to make American Indians self-sufficient both in economic, political, and cultural ways, and at the same time to assimilate them into mainstream society. The general image of 19th century white Americans of Indigenous peoples was the “ignoble savage” (Prucha 7). In *Reservation Blues*, Sheridan describes Chess and Checkers as “sort of that exotic animalistic woman thing” (Alexie, *Reservation* 190). “Sheridan and Wright had been drinking from that flask for a century, give or take a few decades” (Alexie, *Reservation* 193). I believe, Spokane reservation may symbolize the “wilderness,” and Cavalry Records provides Coyote Springs with an “opportunity” to raise “from the darkness” by inviting them to New York and make a career. Sheridan says that “the band could prove to be very lucrative for Cavalry Records” (Alexie, *Reservation* 190), and as I believe, to put an end to “interminable and expensive Indian wars” and bring Natives

to “the lights of of civilization,” specially by taking away their lands, was also very “lucrative” for white American society in the 19th century.

According to Deloria “everything possible was done to ensure that Indians were forced into American life. The wild animal was made into a household pet whether or not he wanted to be one” (8). Deloria indicates that white Americans achieved their decisions through centuries. However, many Native Americans were unable to cope with the life-style that the new order required, as it is clearly demonstrated by Chess’ and Checkers’ dreams.

Checkers’ dream with Sheridan takes us back to the 19th century. “This is just like you Indians, Sheridan shouted in her face. You could never stay where we put you. You never listened to orders. Always fighting. You never quit fighting. Do you understand how tired I am of fighting you? When will you ever give up?” (Alexie, *Reservation* 237). The reference to the right to “put” Natives anywhere suggests their inferior status in American society, however there is a flash of hope from the Native point of view: they do not give up the fight. Until Checkers’ question, “Mr. Sheridan, what are you going to do with me?” the dream contains collective memories of Indigenous peoples. Checker casts doubt about her own private life, and the answer is: “I never know what to do with you” (Alexie, *Reservation* 237). This indicates that mainstream America has always thought about Native Americans as a group, never as individuals. The past and its pressure still has an influence on Natives’ present: “Sheridan reached across the years and took Checkers’s face in his hands. He squeezed until she cried out and saw white flahes of light” (Alexie, *Reservation* 238). No matter how Checkers tries to deny it, “I don’t believe in you. I’m just dreaming. You’re a ghost” (Alexie, *Reservation* 238), Sheridan is still “real.”

Alexie makes a genuine contrast between a well-known white American symbol, Columbia and Chess. As Union soldiers went off to war in the 18th and 19th centuries America, the national figure most often urging them was Columbia. She represented not just one virtue, liberty, but the entirety of American ideals (Berg n. pag.). As I mentioned before, Native Americans were mostly represented in American culture as male, brutal savage figures. In Checker’s dream, Sheridan appears as the oppressor, so we get a reverse, an “AlterNative” view on American history.

“Chess dreamed of a small Indian man on a pale horse” (Alexie, *Reservation* 84). The pale horse symbolizes death in the Bible; therefore the dream begins with a negative aspect. Alexie uses a Christian symbol in Chess’ dream. Chess is Native American and Christian, her Christian education and knowledge about religion seems to be in her conscious, and these elements appear in her dream. I believe, Alexie wants to emphasize that mainstream

American education and religion has already affected Natives. The main character of the dream is a “small Indian man.” It is not described to which tribe he belongs to: “Chess knew the unpainted Indian in her dream was not Spokane or Flathead, but she had no idea what kind of Indian he was” (Alexie, *Reservation* 84). On the one hand, this indicates that he could be of any tribal affiliation, and “small” can represent inferiority of all Indigenous peoples to whites. On the other hand, the “small Indian” may symbolize the invisible minority in current U.S. society. The notion of Pan-Indianism also appears in Chess’ dream. Pan-Indianism can be defined as an “attempt to create a new ethnic group, the American Indian” (Chase 401). The “small, unpainted Indian” man seems to be “intertribal.” The “Indian man” has a knife in Chess’ dream, and the white soldiers hold rifles. When they see him with the knife, they shout “kill the Indian” (Alexie, *Reservation* 85). “The Indian” tries to fight against whites, but he has no chance, he is alone, and he is small. Neither the white medicine man, nor the Indian medicine woman can help him; there is no way to save Native peoples.

By reliving this story, Chess may bring to surface her own, individual fears too. Chess “was scared of the band, scared of Victor and Junior, and of Thomas too. All her life, she had been measured by men. Her father, her priest, her lovers, her employers, her God” (Alexie, *Reservation* 212). She feels lonely the same way as the “small Indian man,” and feels herself inferior to all males, whites and Natives too.

3. 4. Assimilation

Assimilation is defined as:

Enforced social change, indirectly because of the loss of the buffalo and the hunting lands and directly by policies of the administration, led to the partial loss of some traditions, the redefinition of traditional preservation patterns, and the incorporation of some patterns of life of the dominant society, which altogether added up to the establishment of a new way of life indigenous to neither culture – a reservation culture, a colonial “third culture.”

(Wilkinson 54)

One of the main means of Native American assimilation into mainstream society was education. Boarding schools became part of Native Americans history, and part of a collective, pan-Indian identity (Child 4). Indigenous people became more alike, all of them learned English, and intermarriages between different tribes became common, new political

alliances were forged. The boarding school experience also appears in *Reservation Blues* and is recounted by some dreams which may be considered both tribal and personal.

Captain Richard Henry Pratt founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879. It was the prototype for federal off-reservation boarding schools (Katanski 2). Between 1800 and 1870, Native children were educated in either tribal schools or federally supported schools. In tribal schools, children were taught by tribal elders, story tellers, and medicine men to respect the land, animals, human beings, and spirits. Also, some tribes (e.g. the Cherokee) introduced bilingualism in their education. Tribal schools provided a complete education for children, for example 80% of Cherokees were literate, while only 10% of white American society was educated in 1870s U.S. (*Our*). Pratt's aim was to "Kill the Indian and save the man." The main goal of boarding schools was a complete and mandatory assimilation by Christianizing and "civilizing" Indigenous peoples (*Our*). Children were forbidden to speak their native language – that was a primary stage in a "process of cultural genocide" (Haig-Brown 25). They wanted to make Native children white, but their skin was brown: "you can take a boy off the reservation, but you can't take the reservation off the boy" (Alexie, *Reservation* 227).

Frequent sexual abuse was one of the greatest problems in boarding schools. In *Reservation Blues* Victor has a dream of childhood molestation "The priest smiled back, leaned over, and kissed Victor full and hard on the mouth" (Alexie, *Reservation* 148). Children have been stripped off of everything Native: missionaries took away their clothes and cut their hair "The priest touched Victor's newly shaved head" (Alexie, *Reservation* 148). A cycle of sexual violence became common in boarding schools, even children started to abuse younger ones. Native children did not get correct behavior patterns in boarding schools as they were separated from their families. As adults they did not know how to act and behave in the family – how to be a good mother or father –, how to raise children ("Our"). The boarding school system could easily have led to Indigenous peoples' loss in American society, but I believe, that reliving these experiences and bringing them to surface may provide an explanation to white Americans about Natives feelings and attitudes both in collective, and individual ways.

Junior's dream about his family demonstrates this kind of behavior: "I don't want to hurt you, mother-and-father said. But I might hurt you" (Alexie, *Reservation* 112). Victor's dream about his family does not provide us with a picture of happy family life either. His mother and his step-father left him alone on the reservation. His real father left them when he was a child. He remembers the smell of his dead father "That smell never fully dissipated"

(Alexie, *Reservation* 25), but he does not speak about his feelings. Dreams break this silence; Victor's feelings come to surface. Big Mom suggests Victor that "you should forgive that priest who hurt you when you were little. That will give you power over him, you know? Forgiveness is magic, too" (Alexie, *Reservation* 203). Victor pretends he does not remember the priest, but "he still felt the priest's hands on his body after all those years" (Alexie, *Reservation* 203). I believe, Big Mom is right, Victor should forgive, this is the only way to forget and get over the outrages caused in boarding schools.

Checkers' dream with Father Arnold also has sexual connotations "Farther Arnold came into her bedroom" (Alexie, *Reservation* 155). Although Checkers' dream is not an adolescent experience, still the priest appears as an abuser. In my opinion, with these dreams Alexie perfectly shows how childhood experiences impact adulthood, and what the consequences are. Neither Checker, nor Junior, nor Victor has a relationship in the novel. I believe in real life they do not know how to behave with the opposite sex, and there is a fear that they will not be able to live a proper family life. This way, it impacts not only their personal lives, but in a wider sense, it can also cause the loss of Indigenous culture.

Alcohol is considered a large factor in suicides, homicides, other intentional and unintentional injuries, and mental health problems. Homicide and diabetes deaths rates, which are "much higher for Native Americans than for all races combined, have been linked to alcohol use and abuse among Native American populations" (qtd. in Duran 95). The high rate of alcoholism among Native Americans is attributed to the policy of assimilation. Duran says, alcohol "is at the same time viewed by natives as destructive of native life and as a symbol of protest, as an affirmation of native identity" (135). I agree with his view, and we can see the same attitude toward alcohol in *Reservation Blues*, mostly in connection with Victor and Junior. Victor is more familiar with the concept of Star Wars (Alexie, *Reservation* 203) than his own cultural traditions. He is not interested in Thomas' stories, and it seems that the main aim of his life is to get a beer. However, Junior describes Victor in his letter to Big Mom as a careful, tough, and good guy; Junior wants to take the blame off from Victor for being a "jerk" (Alexie, *Reservation* 215). Alcohol may be a kind of mask that Victor, or in wider sense, Natives wear to hide their feeling, like loneliness, frustration. After Junior's suicide Victor promises to quit drinking, but he is not strong enough: "That little explosion of the beer can opening sounded exactly like a smaller, slower version of the explosion that Junior's rifle made on the water tower" (Alexie, *Reservation* 293). Alcohol destroys Natives collective - tribal life and traditional ways (Duran 138), and at the same time their personal lives too.

In an interview Alexie says, that “alcoholism is epidemic among Native Americans” (“Conversation”). Likewise, the notion of alcoholism permeates *Reservation Blues*, one way or another everyone is connected to alcohol. Thomas does not consume alcohol, but his father, Samuel Builds-the-Fire even receives an “Indian name: Drunk and Disorderly” (Alexie, *Reservation* 95), which indicates his connection to alcohol. When Chess and Checkers see Samuel, they believe that alcohol makes “Indian man so helpless and hopeless” and “they hated to see the father’s features in his son’s face” (Alexie, *Reservation* 96). In my view, it means that alcoholism is a kind of “bequest” that has been passed from parents to children for centuries.

3. 4. 1. White - Native relations

Alexie also represents white – Native relations through Junior and Victor’s relationship with Betty and Veronica. Their interactions demonstrate us current white – Native relations:

Junior knew that white women were trophies for Indian boys. He always figured getting a white woman was like counting coup or stealing horses, like the best kind of revenge against white men.

“Hey,” Indian men said to white men. “You may have kicked our ass in the Indian wars, but we got your women.” (Alexie, *Reservation* 233)

For Junior and Victor to start an affair with white woman is revenge. The traumas they relive in their dreams is compensated by the “real” or “magic realistic” present. White American soldiers slaughter down Native peoples and their horses in Junior’s dream. Victor dreams about “Guns, horses, men, flags, horses, smoke, blood, horses [...] until he smelled blood and smoke” (Alexie, *Reservation* 108). In Victor’s dream we see pictures from a battle, he gets wounded, however he is not in the battlefield, but in the hands of a “black robe.” The “black robe” represents white Americans who symbolically eat Natives’ blood, by taking away their lives. We get nearly concrete facts in characters’ dreams about tragic Native history. Coyote Springs becomes almost famous in mainstream American society, they are close to cross tragic Native American fate, but at the last moment they do not succeed. The past still bears its impacts on Indigenous peoples, and that may be the reason why Victor and Junior feel they have to take “revenge” on whites by “getting” white women, they do not see any other opportunity.

Chess is against racial mixing, she believes that “Junior and Victor are traitors” and they are “betraying their DNA” (Alexie, *Reservation* 82):

Your half-breed son will have quater-blood children and eight-blood grandchildren, and then they won't be Indians any more [...]. Those quarter-blood and eight-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. (Alexie, *Reservation* 283)

Chess wants to preserve Native American culture, racial homogeneity can be a way to Native American survival.

Junior and his white girlfriend, Lynn represent a different relationship. Junior used to love her, and after Lynn became pregnant he proposed to her. “I can't marry you, Lynn had said. You're Indian” (Alexie, *Reservation* 240). This indicates that even love cannot change white – Native relations.

Treuer criticizes Alexie's view on white – Native American relations in *Reservation Blues*: “*Reservation Blues* is laced with anxiety about transformation, shared understanding, and racial pollution,” and “racial impurity as an active force in *Reservation Blues* is equaled only in Cooper's *Leatherstocking* stories. In both books the mixed blood characters, or those who promote racial mixing, die terrible deaths” (Treuer 179). In my view, Alexie does not “condemn” white – Native relations in *Reservation Blues*. It is the most explicit in Thomas' opinion: “[Thomas] also knew about shortage of love in the world. He wondered if people should celebrate love wherever it's found, since it is so rare” (Alexie, *Reservation* 82). This question remains opened, we do not get an exact standpoint in the novel. However, Thomas decision to leave the Spokane reservation with Chess and Checkers indicates that it does not matter to which tribe, in a wider sense race one belongs, people can live in peace with each other.

There is a sarcastic representation of Native Americans when Thomas and Chess tries to find Victor and Junior in New York.

“Hey,” Chess said, “you aint't seen two Indian men come in here, have you?”

“What?” the waitress asked. “What do you mean? From India?”

“No,” Chess said. “Not that kind of Indian. We mean American Indians, you know? Bows-and-arrows Indians. Cowboys-and-Indians Indians.”

[...]

“Indians like in the western movies. Like Geronimo.” (Alexie, *Reservation* 239)

It shows us how white Americans stereotype Natives, they are not familiar with the history of Indigenous peoples.

In “Giving Blood” Alexie refers ironically to the white-Indian situation. When “Mr. Crazy Horse” wants to give blood for some extra money, the white nurse’s answer is “we’ve already taken too much of your blood/ and you won’t be eligible/ to donate for another generation or two” (Alexie, *Business*).

3. 5. Television and hunger

“Alexie makes a connection between television as exacerbating desire and passivity as well as confusing identity and increasing feelings of inferiority” (Grassian 82). Television takes a very contradictory place in this dream, Thomas “dreamed about television and hunger” (Alexie, *Reservation* 70). It “constantly reminded Thomas of all he never owned” (Alexie, *Reservation* 71), but he is the one who turns it on and watches it. Television may represent mainstream American culture; it influences not only characters’ life but also their dreams. There is a kind of “movie” that Thomas “watches” in his dream. Natives are trapped and electrocuted with a telegraph wire (Alexie, *Reservation* 71). The telegraph wire represents the expansion of white culture; it had wired all North America as non-Indian settlers “colonized” Natives territories.

Food, houses, clothes, children are natural things for most of people, but Thomas feels that they are available only for the whites, not for Native peoples. Parker says that if Native Americans “decide they have nothing left to lose, then that can make them lose everything” (107). Parker’s statement is valid in Thomas’ case. He is pessimistic and there are no positive allusions regarding the future. The opening song of the book provides us with the same aspect:

I ain’t got nothing, I heard no good news
I fill my pockets with those reservation blues
[...]
And if you ain’t got choices
Ain’t got much to lose. (Alexie, *Reservation* 1)

Hunger equals poverty, it is a recurring image in the novel. U.S.D.A. commodity food the characters mostly consume is described as “rancid meat [...] what stray dogs ignored” (Alexie, *Reservation* 14). “Thomas was hungry on a reservation where there are ninety-seven

different ways to say fry bread” (Alexie, *Reservation* 47). Food, as an important cultural marker, perfectly describes Native Americans’ situation that is “made of random vegetables and commodity food, of failed dreams and predictable tears” (Alexie, *Reservation* 220). “Failed dreams” represent Native American peoples past, and “predictable tears” are their future.

Conclusion

The main goal of my thesis was to demonstrate Native American history through Alexie's *Reservation Blues* with the help of dreams analysis. I illustrated how dreams draw a parallel between the modern U.S. and tribal worlds. I mentioned the most important governmental actions of the 19th century U.S. against Native Americans, and their outcomes. I believe, by reliving the past through dreams, we get a more precise view on history of Indigenous peoples, and Natives present-day situation becomes more understandable. In my view, *Reservation Blues* genuinely mixes realistic and magic things, and provides the reader with a true-to-life picture on Native Americans modern life.

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