The Representation of Blackness in *Reservation Blues*

Akira BABA

Abstract

It is not too much to say that Sherman Alexie (1966-) is one of the most gifted Native American writers at present. Surprisingly, he appears before us in a variety of creative roles: a moviemaker¹, a poet, and a novelist. Alexie’s concern is to depict the real life of contemporary Native Americans by making the best possible use of his extraordinary imagination and creativity.

Two motives have combined to make me focus on his first novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995). First, I want to inquire into the issue of the representation of blackness; secondly, I would like to put this literary piece into the context of globalization and reinterpret the overall problems raised by this fiction. Pursuing these two questions in this novel, I expect to reach the core of the issue of ethnoscapes² in the era of globalization.

Introduction

Sherman Alexie’s first novel, *Reservation Blues* is concerned with the representation of several races in the United States, and this has been a constant concern in Alexie’s fictions. Although many critics have commented on this novel from various viewpoints so far, most of their studies are based on the assumption of binomial opposition, namely, “Native American minority culture” versus “White dominant culture.” To take an example, James Cox remarks that Alexie’s works “revise and subvert the dominant culture’s conquest narratives and the mass-produced misrepresentations of Native Americans” (53). What Cox’s essay demonstrated from the postcolonial standpoint is the mechanism of Native American narrative’s resistance to the dominant white mainstream culture.

On the basis of existing critical essays, I would like to discuss chiefly the representation of
an African American in *Reservation Blues*, in contrast to the many critics who have discussed this work from the viewpoint that the reservation is assigned to Native Americans and the world outside is given to Whites. Reading this novel, we cannot, it seems, overlook the bizarre motif of a black man, Robert Johnson (1912-1938) who visits the reservation and then settles in the place permanently. Considering this motif important, we can incorporate “Blacks” into our argument in order to reexamine the variety of ethnic elements in this work. This paper will provide evidence that the inclusion of a black greatly affects the interpretation of this novel.

Furthermore, it is generally agreed that this novel can be read from the postcolonial context. Whereas I recognize the importance of this reading to some extent, it seems to me that there should be a consideration of this piece from the context of globalization, which underscores the present-day value of this novel.

1. **Blackness in the Native American Reservation**

When Alexie’s work is read from a viewpoint of ethnicity, we generally pay attention to the relationship between Native Americans and Whites without taking notice of the presence of African American elements. Such a binominal view seems to be of value for approaching Alexie’s works, which depict modern Native American life, to some extent, and it seems natural that “blacks” should be recognized as secondary figures appearing only in anecdotes. However, it seems reasonable to put much more emphasis on the representation of Blacks when we recognize the importance of the presence of an African American who is a character driving the development of this story.

As a beginning I would like to analyze some characters’ utterances which relate to their ethnicity as Native Americans. The point to be observed is the fact that these characters often refer to Blacks or Blackness when they talk about their own ethnicity. First, we will examine the words of Checkers, who is a female Native American of the Flathead tribe:

“Anyway, all those little white girls would be so perfect, so pretty, and so white. White skin
and white dresses. I’d be all brown-skinned in my muddy brown dress. *I used to get so dark that white people thought I was a black girl.*” (140, italics mine)

In this passage Checkers is recollecting her early years and explains how she has envied white girls. Checkers’ envy can be attributed to the “whiteness” of their skin, but “blackness” is used as a metaphor of her inferiority here and she has been regarded as a black girl by white girls as well. Of course, this part refers just to “blackness” of her skin color; however, considering several factors I will present in this paper hereafter, we can regard this passage as a significant clue to enter into the problem of interrelationship between the Native American and the African American. Furthermore, such descriptive identification of a Native American with an African American can be observed also in the case of another important character. Let us look at the account of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who is a pivotal character of this novel. Although Spokanes are described as a “mostly light-skinned tribe” in the early part of this novel, Thomas’ skin is vividly depicted “nearly dark as the black man” (4). Moreover, there is a legend that the horses slaughtered long ago by white soldiers returned to Big Mom, the medicine woman in the reservation, becoming “Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye” (10) who were all famous blues singers (though Janis Joplin is a white woman). To point out these juxtapositions of two races is only to reinforce the difference between colored minorities and white rulers. Here I would like to emphasize, if anything, the situation of close relationships between Native Americans and African Americans.

There is a detailed description of a basketball game which Samuel and Lester play with the Tribal Cops. Peter Donahue sharply points out that the winning shot performed by Samuel shows the “revenge on oppressive elements of American culture he [Samuel] sees embodied in the Tribal Cops” (57), and he tries to show the subversion of white mainstream culture in that game. Donahue’s view on the battle between native Americans and whites seems worthwhile, but little attention is paid in his opinion to the existence of the names of African Americans who are mentioned in the following conversation. Let us consider Samuel’s words when he scored points.
"That was for every one of you Indians like you Tribal Cops," Samuel said. "That was for all those Indian scouts who helped the U. S. Cavalry. That was for Wounded Knee I and II. For Sand Creek. Hell, that was for both the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X." (117, italics mine)

In this passage, Samuel offers his goals to the historical Indian massacres, Indian victims, the Kennedy brothers, and so on, but among such victims we should pay special attention to the social and political leaders of all African Americans, namely, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Here we can derive the argument that the cooperative relationship between Native American and African American is embedded in the discourse of subversion against white mainstream culture.

So far we have seen the issue of the representation of the skin color of the two races and Native Americans’ sympathy with African American leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Observations on these affairs can provide momentum to update the foregoing interpretation of this novel that depends on the opposition between Native and White. The point not to be overlooked is that African American elements have key roles in this novel. In the following sections, I would like to make it clear that the presence of a certain black blues musician has important effects to the Spokane Indian Reservation.

2. Blues as Subversive Discourse

Regarding blues music as a discourse of resistance to the master-culture and a means of self-definition, Hill Collins points out that the blues is a way of “solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of black life in America” (99). In recent years Collins and other critics, such as Houston Baker, Angela Davis, etc., are redefining the blues music as an African American discourse which has protest possibilities counter-balancing the master narrative. In this section I will focus on the blues, which has a close relation to the representation of African Americans, as depicted in Reservation Blues.
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The Spokane Reservation is assigned at first the stereotypic image of a reservation filled with alcoholism and gloomy lethargy. According to the narrator, since the creation of the Spokane Reservation “not one person, Indian or otherwise, had ever arrived there by accident” (3). It is, as it were, completely isolated from the outside world, even though the Spokane Reservation is situated inside the United States. Only when a legendary bluesman Robert Johnson with his magical guitar happens to visit the Spokane Indian Reservation, does the odyssey begin for young Thomas and his fellow Indians.

Inspired by Johnson and his entrancing guitar, Thomas makes up his mind to organize a band named “Coyote Springs” and play songs for his own tribe to save “this reservation hidden away in the corner of the world” (16). The question we must consider here is the fact that the text demonstrates that Thomas, the band leader, deeply recognizes the historical-political implication of blues music.

Johnson closed his eyes against the tears and opened his mouth to sing.... Those blues churned up generations of anger and pain: car wrecks, suicides, murders. Those blues were ancient, aboriginal, indigenous.... But Thomas also heard something hidden behind the words. He heard Robert Johnson’s grandmother singing backup. Thomas closed his eyes and saw that grandmother in some tattered cabin. No windows, blanket for a door, acrid smoke. Johnson’s grandmother was not alone in that cabin. Other black men, women, and children sang with her. The smell of sweat, blood, and cotton filled the room.... The white men in their big houses heard those songs and smiled. *Those niggers singin’ and dancin’ again*, those white men thought. *Damn music don’t make sense.* (174-175)

What should be observed in this passage is that Thomas sees African American life in the era of slavery and finds blacks’ conflict with the plantation owners behind Johnson’s blues. In short, considering blues music as a way of resistance to the master culture, Thomas employs the blues as an art form to overturn the oppressive situation in the Spokane Indian reservation. So we can safely say that Native Americans’ encounter with a black man does not happen by accident.
We can also find Alexie’s affinity and interest to the blues music in one of his short stories, ‘Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play “The Star-Spangled Banner” at Woodstock.’

Usually I listened to the blues. Robert Johnson mostly. The first time I heard Robert Johnson sing I knew he understood what it meant to be Indian on the edge of the twenty-first century, even if he was black at the beginning of the twentieth. (‘Because My Father’ 35, italics mine)

Here is the parallelism between Johnson who was an African American at the beginning of the twentieth century and the narrator who is a Native American in the late twentieth century. To borrow remarks from P. Jane Hafen, it is credible that Alexie appropriates the blues or rock music, which do not have roots in Native American culture, for the purpose of “presenting an American Indian cultural and political view of subversion and resistance” (71). The application of Hafen’s formula clarifies the cooperative relations between Native American and African American culture. Incorporating the historical and ideological background, African Americans’ expressive artistic form is appropriated and re-inscribed as a subversive trope for a modern Native American novel.4

3. Globalization: Consumption of Ethnicity

In this section I would like to focus attention on the group Coyote Springs which is formed to save the reservation by young natives, in order to highlight the issue of “ethnicity” itself. What is specific to the blues band named Coyote Springs is the multiplicity of ethnic and racial components. As we have seen in our foregoing discussion, the man who inspired Thomas and his friends to organize the blues band is Robert Johnson with his mystical guitar, that is to say, the existence of an African American bluesman was indispensable for Coyote Springs. In addition, we cannot overlook the white females, Betty and Veronica, who have long blond hair and are strongly drawn to the glamour of Native American culture only from the fashionable “New Age”
perspective. Their exoticism aimed at Native Americans can be typically seen in Betty’s words: “You all have things we don’t have. You live at peace with the earth. You are so wise” (168). Interestingly, Betty and Veronica join the band and play an important role in a chorus part. On top of it, another pair of females who are supposed to be Flathead Indians, Chess and Checkers, are also incorporated into Coyote Springs to sing background. It might be reasonable to surmise that their participation suggests the intertribal contact.

The last point which requires attention is that the record agency, which tries to promote Coyote Springs, is named “Cavalry Records” and its agents have the names “Sheridan” and “Wright,” which allude to commanders at historical Indian massacres, General Phil Sheridan and Colonel George Wright. As I have pointed out, it is obvious that the Native American band, Coyote Springs, is marked by a multiplicity of ethnicities.

Betty and Veronica leave the band and Sheridan and Wright estrange themselves from the members of the band, so their promotion falters in the end. Shortly afterwards, Cavalry Records turns their interest to the promoting possibilities of Betty and Veronica.

James Cox and other critics interpret this novel from standpoint based on anti-colonialism (Cox 62). Considering some parts which are related to historical affairs between whites and Indians, we can say that their post-colonial analyses are reasonably accurate. However, I do not accept their views in total. I would rather put this novel into the context of globalization and examine the consequences.

Consider now the implication of the promoting strategy Cavalry Records adopted to make Coyote Springs popular nationwide. The following is the letter sent to the headquarters of Cavalry Records in New York by Sheridan and Wright:

Checkers is quite striking, beautiful, in fact, while Chess is pretty. Both would attract men, I think. Sort of that exotic animalistic woman thing... Overall, this band 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 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. (190)

What becomes clear at once from this letter is that the very reason why agents find the market value in Coyote Springs can be attributed to its “ethnicity” as the Native American. They put a special emphasis on the exotic appearances of Chess and Checkers and ludicrously try to paint them in war makeup.

After giving up producing Coyote Springs in New York, Cavalry Records tries to change Betty and Veronica, who look like whites, into “real Indians” to attract a mass audience. Sheridan explains his plan to his boss: he intends to “get them into a tanning booth.” He continues, “Darken them up a bit. Maybe a little plastic surgery on those cheekbones.... Then we’d have Indians” (269). We can see here that the appearance of ethnicity itself has a commercial value in the present musical market. And at the same time, considering this case of Betty and Veronica,3 we can understand that the authenticity of Indian blood is not a concern at all in the market. Sheridan says, “there’s been an upswing in the economic popularity of Indians lately” (272), and he persuades Betty and Veronica to agree to his plan of promotion.

The promotion strategy of Cavalry Records is not likely to be irrelevant to the high demand for ethnic music in the big global market. Steven Feld, who is a cultural anthropologist, states that both positive and negative aspects coexist when we talk about world musics which are distributed globally. He suggests that the celebratory side of current world music has possibilities for “the production of hybrid musics” (196), and brings out a point of anxiety, that is, “the complicity of world music in commodifying ethnicity” (197). Coyote Springs’ farewell to Cavalry Records will be reasonably supposed to mean resistance to the commodification of Native Americans’ ethnicity, and moreover, the moment when Thomas heard the song performed by Betty and Veronica and “threw the cassette on the floor, and stomped on it” (296) is a very symbolical challenge to the sales strategy of Cavalry Records.

We will here turn to a discussion of the ethnicity of Robert Johnson. The legends concerning Johnson, who really lived around the 1920s or 1930s in the Deep South, shows that he made a deal with the Devil; he wanted to play the guitar better than anyone else at the price of his soul. A
music critic Robert Palmer suggests that the “Devil,” who made a dealing with Johnson, might be considered as “Legba”, the trickster of voodoo who “opens the path” (60) to the future. It should be noted that the legend concerning Johnson has been changed from its original form in *Reservation Blues*. In the novel Johnson makes a deal with a man called “Gentleman” and exchanges all his freedoms for his future success as a blues musician. We must be attentive to the passage that explains about the Gentleman: “A handsome white man, the Gentleman wore a perfectly pressed black wool suit” (264). Johnson’s trading partner was presumably an African American in the original legend, but a white man is assigned that part in Alexie’s novel. The pairing of Johnson and Gentleman overlaps with the relationship between Coyote Springs and Cavalry Records.

Needless to say, the regional “unevenness” of globalization has been discussed by many interdisciplinary scholars. And we unexpectedly observe a lot of things that are related to globalization in the Spokane Reservation in this novel. In 1992, the present time in this novel, residents of the reservation are able to receive CNN which has a wide global network, and the van of Federal Express, which is the largest transporting company, stops in front of the house to deliver parcels. Furthermore, many residents frequently drink Pepsi. However, we also witness a desolate scenery; a clinic which has been experiencing chronic shortages of medical commodities; numerous dilapidated houses built by HUD (the Department of Housing and Urban Development) because of cut-offs of “the building money halfway through construction” (7) by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. From these descriptions we can say that the text exemplifies the actual circumstances of globalization in the Native American reservation. Peripherally, globalization has already reached the reservation, but its process is not even and there are many problems to be solved.

As we have observed in this section, the problems of prevailing globalization are depicted repeatedly through Cavalry Records’ strategy and the deserted state of the reservation. If we review the whole story, we can now propose a tentative conclusion that Coyote Springs produced a counter discourse against globalism. Even so, we still have a long way to go before we arrive at a decisive conclusion.
4. Coyote Springs as a "Contact Zone"

We must here focus attention on the two places which are the main settings of the novel. The Spokane Reservation, which is the starting point of this story, is set by the author as a site opposing New York, where the band is "promoted" by the record agency. As Thomas says, "Anywhere off the reservation is a long ways from the reservation" (304), we can presume that those two locations suggest a binary polarization, namely, the place of localism and that of globalism. It is certain that the borderline which separates the inside and outside of the reservation is clear and firm in the first part of this story, but in contrast, at the end of the story the line becomes ambiguous.

After Coyote Springs disbands, Thomas comes back to his reservation from New York once, and then he decides to leave the place to start a new life in a neighboring town: "They all held their breath as they drove over the reservation border. Nothing happened. No locks clicked shut behind them" (305). This is the description when Thomas and Chess and Checkers pass the boundaries of the Spokane Reservation by car. The borderline of the reservation becomes so ambiguous at this point, but before this scene readers had a deep impression that the division of the inside and the outside still existed. We should take notice that the moment of crossing the border is just after the end of the "career" of Coyote Springs.

Pointing out the implications of expansionism in using the term "frontier," Mary Louise Platt presents the notion of a "contact zone" in place of "frontier":

By using the term "contact" I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A "contact" perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. (6-7, italics mine)

Platt rejects the term "frontier"; instead, she adopts "contact zone" because she interprets that the
"subjects" are constructed by means of interrelation with each other. We might define the band Coyote Springs as a "contact zone" because ethnic diversity is evident and transcultural relationships are distinctive features of this band, as we have examined in the previous section. Especially, when we consider the existence of a black bluesman who plays an indispensable role for the band, we can reasonably suppose that Coyote Springs to be a contact zone, a place of transcultural negotiation. In order to avoid simplistic binary polarization, that is, "global vs. local," or "white vs. Native American," and acquire a more productive perspective, the blues music and African American culture are employed by the author.

Although we frequently confront arguments which require choosing "global" or "local" or "ethnic" these days, it seems to me that it is not often an effective method, but a circular logic at best. As Arjun Appadurai insists, "ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality (however large), has now become a global force" (41), that is, ethnicity is not fixed in a particular place any longer. Therefore, we have to modify our tentative conclusion I proposed in the previous section. However firmly Coyote Springs holds to the ideology of anti-globalism at the beginning of this novel, Thomas chose at the end of the novel neither New York, the pivot of globalization, nor the Spokane Indian Reservation, his birthplace. He finally selected Spokane, a town located near the Spokane Indian Reservation, as his new life space. Therefore, it might be concluded that Spokane is a third place, an alternative which was presented as a place of reconciliation in the novel.

Robert Johnson decides to stay in the reservation at the end of the novel with the help of Big Mom, the medicine woman and trickster of the Spokane tribe. Here is the reciprocal relationship between the two races. Moreover, the author Alexie tries even to incorporate a good part of white culture into his Native American culture, when he depicts a promoting executive of Cavalry Records, George Wright (a doppelganger of General George Wright who slaughtered Native Americans and their horses in the 1800s) who regrets his deeds against Native Americans. These are the cultural relationships Alexie pictures in the era of globalization.
Conclusion

Alexie demonstrated in this novel the transcultural cooperation of minorities by inserting African Americans and their culture into the binary relationship between whites and Native Americans. Houston Baker defines the blues as a "matrix" of African American culture, and he explains that "the matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit" (3). As Baker points out, blues music plays a significant role as a "transcultural contact zone" in Reservation Blues.

The current course of reception of Robert Johnson’s music may be worth mentioning in order to outline the historical background of Reservation Blues. After The Complete Recordings was released in 1991, Johnson’s tunes were distributed in the global market and became a smash hit throughout the world. When Johnson recorded his songs in the 1930s, blues music targeted at mostly African American audiences as “race music.” However, it has been received as “world music” since the 1990s. If we take such a historical background into account, it may be proper to surmise that the encounter of the blues music and Alexie’s novel did not occur by accident.

Although a close study of global culture itself is irrelevant to this paper, we can at least say that globalization is a very complicated phenomenon and has both positive and anxious aspects. As John Tomlinson acutely suggests, “the global dominance of western culture” (80) is very close to cultural imperialism. But, if positively viewed, globalization gives us possibilities for producing transcultural hybrid culture. It follows from this positive interpretation of globalization that the global distribution of Robert Johnson’s music has provided a chance to create hybrid cultures.

Alexie appropriately employed a character Robert Johnson as a global icon of African American culture in his novel which depicted the situation in a contemporary Native American reservation. By way of conclusion, I would like to reiterate my point that this story about Native Americans in the era of globalization is officially developed by using an asset of African American culture, the blues, and hence the title of Reservation Blues becomes even more
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significant.

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**Notes**

1. Alexie completed his first movie *Smoke Signals* (1997), which is based on both *Reservation Blues* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

2. Arjun Appadurai proposes five dimensions “ethnoscapesc,” “mediascapes,” “technoscapesc,” “financescapes,” and “ideoscapesc” to examine the global culture, and the word “ethnoscapesc” is used to consider the dynamism of ethnicity in the era of globalization.

3. As Peter Donahue suggests, the motif of basketball plays a powerful role in contemporary Native American literature. As examples Donahue mentions James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* in addition to *Reservation Blues*.

4. Douglas Ford acutely pointed out, “the blues speak not just an African American history and identity, but instead seem to generate from a Native American point of reference” (197) in *Reservation Blues*.

5. Ironically, Sheridan’s remarks reveal that racial identity as a Native American is not an abstract essence, but it can be created artificially.


7. In recognition of the ongoing impact on music and cultural history both in America and around the world, the United States Congress recognized 2003 as the ‘Year of the Blues’ in the 107th Congress.

**Works Cited**


