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Transcultural Transformation:  
African American and Native American Relations

By  
Barbara S. Tracy

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Frances W. Kaye

Lincoln, Nebraska

November, 2009

## Transcultural Transformation:

### African American and Native American Relations

Barbara S. Tracy, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2009

Advisor: Fran Kaye

The intersected lives of African Americans and Native Americans result not only in Black Indians, but also in a shared culture that is evidenced by music, call and response, and story. These intersected lives create a dynamic of shared and diverging pathways that speak to each other. It is a crossroads of both anguish and joy that comes together and apart again like the tradition of call and response. There is a syncopation of two cultures becoming greater than their parts, a representation of losses that are reclaimed by a greater degree. In the tradition of call and response, by denying one or the other something is lost. Claiming the relationship turns transcultural transformation into a powerful response. Working from Henry Gates' explanation of signifying combined with Houston Baker's description of blues literature, I examine signifying, call and response, and blues/jazz elements in the work of three writers to discover the collective lives of African Americans, Native Americans, and Black Indians. In the writing of Black-Cherokee Alice Walker, I look for the call and response of both African and Native American story-ways. I find these same elements in the writing of Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie, in his blues writings and his revision of Robert Johnson's and other stories. In the work of Creek/Cherokee Craig Womack, I examine a Creek/Cherokee perspective of Black Creeks and Freemen. In all of these works, I find that the shared African American and Native American experience plainly takes place in these works in a variety of ways in which the authors call upon oral and written story, song, and dance, and create a response that clearly signifies the combined power of these shared experiences. This is a fusion of shared traditions with differences that demonstrate the blending of voices and culture between two peoples who have been improvising together for a long time.

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In Memory of Anna Mae Spurlock:  
grandmother, storyteller, musician--the one who started it all

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	vi
Introduction: Speaking of Things Yet Unspoken: Native Americans, African Americans, and Black Indians	1
1.    The Red-Black Center of Alice Walker's <i>Meridian</i> : Asserting a Cherokee Womanist Sensibility	19
2.    Crossroads: The African American and Native American Blues Matrix in Sherman Alexie's <i>Reservation Blues</i>	44
3.    "Red is Red": Transcultural Convergence and Craig Womack's <i>Drowning in Fire</i>	84
Conclusion: Common Ground: Let the Music Start	118
Works Cited	122

## Introduction

### Speaking of Things Yet Unspoken:

#### Native Americans, African Americans, and Black Indians

“No outsider knows where Africa ends or America begins” (Silko *Almanac of the Dead* 421).

“Africans and Americans<sup>1</sup> must now be studied together without their relations always having to be obscured by the separations established through the work of scholars focusing essentially upon some aspect of European expansion and colonialism” (Jack D. Forbes *Africans and Native Americans* 1).

The intersected lives of African Americans and Native Americans result in Black Indians and a shared culture of music, call and response, and story in forms of what Henry Louis Gates identifies as signifying. These intersected lives create a dynamic of shared and diverging pathways that speak to each other. It is a crossroads of both anguish and joy that comes together and apart again like the tradition of call and response. Two cultures become greater than their parts, representing losses that are reclaimed by a greater degree. In the tradition of call and response, the lack of one or the other leaves

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<sup>1</sup> Forbes uses the word American for American Indian in the colonial period and African or Black African for sub-Saharan Africans to avoid the “ambiguous Indian and Negro.”



something lost. Claiming the relationship summons transcultural transformation into a powerful response. Without a call there is no response; without response the call is left crashing in the wind.

The title of my introduction “Speaking of Things Yet Unspoken,” is borrowed from a keynote address given by Toni Morrison in 1989 titled “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” in which she discussed the marginalization of African American literature. Since that speech, much has happened in African American literature, and we can be pretty certain that students leaving high school will know the works of a few African American authors; although not perfect, today we see a marked improvement in this area since 1989. While much is being done to move African American, Native American, Asian American, Chicano/Chicana, and Latino/Latina literature out of the margins and into the mainstream, a significant gap remains in literary discussions of mixed bloods, particularly those who live on more than one hyphen and who remain on the margin of the margins. Invisible mixed bloods and erased cultural exchanges, much like invisible beings and empty landscapes “found” by “discovery” and colonization, become a canvas--assumed empty by the dominant cultures--upon which they can then interpret and reinvent mixed blood communities which center on European encounters with “otherness.”

A few years ago my son came home from high school eager to show me something. Tearing through his backpack, he found his World History II book. Having listened to the topic of my research for many years, he keeps a keen eye for anything of interest. The book is beautiful, full of color, photographs, classic paintings and maps. He

turned the pages to a drawing from the New York Library titled *African Slave and Indian Woman*. The caption below the picture reads:

A black slave approaches an Indian prostitute. Unable to explain what he wants, he points with his finger; she eagerly grasps for the coin. The Spanish caption above moralizes on the black man using stolen money—yet the Spaniards ruthlessly expropriated all South American mineral wealth. (McKay, Hill, and Buckler 544)

The picture starts a section titled “European Slavery and the Origins of American Racism,” and is placed opposite a map of the African slave trade. Within the contexts of the last line of the caption, the writers’ emphasis is on the irony of the Spanish commentary on Blacks stealing money when the Spanish themselves stole from South Americans. However, the discussion stops there. No mention of interactions between Indians and Blacks follows. The students are left with this image of over-sexed Black thieves and Indian prostitutes. The section does, however, mention that as early as 1495, the Spanish, followed by the Portuguese, Dutch, and English, began unsuccessfully enslaving Indians in the Americas (545). Later in the book it discusses mestizos of Spanish and Indian background and mulattos of Spanish and African heritage (915). However, the section makes no mention of Indian and African mixed bloods. Throughout the section on slavery in the U.S., the book does not mention that Native Americans owned Black slaves. Later in discussion of the then approaching year 2000 and the new census, it mentions Native Americans marrying “outside their group,” Blacks and whites marrying, Asians and whites, and Hispanics and Blacks (940-41). While one text book on world history since 1500 certainly cannot begin to dive deeply

into the complexities of interracial relations, just a few additional paragraphs would waken any high school sophomore to the thought that Native Americans held slaves and that mixed race does not always mean mixed Europeans. Such a textbook, or classroom discussion, also creates an inclusive atmosphere where students already aware of their own history and relations are affirmed because they too are recognized.

In most of our grammar school educations, we learned a little bit about minorities and a whole lot about Euro Americans. I'm about certain that in our grammar school years, little if anything was mentioned of Black Indians, Chinese Africans, Filipino Africans, Mexican Asians, et all, much less about any other mixed bloods. The erasure of these identities impacts everyone, especially members of these communities. Recently in the Native American Literature course I teach, I overheard a student from El Salvador talking in a small group discussion; he was excited that the class had read "These Stones will Talk Again," an essay by a Mayan from Guatemala, Victor Montejo whose work focuses on the traditional Mayan stories of Central America. The student proudly explained to his group the history of Indians in El Salvador and Guatemala. Readers look for evidence of themselves, and like the student reading Montejo, they feel a strong sense of identity when someone like themselves can speak from the pages. This feeling of identity is apparent in Silko's character Clinton in *Almanac of the Dead*. Clinton only cares about taking Black studies classes in which he pours over the books looking for Black Indians. When he was young, the old women taught him about their Indian ancestry: "He had not got over the shock and wonder of it. He and the rest of his family had been direct descendants of wealthy, slave owning Cherokee Indians" (415). Clinton is disappointed as he waits for any mention of Indians in his Black studies classes. He

only takes notes regarding Black Indians, and his nearly empty notebook reveals volumes. It is an empowering moment in reading history or literature in which we can find ourselves, our ancestors, in those pages.

However, finding those moments in history or literature can be disheartening or at least a lot more work than reading about the dominant culture and its relationship with Black or Indians. Jack Forbes, in introducing *Africans and Native Americans* states:

Thousand of volumes have been written about the historical and social relations existing between Europeans and the Native Peoples of the Americans and between Europeans and Africans, but relations between Native American and Africans have been sadly neglected. The entire Afro-Native American cultural exchange and contact experience is a fascinating and significant subject, but one largely obscured by a focus upon European activity and European colonial relations with ‘peripheral’ subject peoples (1).

How little has been written or not written about contact between Native Americans and African American does not negate the fact that indeed contact occurred in the forms of alliances, slavery, and family. In discussing the significance of contact, Forbes writes, “In many parts of Europe, along the coasts of Africa, and throughout the Americas the slave trade and European imperialism in general produced a vast number of contacts between Black Africans and Native Americans. As a result a great deal of intermixture took place” (60). In fact the history of Black Indians, when and where their relationships may have begun and what they are today is itself a rich topic for further research.

African Native American historical studies emerging since the early 1900s include such works as Ivan Van Sertima's *They came before Columbus* in which he argues that Native Americans and Africans had contact prior to Columbus. Berry Brewton's *Almost White* explores origins and social conditions of various mixed race peoples. Jack Forbes has written several articles and books, most notably *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*, in which he carefully examines the language used to categorize African Americans, Native Americans, Black Indians, and other mixed bloods. He finds ambiguous terms, which overlap and lose specificity, such as colored and mulatto, which in one instance might mean Black, another Indian, and in some anyone of unclear ethnic identity. Daniel F. Littlefield's books *Africans and Creeks*, *The Cherokee Freedmen*, and *Africans and Seminoles* all examine the history of each tribe and their relationship with Africans, slaves, and Freedmen.

Additional studies include *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society* by Theda Perdue, who examines Cherokee ownership of Black slaves, and their shared exploitation by Europeans. William Loren Katz's *Black Indians* contains historical photographs and an overview of slavery, runaway slaves, and Black/Indian marriages in early American history. Claudio Saunt, author of *Black, White, and Indian* discovers the connection between the Creek Graysons and their Black Creek kin. Patrick Mingos wrote *Black Indians* in which he researched the archives of the Federal Writer's Project and collected twenty-seven narratives which include discussion of relations between Native Americans and African Americans. In 1998, a special edition of *American Indian Quarterly* featured writings from anthropologists and historians such as James Brooks

and Circe Sturm. Many of the essays were later collected by Brooks in *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America*. Sturm has since expanded and published her study of Black Cherokees in *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma*. Sturm examines the national identity, contradictions of race, and the Cherokee Freedmen in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. Issues of identity, nationhood, even the naming of identities become foggy throughout these works, but the significance in relationships between Native Americans and African Americans grows.

Less has been written to date about African Native American writers or African American and Native American relations in literature, despite the noted presence of African Native American writers such as Paul Cuffe (African Wampanoag) whose ship logs and letters tell much about the number of Black Indians employed on his ship. While much is written about William Apess (African Pequot), one of the earliest Native American writers, little is said of his African ancestry. Discussions of Olivia Bush-Banks (African Montauk), Langston Hughes (African Cherokee), Alice Walker (African Cherokee), Clarence Major (African Cherokee) primarily focus on their African American identity, even while their writing reveals their self identity as also Indian. Several Native American or African American writings contain Black Indians or other evidence of the exchange of culture apparent in their novels or poetry such as that of Toni Morrison (African American), Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo/Mexican), Nettie Jones (African American), Francine Washburn (Lakota), Joy Harjo (Muskogee Creek), or Craig Womack (Muskogee

Creek/Cherokee), yet literary criticism seldom examines these works as speaking to relationships between African Americans and Native Americans.

In 2000, Dartmouth held a symposium titled “Eating Out of the Same Pot,” which featured many new and established voices in the field such as James Brooks, Ron Welburn, Jack Forbes, and Theda Purdue. However, only a handful of literary scholars presented at the symposium, and until the recent emergence of Jonathan Brennan’s books, *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote* and *Mixed Race Literature*, little work has been published in this area of African Native American literary criticism. Brooks comments that “historians and ethnographers [were driven] toward archives and/or field sites in the hope of recovering moments of alliance between these victims of Euro-American expansion (128). He also notes, however, that intellectuals have been slow to recognize the complexities beyond mere “analyses” of multi-cultured communities or to “engage in the ambiguities of cultural hybridity, especially *as seen from the perspective of the mixed descent people themselves*” (129). What better place than the narratives and fiction of and about ethnically mixed peoples from which to recognize these complexities?

Jonathan Brennan calls for an examination of African Native American writing within an interpretive framework combining both African American and Native American critical theories. To read only through one identity, he explains, leads to “misinterpreting the merging traditions that underlie the hybrid text” (“Introduction” *Mixed* 19). He suggests that “in order to really understand the tradition from which [ethnically mixed] writers create their literary works, one must also examine their parallel heritage without denying either one” (“Introduction” *Mixed* 19). One might also argue that Indigenous identity is political and national, which further complicates the

discussion of culturally mixed identity. In examining Native American mixed blood literature, it is equally essential to engage a tribally specific perspective. Creek/Cherokee writer Craig Womack explains:

In terms of a Creek national literature, the process had been based on the assumption that it is valuable to look toward Creek authors and their works to understand Creek writing. My argument is not that this is the *only* way to understand Creek writing but an important one given that literatures bear some kind of relationship to communities, both writing communities and the community of the primary culture from which they originate (4).

A balanced reading of African Native American literature or African American and Native American relations means looking at both tribal perspectives, which may include story-ways, call and response, music, and other shared culture. Womack's suggestion that we include tribally specific voices in writing about Native American literature and Brennan's plea to examine multi-cultured authors from all of their identities should mean that a reading of Alice Walker, for example, would examine the Cherokee and African American responses found in her work through a study of both Cherokee and African American sources. Although Alexie is not a Black Indian, the influence of Robert Johnson, Legba, and the blues on Alexie's writing, requires study of African/African American relationships to Native Americans and the blues. Craig Womack also is not a Black Indian; however, Black Creeks and Creek Freedmen in his writing as well as the influence of jazz and blues, requires a study of these elements of Creek culture.



In history, art, film, and fiction we absorb mostly ideas of red-white conflicts, Black-white conflicts, and European mixed-blood children who suffer some kind of torn identity. Hertha D. Sweet Wong states “most mixed blood protagonists have been portrayed as red-white conflicted unions or conflicts, thus mirroring the dominant political struggle between colonizers and colonized” (166). While the American imagination today easily incorporates mixed ethnicities among Euro-Americans such as Swedish Germans and Irish Italians, it resists the logical interconnections beyond a shared oppression among non-euro-Americans.

Sharon P. Holland in her discussion of African Native American literature states: “Finding a space, let alone a subjectivity, that embraces both African and Native identity is also an endeavor to develop an understanding of literature as a process of both *emancipation* and *sovereignty*, as we are seeking the history and lives of people whose experience crossed the barriers of enslaved bodies and lands” (260). Despite African Native American historical studies emerging in the early 1900’s and a literary history hundreds of years old, many scholars have taken an either/or approach, a focus on one or the other identity, stifling opportunities to discuss the rich syncretism of multiple traditions and voices emerging in the works of the African Native American writing. In the field of literature, with the exception of aforementioned *Confounding the Color Line* a collection of essays edited by James Brooks, that includes multi-disciplinary approaches to the subject of Black Indians, and Jonathan Brennan’s two literary studies *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote* and *Mixed Race Literature*, little has been written to date about literature written by Black Indians or about Black Indians by African American or Native American writers.

The call to recognize the entirety of identity appears frequently in Native American writing. Gloria Bird, after being asked if she wrote as a woman or a Native, writes “It is curious that I would be asked to isolate from all of these a single aspect of what makes up my being—that I am a Native or a woman” (“Breaking the Silence” 45). In speaking of the various tribes and clans in her family, Roberta Hill quotes her sister Rose who “claims we’re forced to define ourselves in one frequency instead of all the chords and harmonies of which we are composed” (“Immersed in Words” 81). Leslie Marmon Silko writes “Our full-blooded relatives and clans people assured us we were theirs and that we belonged there because we had been born and reared there. But the racism of the wider world we call American had begun to make itself felt years ago” (“Interior and Exterior Landscapes” 19). She sums up her family response when describing her father and uncle: “Whatever the ambiguities of racial heritage, my father and uncle understood what the old folks had taught them: the earth loves all of us regardless, because we are her children” (“Interior and Exterior Landscapes” 19). The response is that growing numbers of tribal people are beginning to identify themselves in all of their “chords and harmonies.”

Parallel to the call to encompass the completeness of a writer’s identities lies the task to examine works by ethnic writers whose cross cultural writing includes the characters’ gaze upon other marginalized people, requiring a look into the shared pot from which so many cultural interplays quietly arose and of the shared locations of peoples whose lands were stolen or who were stolen from their lands, whose people shared experiences of detainment, removal, relocation, murder, rape, and genocide. A cross cultural study of Silko’s *Ceremony* would find the parallels she draws between

Japanese and Pueblo cultures, the ripping open of mother earth, the poisonous effects lasting perhaps thousands of years, and the resulting genocides all through the shared exposure to nuclear horror. When Tayo is asked to participate in the execution of Japanese soldiers, he sees his own relatives through the image of his uncle. However, at the airport as he has returned home, he experiences a mix of negative feelings while briefly encountering a Japanese family. The family also conjures similar images of the imprisonment and relocation of Native Americans who likewise were seen as the enemy in the land they called home. These images require a study of Japanese and Japanese American experiences in order to find and discuss the parallels of this shared experience.

Kyoko Matsunaga's doctoral dissertation, *Post Apocalyptic Vision and Survivance* examines the shared experience of Native American and Japanese regarding nuclear issues in what she calls "cross-cultural nuclear destruction" (1). Wei Ming Dariotis describes these parallels found in *Ceremony* and other cross cultural literature such as Alejandro Morales's *The Brick People* which looks at Asian-American experiences as a "kin-aesthetic." She argues that recognizing other as kin shifts one's own identity and that such a shift will break us out of the "stereotypical relations based on media induced racial dichotomies" (177-79). Recognizing what she calls the "kin-aesthetic" and recognizing "other" as kin, and part of the in-group, produces a state that moves "beyond the logic of binary oppositions and thus begins the work of reframing 'the gaze'" (178-179).

A full spectrum analysis of cross culture suggests that scholars of works such as Michael Dorris's *Yellow Raft on Blue Water* examine not only Dorris's Modoc French Irish identity but also the experiences of Black Indians, such as bell hooks and Ron

Welburn, in order to clearly understand and evaluate Doris's depiction of the Black Indian teenager, Rayona from Seattle, who finds herself living on her mother's reservation. Similarly, in discussing Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, a study of African and indigenous cultural interchange particularly related to music and the blues becomes as essential to reading and discussing his character Big Mom as does discussion of setting and author identity.

In examining traditional story-ways found in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, Henry Louis Gates finds the presence of the Yoruba Esu-Elegbara (also known as Legba) and the Signifying Monkey. In these figures lie a tradition and system of interpretation that the enslaved Africans brought with them to America. No doubt given the shared lives of Africans and Indigenous Americans, we can see similar elements of this system in the story-ways of Native Americans and African Native Americans such as Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby. Gates explains: The Black tradition is double-voiced. The trope of the Talking Book, of double-voiced texts that talk to other texts, is the unifying metaphor . . . Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced, epitomized by Esu's depiction in sculpture as possessing two mouths" (xxv). Gates explores four types of signifying: "Tropological Revision," "The Speakerly Text," "Talking Texts," and "Rewriting the Speakerly." The first is a "manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts" (xxv). This type of Signifyin(g) occurs in many Native American works as well, where we can see that the book (Talking Book) is a double-voiced text in which it locates the call of another text or oral story and speaks back to it in both a form of repetition and difference.

For example, in Alice Walker's reading of *Black Elk Speaks*, she hears the call and responds not only from her experience as a Black Woman but also from her knowledge as a Cherokee of the Selu and Wild Child stories. Tropological Revision is also a means by which the colonized and the enslaved can look into each other's culture or take European tropes and revise them fitting one's own culture. In *Reservation Blues* Sherman Alexie answers the call of several texts, films, and songs with a response that turns the original into a difference through his blues writing. Blues are also a means of signifying. In typical twelve bar blues, the first four bars express the topic or problem, and bars five through eight repeat the first four, sometimes with some slight variation. The last four bars eight through twelve, put a twist or a difference on the topic or problem. For example: "Going to the riverside, take a chair and set down. Going to the river take a chair and set down. If I get worried I'll jump over board and drown" (Dorsey and Jones). The blues is also a form of signifying or call and response, and use tropological revision through mnemonics, metaphor, and irony, playing with the meaning of words. Alexie's writing demonstrates a deep interest in the blues, particularly in Jimi Hendrix and Robert Johnson. There is a history of blues singers in the Coeur d'Alene with Mildred Bailey and Al Rinker. Because of his own and other Native American participation in the blues, he recognizes this kind of shared signifying and naturally uses it in his blues novel.

Gates finds that The Speakerly Text is "exemplified in the peculiar play of 'voices' at work in the use of 'free indirect discourse'" (xxv). Gates explains:

Free indirect discourse is represented . . . as if it were a dynamic character, with shifts in its level of diction drawn upon to reflect a certain

development of self-consciousness in hybrid character, a character who is neither the novel's protagonist nor the text's disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, and emergent and merging moment of consciousness (xxv-xxvii).

In the Speakerly Text oral tradition can play a significant role. It is the response to the voice of one's own people that survives despite slavery and colonization. And while the Speakerly Text is a collective voice, it is interpreted by the author and the reader. In *Reservation Blues* the sound of the screaming horses, which echoes throughout the story, is not only the actual horses lost, but also the traditions to which Alexie listens and responds in his voice as a writer. For Big Mom, it is the sound that she responds to in her work with musicians and the sound of her flute. For the reader, although the sound is communal, his or her response is individual, like the writer's.

The third, the "Talking Text" is a form of intertextuality in which "black texts 'talk' to other black texts" in a double voiced discourse" (xxvi). By examining Indian texts that talk back to Indian texts, Craig Womack's novel *Drowning in Fire* as well as his work of literary criticism, *Red on Red*, speak back to writings of past Creek and Cherokee writers as well as historical events. In creating Jimmy, a Black Creek, to represent one of the three worlds<sup>2</sup> and to recognize the role of Blacks in the Red Stick war, he responds to Creek writer Alex Posey's portrayal of Freedman characters. The

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Grantham (Creek) describes the three worlds. The Upper World, "beyond the sky, was the realm of powerful spiritual beings and departed souls. It was permeated with powers of perfection, order, permanence, clarity, and periodicity." The Lower World, with exactly the opposite powers of the Upper World: "reversals, madness, creativity, fertility, and chaos. . . The Middle World existed in a 'precarious balance' between those powers that structure nature and human life and those that rupture order and empower freedom (22).

fourth mode, “Rewriting the Speakerly,” signifies the sound of voices “in the vernacular ritual of ‘close reading’”(xxvi). Womack’s novel and literary criticism both listen carefully to the Creek voices so familiar to him as well as the vernacular found in the writings of Alex Posey, responding with a “close reading” of those voices in the voices of his characters and especially in the voices of the letters ending each chapter of *Red on Red*.

In Gates’ work, he carefully defines various forms of signifying and how they are apparent in African American literature. Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* relate the blues to African American culture on a vernacular level. He combines the vernacular with history, economics, and social class. He also pushes the literary critic to achieve beyond tropological theory and the search for symbols to reach for “active imagination.” He states:

No one can lead an analyst of Afro-American culture, for example, to discover the effectiveness of blues, or storytelling, or the signifying monkey for a theory of black expression. ‘Discovery’—in the tropological view—is not synonymous with learning through rational persuasion. It is akin to an adventurous act of play, or an energetic invention. The effective trope, one might say, is merely the lever long enough for the purpose. One must still risk the leap into space that discovers seemingly unlikely spots from which to move a familiar world. (110)

In Baker’s discussion of Gates’ *Signifying Monkey*, he suggests that Gates is a bit restrictive, not allowing much room to look creatively for the rhythms that move us forward and break the critic free to his or her own improvisation. He suggests that “we

can improvisationally constrain the limitations of his model's politics by signifying on them" (111). He suggests that in that space when the blues music breaks and its your turn to perform "improvisationally simple enough to advance both the tradition itself and its clearer understanding. . . . There is a constant need for original and suggestive tropes to capture an ever changing American scene" (112). This is the call that I hear.

I hear the shared traditions of call and response of a blues ideology of signifying within the shared pot of African American, Native American, and Black Indian music and stories. I listen to Gates and Baker and signify from them, to answer this call. To riff on, playing with what I hear in these works that seems on the surface so unrelated to one another.

In the following chapters, I examine selected works of three authors looking at elements of signifying, call and response and blues to discover the collective lives of African Americans and Native Americans. In the writing of Black-Cherokee Alice Walker, I look for the call and response of both African and Native American storyways. I find these same elements in the writing of Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie, in his blues writings and his revision of Robert Johnson's and other stories. In the work of Creek/Cherokee Craig Womack, I examine a Creek/Cherokee perspective of Black Creeks and Freedmen. In all of these works, I find that the shared African American and Native American experience plainly takes place in these works in a variety of ways in which the authors call upon oral and written story, song, and dance, and create a response that clearly signifies the combined power of these shared experiences. This is a fusion of shared traditions with differences that demonstrate the



blending of voices and culture between two peoples who have been improvising together for a long time. This is my response.

## Chapter One

### The Red-Black Center of Alice Walker's *Meridian*:

#### Asserting a Cherokee Womanist Sensibility

The mixed blood is not a cultural broker but a cultural breaker, breakdancin, trickster-fashion through all signs, fracturing the self-reflective mirror of the dominant center, deconstructing rigid borders, slipping between the seams, embodying contradictions, and contradancing across every boundary.” (Louis Owens)

While Alice Walker's name frequently appears in both African American and feminist studies, little has been written of her identity as a Black Cherokee<sup>3</sup>. Most writers who note her Cherokee identity focus on *Black Elk Speaks* and Native American culture but do not pick up on the subtle references to the Cherokee stories of Selu and Wild Boy embedded in her novel. Patricia Riley, however, speaks to this in her essay on Alice Walker's Native American subjectivity in which she recognizes the influences of both Cherokee stories and Black Elk in *Meridian*. In my reading of *Meridian*, I examine the

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<sup>3</sup>Anne M. Downey and Lindsey Tucker have published essays that examine Indian elements of *Meridian* but do not focus on the Cherokee elements.

Cherokee and Lakota elements in the call and response Gates calls “Tropological Revision,” where a double-voiced text hears the call of another text and speaks back in both repetition and difference. A rereading of *Meridian* discovers that the multiple voices found in identity demonstrate the ways by which Walker—in the shared African and Cherokee tradition of call and response—answers the call of John Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* not simply as a womanist (a term for Black feminists coined by Walker), but as a Cherokee womanist listening to the call of *Black Elk Speaks* and responding with the Cherokee stories of Selu and Wild Child.

Although Walker’s participation in the civil rights movement is central to her writing, particularly in the novel *Meridian*, her interest in the continued violation of Native American civil liberties and treaties as well as the struggle to regain sovereignty also threads a distinct pattern throughout Walker’s writing. Native American characters and ideologies, some more subtle than others, frequently appear throughout Walker’s writings. In her autobiographical works, she mentions her Cherokee great-grandmother Tallulah who walked the Trail of Tears likely as a result of white expansion made possible by slavery. James Mooney, in discussing stories shared by Blacks and Cherokees such as Brer Rabbit, says such stories could be borrowed from one by the other; it is not commonly known that in the southern colonies Indian slaves were bought and sold and kept in servitude and worked in the fields side by side with Africans up to the time of the American Revolution and beyond (233). Cherokees also owned slaves until July 18, 1866, when “the Cherokee Nation signed a reconstruction treaty with the United States, amid great internal controversy. That treaty extended Cherokee

citizenship and ‘all rights of Native Cherokees’ to the freedmen and their descendents” (Sturm 171).<sup>4</sup>

Although Walker’s use of the ubiquitous Cherokee grandmother may raise concern, it also reveals what Ron Welburn found in his own African Native American home, where it was common practice to publicly embrace Black ethnicity while distancing yet recognizing Native American heritage (293). In 1979 Walker published *Horses Make a Landscape More Beautiful*. The front-piece of the collection begins:

For two who/ slipped away/ almost/ entirely:/ my “part” Cherokee/ great-grandmother/ Tallulah/ (Grandmama Lula)/ on my mother’s side/ about whom only one/ agreed-upon/ thing/ is known:/ her hair was so long/ she could sit on it;/

And my white (Anglo-Irish?)/ great-great grandfather/ on my father’s side; nameless/ (Walker, perhaps?)/ whose only remembered act/ is that he raped/ a child:/ my great-great-grandmother,/ who bore his son,/ my great-grandfather,/ when she was eleven.

Rest in peace./ The meaning of your lives/ is still/ unfolding.

Rest in peace./ In me/ the meaning of your lives/ is still/ unfolding.

Rest in peace./ In me/ the meaning of your lives/ is still/ unfolding.

Rest in peace./ In me/ the meaning of your lives/ is still/ unfolding.

Rest in peace./ In me/ the meaning of our lives/ is still/ unfolding.

Rest. (viii-ix)

The poem trespasses upon an unspoken but known practice as described by Welburn:

<sup>4</sup> See Circe Sturm’s *Blood Politics* for a more complete discussion of the Freedmen and the history of their political status, which is still in debate today.

Most of us living on the Indian-Negro color line grew up with mixed signals and coded information. Our elders had learned to protect us from the ridicule and abuse they had experienced as Indians or from which their parents had sheltered them. They instilled in us the sense that we were “different” from our peers; but that we were Indian or of Native descent, when it was raised, was a covert issue. Why we should live with such a covert identity was seldom explained. (292)

As a result of her poem, Walker publicly experienced one possible reaction from which Welburn’s elders hoped to protect him. In a 1984 review for the *Richmond News Leader*, K.T.H. Cheatwood<sup>5</sup> criticized Walker’s exploration of her mixed ancestry, accusing her of trying to pass from one identity to another in order to disassociate herself from her African identity (Walker “Closet” 82). In her 1986 essay, “The Closet of the Soul,” Walker writes:

But crucial to our development, too, it seems to me, is an acceptance of our actual as opposed to our mythical selves. We are the mestizos of North America. We are black, yes, but we are “white,” too, and we are red. To attempt to function as only one, when you are really two or three, leads, I believe, to psychic illness. . . . Regardless of who will or will not accept us, including perhaps, our “established” self, we must be completely (to the extent it is possible) who we are. (82)

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<sup>5</sup> The language of Cheatwood’s review is no more appropriate here than it was in his review. Walker herself partially quotes and addresses Cheatwood’s remarks head-on in *Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987*. 1992. London: Women’s, 1988. (86-89).

She further writes, Cheatwood “assumes an interest, on my part, in being other than black, of being ‘white.’ I, on the other hand, feel it is my blackness (not my skin color so much as the culture that nurtured me) that causes me to open myself, acknowledge my soul and its varied components, take risks, affirm everyone I can find . . .” (89). Walker’s endeavors to explore and create a literature which recognizes her ancestors, risks much pain and criticism, but also it is one that makes visible an often-overlooked shared history. The climate for African Native American studies shares the rough terrain of both Native studies and African American studies. Louis Owens describes such debates in the discourse:

Not merely disagreement . . . but more significantly a dynamic energy that brings life to a kind of literature and literary debate that barely existed a quarter century ago. . . . [V]irtually everything that is new and vital and exciting in American literature is coming from the so called margins. (xv)

The recovery of early African Native American texts, the emergence of new African Native American voices, and the start of African Native American literary criticism, while rife with arguments of identity, appropriation, sovereignty, and much more, invites an exciting, vital discourse which joins and evolves the voices of Native American and African American scholars in a vibrant rediscovery of shared and often intertwined histories.

Interestingly, the space for those shared lives is named by Jean Toomer in his poem “Blue Meridian.” Toomer, a light skinned mixed blood whose origins still intrigue scholars, identified himself as the first man of a true melting pot of America:

“My own father likewise came from Middle Georgia. Racially, I seem to have (who knows for sure) seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian. Because of these, my position in America has been a curious one. I have lived equally amid the two race groups. Now white, now colored. From my own point of view I am naturally and inevitably an American. I have strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling.” (Arna Bontemps 21)

Somewhat like Walker, Toomer also saw himself as a total of all his ancestors. He continues, “Without denying a single element in me, with no desire to subdue one to the other, I have sought to let them function as complements. I have tried to let them live in harmony” (Arna Bontemps 21). Toomer raised many questions when in 1930 he refused “permission to publish his work in the *Book of American Negro Poetry*, responding that he was not a Negro (Brennan *Mixed 1*). Brennan states:

Toomer was not *either* African American or European American but *both* African American and European American and Native American as well. Like other mixed race writers, he refused to allow himself to be corralled into a singular identity, because he experienced himself through multiple identities. (2)

In “Blue Meridian,” Toomer writes, “Growing towards the universal Human being;/And we are the old people, witnesses/ That behind us there extends/ An unbroken chain of ancestors,/ Ourselves linked with all who ever lived” (72). Alice Walker likewise reflects her awareness of this unbroken chain of ancestors by writing from all parts of her identity.

While discussion of Walker's *Meridian* portrays the work as an African American civil rights novel, Walker in embracing all that she is, reflects also on Native American civil rights and the American Indian Movement (A.I.M.). As Patricia Riley clarifies:

In *Meridian*, Walker writes within an African-Native American subjectivity that not only includes cultural elements from her Cherokee and African American heritage but, additionally inspired by Lakota (Sioux) culture and the heroic endeavor of the Lakota people to retain their autonomy, firmly links together the collective struggle for freedom undertaken historically by Native American and African American peoples (242).

Walker's writing emerges out of the center of both civil rights and A.I.M. recognizing not only the struggles of Cherokee people but of all tribes.

Near the publication of Walker's *Meridian* much was happening in Indian country and particularly regarding Cherokee communities. Walker wrote *Meridian* in 1976: approximately 137 years after her ancestors survived the Trail of Tears which brought more than ten thousand Cherokees to their deaths (1838-1839); fifteen years after the TVA announced its intention to build the Tellico Dam and flood the Cherokee's ancient burial ground—the site of an ancient peace city and center of Cherokee history (1961);

- eight years after the birth of the American Indian Movement in Minneapolis, Minnesota (1968);
- seven year after the Indians of all Nations seized Alcatraz (1969);



- five years after W.W. Keeler became the first principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, since Oklahoma achieved statehood, to be elected by his own people rather than assigned by the US government (1971);
- four years after AIM occupied the BIA offices in Washington, DC and the resulting march known as the “Trail of Broken Treaties” (1972);
- three years after the second Wounded Knee (1973) and the resulting wrongful conviction of Leonard Peltier for the murder of two FBI agents (1975);
- two years before the American Indian Religious Freedom Act passed at the same time that the BIA established which American Indian tribes and nations would be recognized as such (1978);
- and the year before Congress passed the Self-determination and Assistance Act (1975). Within this background, Walker responds in *Meridian* to the call of John Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* (1932).

As a Cherokee African American woman, Walker speaks to John Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* in the tradition of call and response or what Henry Louis Gates identifies as “Signify’n,” a system of language and interpretation that he traces from Africa to the writings of present day African Americans. His theory for African American literature brings much to light in understanding the echoes of John Neihardt’s *Black Elk* in Walker’s novel:

Writers Signify upon each other’s texts by rewriting the received textual tradition. This can be accomplished by the revision of tropes. This sort of Signifyin(g) revision serves if successful, to create a space for the revising

text. It also alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relationship of the text at hand *to* the tradition. The revising text is written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter. (124)

Interestingly Gates reads Walker's *The Color Purple* as signifyin' upon Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*. He further posits that this particular strategy demonstrates "an act of ancestral bonding that is especially rare in black letters" (245). Walker's revision of *Black Elk Speaks* demonstrates her deep feelings of ancestral connection to Native Americans and particularly a respect for Black Elk himself.

Walker's selection of this particular text proves problematic in the on-going discussion of its dramatic deviation from the actual transcripts of the Black Elk interviews. In comparing the original transcripts of the Black Elk interviews, Raymond J. DeMallie's *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* makes a close comparison of the original transcripts versus the resulting Neihardt text, and finds many discrepancies between what he actually said and the resulting publication, *Black Elk Speaks*. Interestingly, it is the most quoted passages of *Black Elk Speaks*, including those used by Walker, which DeMallie reveals as Neihardt's poetic imagination. Nevertheless, the Neihardt book remains essential to Walker and to many disenfranchised Indians, especially in a time of relocation and cultural revival.<sup>6</sup> In his introduction to *Black Elk Speaks*, Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) explains that the most important aspect of the book has been its influence upon the contemporary

<sup>6</sup> Also see Paul Chat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior's *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*: New York, New, 1996 for background on "Indians of all Nations" and the movement to recover tribal culture lost by boarding schools, bans on Indian ceremonies, and relocation.

generation of young Indians (xiii). Deloria writes that the book was essential for young Indians who

have been aggressively searching for roots of their own in the structure of universal reality. To them the book has become a North American bible of all tribes. They look to it for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight, and for affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life, now being badly eroded by the same electronic media which are dissolving other American communities (xiii).

That Walker's *Meridian* is framed around Neihardt's book, and that her character in many ways mirrors Black Elk, indicates that she too finds much insight in the text despite any fictionalization of Black Elk's story.

Her character Meridian, like Neihardt's Black Elk, experiences visions, works for the liberation of her people, and witnesses death and destruction threatening the center of her community, its women, children, and future, the land, and a sacred tree called the Sojourner. In her creation of *Meridian*, Walker signifies on *Black Elk Speaks* using both African American and Cherokee oral traditions. Her use of Cherokee stories raises issues of appropriation and misappropriation. In a discussion of Coco Fusco's *English is Broken Here*, Sandra Baringer argues that there is a difference between "culturally positive signifying practice when practiced by marginalized or disempowered groups" and the "appropriation or fetishization" of such cultures "by a dominant group" (26). However, membership does not give one entitlement without responsibility. Many Native American writers have been criticized by their own tribal, and/or other tribal, members for their use or perceived misuse of tribal traditions in their writing. Walker's

intent in signifying appears to focus on the message of the traditions from which she speaks to--rather than to focus on the traditions themselves.

The Lakota are a Northern Plains tribe and the Cherokee a Southeastern one, which like many southeastern Indians were enslaved by Europeans and later held African slaves themselves, placing the two tribes in opposing geographical and political positions prior to emancipation.<sup>7</sup> Also both the story of Black Elk's life and the Cherokee stories are rooted in an original oral form translated and put to print by John Neihardt in response to Black Elk and in James Mooney's and the Kilpatricks' written records of Cherokee traditions.

Walker signifies in numerous ways to create a text which speaks from all of her cultures. She most notably signifies on Cherokee traditions, through the story of Wild Boy, first man and first woman's son. Meridian learns of a 13-year-old girl "Wile Chile" who eats from garbage cans and has lived like this in the neighborhood for years. She was said to have arrived with a younger brother whose disappearance is rumored to be at the hands of a "local hospital for use in experiments, but it was never looked into" (35). Walker in the tradition of signifyin' takes the Cherokee story of Wild Boy, changes his gender, but retains the meaning of his origin:

Long years ago, soon after the world was made, a hunter and his wife lived at Pilot Knob with their only child, a little boy. The father's name was Kana'ti (The Lucky Hunter), and his wife was called Selu (Corn). No

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<sup>7</sup> See Circe Sturm's *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002, Jack Forbes' *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988, and particularly Theda Perdue's *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1979.

matter when Kana'ti went into the wood, he never failed to bring back a load of game, which his wife would cut up and prepare, washing off the blood from the meat in the river near the house. The little boy used to play down by the river every day, and one morning the old people thought they heard laughing and talking in the bushes as though there were two children there. When the boy came home at night his parents asked him who had been playing with him all day. "He comes out of the water," said the boy, "and he calls himself my elder brother. He says his mother was cruel to him and threw him into the river." Then they knew that the strange boy had sprung from the blood of the game which Selu had washed at the river's edge. (Mooney 242)

The story of Kana'ti and Selu continues in the explanation of the origin and continuation of game and corn.

Selu and Kana'ti take responsibility for the creation of the second boy and call both boys "son," teaching both boys the laws of respect and the consequences of disregarding that respect. Also the story speaks of being careful with children. Selu unknowingly has thrown away her child when the game blood spilled into the river. As a result, Wild Boy, who disregards the laws of respect, causes the community hardship in attaining and maintaining its sources of food. Marilou Awiakta, Cherokee writer and friend of Walker, teaches us in her book *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom* that "a terrible manifestation of society's spiritual illness is violence, especially toward women and children. Women represent the life-force; children ensure its continuance. Any species that damages or brings ill its life-bearers and its children is doomed" (190).

Throughout *Meridian*, Walker suggests that our future lies in our children, who like Wild Child and her disappearing brother are often thrown away, harmed, or disregarded. Wild Child lives in a society that will not respond to her abandonment or her needs and cannot see that her abandonment will impact the community's future.

From her womanist sensibility, Walker's signification upon Wild Boy focuses not only on society's neglect of children but also on its disregard for women. Riley states that "Walker further illustrates the failure of the community to rally together and raise its child by pointing out that no immediate effort is made to rescue her and take her in when it is discovered that she is pregnant" (249). Through signifying, Walker alters the Selu and Wild Child stories. In the Cherokee story, the blood or child is thrown out and recovered by Selu and Kanati as they call him son. Shortly thereafter both sons betray the laws of respect and Selu must die in order to feed or save future generations. Although only thirteen, Wild Child has not only been thrown away but she is pregnant probably as a result of rape. Upon her discovery of the Wild Child, Meridian captures her and brings her to the college where "Wile Chile" horrifies the proper young ladies of Saxon College with her uncouth table manners. While Meridian unsuccessfully looks for a home or school to accept Wile Chile, the girl escapes and is hit by a car ending both her and her baby's life. Taking on the role of Wile Chile's mother by taking in the thrown away Wile Chile, Meridian in this revision lives while Wile Chile and her progeny die. Throughout *Meridian* motherhood is not a biological obligation but a role that must be freely accepted as Selu has accepted Wild Boy.

Meridian's mother Mrs. Hill is described as a woman who should not have had children. "She was capable of thought and growth and actions only if unfettered by the

needs of dependents” (49). “Her children were spotless wherever they went. In their stiff, almost inflexible garment, they were enclosed in the starch of her anger, and had to keep their distance to avoid providing the soggy wrinkles of contact that would cause her distress” (79). Mrs. Hill gives up her life to be a mother but she does so grudgingly, so she is not the mother of the Wild Child story. Meridian continues to fail her own mother who cannot love her children. At an oratorical competition Meridian was to present a speech that “extolled the virtues of the Constitution and praised the superiority of the American way of life” (121). In the middle of her speech, she stopped, suddenly aware that she did not believe what she was saying. Miss Winters, who Meridian would meet later at Saxon school, witnessed the disappointment of Mrs. Hill, who was unable to listen to or understand Meridian’s reasons for ending the speech, and simply wanted her to rely on God and perform the speech.

In many ways Mrs. Hill is like Saxon College. For both, appearance is everything and emotion is not permitted, and they both are intent on a grooming of the outside person. Saxon College as its name might indicate is much like Indian boarding schools, intent on turning students of color into white facsimiles. It is Miss Winter who acts in compassion to put an arm around Meridian attempting to comfort her, but Meridian can only see her mother’s disappointment. Miss Winter demonstrates her commitment to preserving African American culture rather than erasing it as her employers would prefer. Her compassion for Meridian is one demonstration of this. Miss Winter is also the Saxon College music teacher and the administration expects her to refine her students with lessons in classical European music. She was one of three Black teachers at the college and was also the school’s organist required to play English and German hymns

every morning which she did. While though in dress and appearance, she modeled everything that Saxon taught, a graduate of the school herself, she refused to allow Saxon's pedagogy to enter her classroom:

In her music class she deliberately rose against Saxon tradition to teach jazz . . . and spirituals and the blues. . . . It was thought each year that she would never survive to teach at Saxon the following one. But she endured. . . . Her fights with the president and the college dean could be heard halfway across the campus. (120)

Miss Winters, a single, childless woman, is the real matriarch of the school. She appears "aloof and ladylike" and "never wore outfits the parts of which did not *precisely* match" (120). While by all appearances, she is the Saxon student model, she stands in defense of her students, comforts them, and reinforces their culture through music, refusing to give that part of her own or her students identity over to Saxon.

Before entering Saxon, Meridian has had a child; she cannot bear to be like her own mother and gives the child away, which angers her mother. After graduation from Saxon, when Meridian falls into a month-long trance, Ann-Marion, her roommate, sends for Miss Winters, who once again, comforts Meridian. Meridian whispers, "Mama, I *love* you. Let me go," Again Miss Winters is maternal "instinctively as if she were her own child, Miss Winters answered, close to her ear on the pillow, 'I forgive you'" (125). Meridian completes the revision of Selu much later, when having left her lover and her activist friends, she sets out on her own, wandering, finding people who need her.



Miss Winters, in teaching the students of Saxon rebellion and the power of music through jazz, spirituals, and blues, tunes Meridian's ear to discover the strength of both words and music. Earlier when working with Truman and the movement she is asked to swear that she would kill for the revolution. Meridian cannot respond; she cannot find the words. After leaving Saxon, she attends a church memorial service for a man who had died in racial violence. His father comes to the church once a year in his son's memory and gives a speech. Meridian is moved and wonders how she can express love for someone who is already dead. The emotion and voice of the church speaks to her in answer as she realizes that church does not mean religion:

Communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence, "the music , the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know. We want to take this with us as far as we can." (199-200)

This powerful moment is the transformation in Meridian that responds to Black Elk with the story of Selu. Selu's story in this form of call and response is revised. When Selu is killed by her sons, she ends this life and makes a transformation to sustenance, to cornfields that will feed people. In Meridian's transformation she gives up herself to serve the people. She makes an oath that "yes, indeed she *would* kill, before she allowed anyone to murder his son again" (200). In her acts that follow, Meridian gives up herself; what she kills is any material or self righteous ideology, she kills what Saxon wants her to be, and gives all of her life energy to the people and particularly to the children.

Meridian begins, like Miss Winters, to act as a the maternal protector of children, both shielding them from what she can, and with them facing the inequities of life.

However, she conforms to no one's rules. She leads the family of a child drowned because the city has not cared for its sewer system and in turn not cared for its children. She led the family "to the mayor's office bearing in her arms the bloated figure of a five-year-old boy who had been stuck in the sewer for two days before he was raked out with a grappling hook" (191). The boy unlike Wild Boy is not taken from the water to live with his parents, but is carried by Meridian, as his own mother cannot touch him now as he decomposes, into a town meeting where she lays him next to the mayor's gavel and with the family and their community leaves the office. In this revision of Wild Child, the child rather than the mother in death saves the future children, as their parents promise to vote and the mayor is left to contemplate this horror.

In the town of Chicokema, Meridian now, like Selu, teaches the children the laws of respect, for this is the center of Selu's story, and in some ways like Selu, Meridian dies and is reborn not as food but as a restored woman with a clear sense of herself. In this town, racial segregation is disguised. Most of the Black town members work in the guano plant and are segregated because they smell. Their children and family members are also segregated. The town attraction is the mummified body of Marilene O'Shay displayed by her husband with signs stating, "Obedient Daughter," "Devoted Wife," "Adoring Mother," and "Gone Wrong" (19). The workers in the guano plant and their children can only see the exhibit on Thursdays. Teaching the children right action and the laws of respect, Meridian silently leads the children up to view Marilene O'Shay on a restricted day. Nobody dares to stop her. Not only is she teaching the children their civil rights but also she is showing them how the mummified woman has been disrespected by her husband and the town.

Following Wile Chile's death, Meridian makes plans for the funeral to occur at the Saxon College Chapel. They are met at the locked doors by armed guards who refuse their admittance. The neighbors flee and the students riot that night, destroying the school's Singing Tree, named Sojourner, which has come to represent a center for the students, particularly the Black students. Here Meridian responds to the sacred tree of Black Elk's vision. In her response she revises the memory of the former slave Sojourner Truth, known for her strength, height, and love of singing, for her memorable speech on human rights and the power of her spiritual transformation. Sojourner becomes a strong beautiful Magnolia tree with powerful stories.<sup>8</sup>

Walker recognizes the power of Black Elk and Sojourner Truth both as symbols of strength. With the introduction of Sojourner, the Singing Tree, she takes the reader back to the front-piece of *Meridian* which quotes the final chapter of *Black Elk Speaks*:

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now . . . I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream . . . the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead. (Neihardt 270)

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<sup>8</sup> Nell Irvin Painter's *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* questions Gage's documentation of the speech to that of Marius Robinson. In Gage's account four times Truth says "ar'nt I a woman?" Robinson's version is shorter, less dramatic, and does not contain the famed statement. Painter states: "Had Truth said it several times in 1851, as in Gage's article, Marius Robinson, who was familiar with Truth's diction, most certainly would have noted it. If he has an unusually tin ear, he might have missed it once, perhaps even twice, but not four times, as in Gage's report" (171).

Walker's juxtaposition of the Sojourner tree with Black Elk's sacred tree gives power to the narrator's comments:

Even before her death forty years later the tree had outgrown all the others around it. Other slaves believed it possessed magic. They claimed the tree could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power to obscure vision. . . . So many tales and legends had grown up around The Sojourner that students of every persuasion had a choice of which to accept. (44-45)

While commenting on the fictional Sojourner, the tree and its powerful legends, Walker reveals what Painter describes as a powerful need for these stories: "I finally realize Americans of goodwill deeply need the colossal Sojourner Truth, the black woman who faces down a hostile white audience. . . . Truth is consumed as a signifier and beloved for what we need her to have said" (284-85). Similarly, Neihardt's version of Black Elk and the various versions of Sojourner Truth come together to create a much needed symbol in the Sojourner tree which is immortalized in stories passed down from student to student.

In addition, the Sojourner brings to mind a feminist sense of place and emphasis on the land often found throughout Walker's work. In *Black Elk Speaks*, Neihardt says much about sacred places, but most memorable is the statement made from the top of Harney's peak:

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was

seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all shapes as they must live together like one being (43).

Through Black Elk's words, he not only emphasizes the sacredness of place, but also his instructions to "live together like one being." Walker in reply comments on the land while acknowledging that to live together like one being also means to acknowledge all the mixed race parts of oneself.

Meridian, whose own name brings to mind geography, astronomy, time, and a center point, learns from her father and Feather Mae, her paternal grandmother, the importance of place as they pass on their spiritual connection to the Sacred Serpent Indian burial mound. As a young woman, Feather Mae spent much time at the Sacred Serpent mound and eventually discovers an opening into the mound. Once inside, she has her first physical response to the sacred place:

She felt as if she had stepped into another world, into a different kind of air. The green walls began to spin, and her feeling rose to such a high pitch the next thing she knew she was getting up off the ground. She knew she had fainted but she felt neither weakened nor ill. She felt renewed, as from some strange spiritual intoxication. Her blood made warm explosions through her body, and her eyelids stung and tingled. (57)

Meridian has a similar first experience in the mound. Her physical experience is much like her grandmother's, but she also adds a vision to her description:

And in this movement she saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals

of flowers rush toward a central point high above her and she was drawn with them, as whirling, as bright, as free, as they, (58)

The Sacred Serpent becomes a connection between the three generations, one secretly discussed between father and daughter. Meridian and her father debate the possible meanings of the place and their shared experience. Madhu Dubey suggests that Meridian's "ecstasy at the Sacred Serpent subtends the political activism of her later life, as she draws the strength to fight for change from her own ancestral past" (135). Here Walker demonstrates the traditions of looking to the ancestors for guidance and inspiration while looking at one's own role in creating justice for the future—a tradition held by both Native and African Americans.

Meridian's visions continue throughout her life and are accompanied by a sort of temporary paralysis. The experiences of both Feather Mae and Meridian find several similar examples in Neihardt's *Black Elk*. Black Elk's legs fail him as he slips into a vision at the age of nine. During his collapse, he receives a vision, which shows him the sacred tree at the center of the nation's hoop, the potential death and destruction of the tree, the hoop, and his people, and the hope found in the buffalo. Meridian has her first similar experiences with temporary paralysis in college as she sees a bluish light, until one day she loses her sight and becomes sick. Upon losing the blue light and feeling of illness, Meridian experiences paralysis (119). This state of paralysis seems to occur throughout Meridian's life when she exhausts herself in human rights work, and she requires renewal.

Although the physical symptoms of fainting, unconsciousness, and temporary paralysis are frequently reported to accompany visionary experiences, Walker seems to

signify upon Black Elk's experiences, when Meridian collapses in a state of paralysis and experiences dreams or visions. In John Neihardt's account, Black Elk's first vision came at the age of five when he heard voices and saw two men come from the clouds to sing him a sacred song (18-19). Meridian's visions, similarly, start at the Serpent Mound where she sees the images of her family.

While still living at home as a young girl, Meridian discussed the Serpent Mound with her father. They interpreted their experiences at the Sacred Serpent as a means of linking to the past. The link finds father and daughter connected to one another, to the physical place of the past, and to the ancestral spirits. Possibly because of his experience in the mounds, her father holds an acute interest in land and Indians. His office walls are papered with images of Indians and maps of Indian lands. He never clearly reveals his motivation for this interest other than his affinity to the land and his recognition that Georgia once belonged to the Cherokees. However, his mother's name is Feather Mae, implying a possible Native tie. When he gives his land deed to Walter Longknife, a Cherokee "wanderer" passing through the area, Meridian notices something familiar in the Cherokee man's face that explains her father's interests. "She began to recognize what her father was by looking at [Walter]" (54). Here Walker may be indicating more than a shared oppression: the possibility of shared blood.

For whatever reasons her father's interest began, his act of giving the deed might seem like a parallel to white guilt. Yet, in an argument with his wife about the roles played by Indians in the Civil War, her father replies, "I never said that either side was innocent or guilty, just ignorant. They've been a part of it, we've been a part of it, everybody's been a part of it for a long time" (55). Like Black Elk, Meridian's father

sees a need for uniting and supporting one another. The comparison between African American and Native American experiences clearly appears when Meridian's family land is taken by the government. Longknife spends the summer on the land and then gives back the deed at the end of summer when he moves on, reinforcing Native beliefs that land cannot be owned. Ironically, and perhaps more to Walker's point, the land is then stolen and treated much like the sacred Black Hills. "The Indian burial mounds of the Sacred Serpent and her father's garden of prize beans, corn, and squash were to be turned into a tourist attraction, a public park" (56). The scene points poignantly to the shared land issues of both Blacks and Indians, neither of whom are allowed to attain and keep land. The county courthouse adds further insult when after offering a small payment, the family is further warned "to stay away from Sacred Serpent Park which, now that it belongs to the public, was of course not open to Colored" (56). Like Black Elk's Black Hills, and the Cherokee's Appalachian Mountains, the government takes the land with indifference as it commodifies its sacred meaning as a tourist attraction.

After the Snake Mound is compromised by tourists, and Meridian finds herself far from home, the Sojourner tree becomes Meridian's new place to find peace of mind while she attends Saxon College. While the tree's name beckons the spirit of history's earliest womanists, the tree itself and the earth from which it gains strength calls to the oral tradition of Louvine, a Black slave who is sought out for her rich African stories and storytelling abilities, until one white child dies of fright. As a result, Louvine's tongue is cut out at the root, but she preserves her tongue and buries it at the base of a small magnolia tree which, by the time of her death twenty years later is the largest tree of its kind. It is thought to have had the power to hide many a slave. It became the site of a



yearly ritual, held to remember Mary of Tower Hall, a Saxon student so frightened to speak of her pregnancy that she killed her baby and herself. The stories of Mary and Louvine bring the girls to the tree each year to celebrate menstruation as the proof that they have escaped pregnancy that year.

In the abandonment and death of the Wild Child and the destruction of the Sojourner tree, Meridian conjures memories of the Civil Rights Movement and the American Indian Movement, of Sojourner Truth and Selu, of the dreams of both Martin Luther King and Black Elk. The pain and loss felt upon King's assassination, and the series of bombings, mob attacks, brutality, lynching and other murders of Black men, women, and children, are paralleled with the sorrow experienced by Black Elk as he witnessed the murder of men, women, and children by the soldiers at Wounded Knee.

However, both Neihardt's Black Elk and Walker's Meridian find hope for their peoples. In Neihardt's postscript, he tells the reader that later he returned with Black Elk to Harney's Peak where Black Elk speaks to the Great Spirit:

I recall the great vision you sent me. It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives. Nourish it then, that it may leaf and bloom and fill with singing birds. Hear me, nor for myself, but for my people: I am old. Hear me that they may once more go back into the sacred hoop and find the good red road, the shielding tree! (274).

Near the end of the novel, Truman, Meridian's introduction to the voter registration movement and former lover, notices a photograph hanging on Meridian's wall among her collection of letters from Ann-Marion, Meridian's Saxon College friend. It shows a

huge tree stump with a finger-sized branch, barely visible. The accompanying note says: “Who would be happier than you that The Sojourner did not die?” (217).

Through the multiple voices found in *Meridian*--Lakota, Cherokee, and African American--we hear these texts, both oral and written, speak to one another in a conversation that focuses on the message found in Black Elk's vision, Selu's Wild Boy, and Sojourner Truth's work for social justice. These oral stories come out of histories which dynamically evolve without end. This reading of *Meridian* requires discovery and rediscovery, recognition of both identity and multi-identity in an effort to bring cohesive wholeness to represent the author's entire identity. Walker's desire to speak in multiple voices and to harmonize those voices is especially difficult when ethnically diverse voices are silenced, or attempted to be silenced, in favor of what the dominant center thinks the “other” must be. However, Walker successfully brings together the voices of those ancestors found in her poem about Tallula and responds to Neihardt's *Black Elk* in a strong chorus as an African Cherokee feminist who embraces and responds to the voices of all her ancestors and recognizes all of their complexities.

## Chapter Two

## Crossroads: The African American and Native American Blues Matrix in Sherman

*Alexie's Reservation Blues*

The television is white noise and the  
 midnight movie is just another western  
 movie where the Indians lose. . . . It's just  
 me and my blues. (Sherman Alexie "Red  
 Blues")

The crossroads is a real place between imaginary  
 places—points of departure and arrival. It is also a  
 place where negotiations and deals are made with  
 higher powers. . . . The crossroads is a junction  
 between the individual and the world. (Yusef  
 Komunyakha "Crossroads")

Similar to Walker signifying with *Black Elk Speaks* and the Cherokee oral story of Selu, Alexie signifies in response to the film "*Crossroads*," and Native American blues and jazz experience to speak back to European imperialism. In addition he employs "a free indirect discourse." However, Alexie's is very clearly a blues text, in which he is riffing off the many voices he hears, the ones he respects as well as the ones that have not respected his people. Alexie uses the blues to take back his voice, his history, his

perspective, to decolonize himself and take control of his own history while distorting and muting the previously deafening sounds of the colonizer's view or white noise.

All good blues start with listening to and responding to a really good blues man. Alexie responds to Delta blues musician Robert Johnson, who led many to believe he had gone to the crossroads where something otherworldly made him the greatest living blues guitarist in the early 1900s. Johnson and the beliefs surrounding the crossroads continue to inspire many works of fiction, including Walter Hill's 1986 film *Crossroads*, starring Ralph Macchio and Joe Seneca, and in turn Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, a novel in which Alexie joins his love of music, particularly the blues, with a playful yet pointed response to the European treatment and depiction of both Native Americans and African Americans. In his novel Alexie gathers various characters of American history, reinvents them, and refocuses history from the perspectives of the colonized and enslaved—rather than the colonizer and slave master. While differences exist in Native American and African/African American experiences, much of Alexie's work looks at what he calls the “white noise” of Euro American culture. This noise has washed out the sound of Indigenous told stories and histories including those in the shared lives of African/African Americans and Native Americans. This proves particularly important in roots music which is thought to be something that began in West Africa and developed through European influences, a theory that seldom considers that other cultures, such as Native Americans, may have contributed and even co-created these genres. Alexie's work opens the door to questions remaining about the origins of what is often referred to as American roots music, such as jazz, blues, bop, swing, rock,

and reggae. Native American musical influences provide equally important elements to the discussion.

The crossroads forms one place from which the colonizer cannot control or contort indigenous stories. When Sherman Alexie (Coeur d'Alene/Spokane) signifies on Robert Johnson and brings the legend of the crossroads to the Spokane Reservation in his novel *Reservation Blues*, knowingly or not, he sets loose the legends of Robert Johnson and beliefs in Legba<sup>9</sup>, the passageway of the crossroads, and related West African and Haitian traditions. Bringing these beliefs of other colonized people to an Indian reservation reveals the links between Africans and Native Americans who, in the course of colonization and slavery, shared each other's stories, spirituality, and music, while struggling to keep their own traditions, despite forced European/Christian assimilation. In the film *Crossroads* and the novel *Reservation Blues*, musicians, who went to the crossroads out of a desire to master their music through magic, later realize the price paid and wish to find a way to end their deal with the "gentleman" at the crossroads. In some African American traditions originating from the West African Diaspora, Legba<sup>10</sup> emerges at the crossroads where he stands with one foot in this world and one in another. He is often depicted limping as a result of this stance. Haitian ceremonies begin at a crossroad, from which Legba and his loa emerge. Legba stands as the conductor at

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<sup>9</sup> In the film *Crossroads*, Willie Brown uses the name Legba to refer to the man at the crossroads who takes his soul.

<sup>10</sup> Papa Legba Attibon "is the god of the gate. He rules the gate of the hounfort, the entrance to the cemetery and he is also Baron Carrefour, Lord of the crossroad. The way to all things is in his hands. Therefore he is the first god in all Haiti in point of service. Every service to whatever Loa for whatever purpose must be preceded by a service to Legba" (Hurston 128).

crossroads, doorways, and any other portals that link one time and place to another. From the crossroads, Legba comes and goes and may be followed by one or more of his messengers, the loas each with different powers, who ride “horses” to carry their messages<sup>11</sup>. The powerful force of Legba and the crossroads through which Alexie’s fictional Robert Johnson<sup>12</sup> arrives at the Spokane Reservation crossroads, below the mountain home of Big Mom, thousands of miles and tens of years away from that Delta crossroads of the Johnson legends, produces a vehicle through which the traditions of colonized and enslaved peoples can emerge and speak to one another, in the tradition of call and response, above the once prominent sound of Euro-American told stories. Crossroads create many metaphors for life: a place of choice, a place of change, a place of decision, as well as a place of discovery.

In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie uses the crossroads as a portal or trapdoor to improvise and recreate the white noise of Euro-America’s forced assimilation, appropriation, and misrepresentations of race, culture, and history. In *Reservation Blues*, as well as his other writings, Alexie alludes to the pre-cable TV days, of the network going off air, ending with “The National Anthem,” followed by static or white noise.

James Cox explains:

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<sup>11</sup> The Loa “manifests himself by ‘mounting’ a subject as a rider mounts a horse, then he speaks and acts through his mount. The person mounted does nothing of his own accord. He is the horse of the Loa until the spirit departs. Under the whip and guidance of the spirit-rider, the ‘horse’ does and says things that he or she would never have uttered un-ridden. ‘Parlay Cheval Ou’ (Tell my Horse), the loas begins” (Hurston 220-221).

<sup>12</sup> In writing about both the real life of blues legend Robert Johnson and the Robert Johnson reinvented by Alexie, it can sometimes be confusing. Where confusion may lie, I will refer to the historical Robert Johnson as legendary or historical Robert Johnson and Alexie’s character Robert Johnson as Alexie’s Johnson or the fictional Johnson. Similar distinction will be noted for other historical characters who Alexie has reconstructed for his novel

The white noise is, literally, the oppressive noise of white mass-produced culture, the loud demand to abandon all that is Indian and conform to the dictates of the invader's cultural belief system or to be destroyed. . . . technology when controlled by members of the colonizing culture, is an iconographic evil against which the Spokane must struggle (237-38).

Alexie's focus on the distortion of Native images also brings attention to aspects often absent from the popular Native American representations found in films and television. He does this by tuning out white noise and utilizing what he refers to as trapdoors. He explains in an interview with John Purdy: "Yeah, I load my books with stuff, just load 'em up. I call them 'Indian trapdoors.' You know Indians fall in, white people just walk right over them" (15). Alexie's trapdoor metaphor is perhaps misleading. A trapdoor represents something potentially hazardous, unexpected, and possibly leading to danger. However, Alexie's term trapdoors might remind one of "Easter eggs" found in video games, films, books, and such in which one might find an intentional hidden message, a surprise, or inside joke. For example in the film *Smoke Signals* when Arnold Joseph played by Gary Farmer asks his son Victor to name his favorite Indian, Victor insists it is "nobody." In another film, *Dead Man*, with Johnny Depp and Gary Farmer, Farmer plays an Indian named "Nobody." While it appears that Victor tells his father that neither his mother nor his father are his favorite Indians, the inside joke, a trapdoor, is that his favorite Indian is Gary Farmer or the Indian character "Nobody." In many ways, it's like falling through a rabbit hole and discovering the twists and turns and puzzles that Alexie has left for those who will recognize them. While the trapdoors do not pose any imminent danger, they, like the blues element that they are, often take readers through a

painful history. In blues lyrics as well as blues literature, the writer uses mnemonics and metaphors to represent the topic or turn the topic or issue around. Alexie's trapdoors are names, words, and situations that many readers will "walk over" or just not get, while offering transport to another level of meaning and memories for those who step through the portal. In other words, his trapdoors are a culturally coded discourse.

Alexie's trapdoors are also much more complicated than he indicates in his interview with John Purdy. In his works, particularly those involving music, he creates allusions that lead to a commentary on pop culture, history, and the misrepresentation of Indians, including the often excluded history of shared lives and culture with African and African American lives and culture. His allusions ask readers to recognize what has been neglected or diffused through the white noise of colonization. In this case, his trapdoors are open to those familiar with not only Native America, but also blues, and especially the shared African American and Native American experiences in American roots music. And while he diminishes the white noise, he simultaneously plays his fingers along the sharp edges of a painful memory to gain control of it and move beyond it to a state of self-realized rather than imposed identity.

To this effect, Alexie's trapdoors employ the blues as a satirical and humorous element, the "near comic lyricism" of Ralph Ellison's much quoted passage found in *Shadow and Act*: "The Blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (28-29). The blues form an oral tradition in which shared experiences are expressed in short narratives. These lyrics or narratives keep history



alive while sometimes using irony, satire, and/or humor to lighten the weight of overwhelming and even catastrophic events. The classic blues composition often starts with two repeating lines stating a problem, loss, or tragedy, “What you gonna do when they burn the Barrelhouse down/’What you gonna do when they burn the Barrelhouse down?” The third line resolves the issue often using wit or irony: “Gonna move out the piano and barrelhouse on the ground” (Citron 27). The satire and humor provides the listener a break from life’s pain by examining the absurdity of situations throughout time in which people encounter difficult and even horrid events, yet conjure the strength to escape and overcome the painful experience.

Through these trapdoors and in combination with his deconstruction of white noise, Alexie dismantles misrepresentations of Native Americans throughout pop culture and history while highlighting the relationships between Native Americans and African Americans. He uses the portal of the crossroads to open the connections found between past and present and Native American and African American experience and to mute the sounds of white noise, making himself the conductor of this story about Indians and the blues. In his work, particularly *Reservation Blues*, Alexie disempowers the white noise that masks the realities and shared experiences of both Native American and African American lives. Douglas Ford suggests that Alexie asks his readers to “see Indians in places we might least expect: in the blues, rock ‘n’ roll, TV, sitcoms” (212). Alexie also summons readers to see Indians and African Americans *together* in places one might not expect. In many ways, Alexie says to his reader, *these are our shared experiences and shared music—this is our music.*

Alexie's blues holds hope for the future of all Indigenous peoples, written with a humor aimed at post colonization--"to finger its jagged grains" (Ellison 28-29). He weaves history through seemingly endless elements of music within his work, including Alexie's own blues and rock lyrics at the beginning of each chapter. Jane Hafen writes:

The blues becomes the means for the narrator to tell his collective history. His people were not at Sand Creek or Wounded Knee; neither are the Spokane related to Crazy Horse. Yet these are events and figures that have impact upon all Native peoples. Contemporary knowledge of Robert Johnson a major musical influence on Jimi Hendrix, allows mediation of the historical past with the present. (73)

Alexie tells a collective history, in which he layers intriguingly obvious, and sometimes shadowy, references to American roots music personalities, the recording industry, the relationship between African Americans and Native Americans, traditions and the blues, the church and gospel. He performs a double-consciousness that humorously revises, responds to, and riffs upon the characters distorted and invented by the colonizers, misrepresentations that have entered into contemporary pop culture and education.

Throughout his work, Alexie examines how Native Americans view themselves through the imagination of outsiders who misunderstand and/or misrepresent Native American cultures. W.E.B. Du Bois describes a similar feeling in the African American experience of double-consciousness:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One

ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (3)

Alexie demonstrates his own sense of double-consciousness by examining Native people through the eyes of the colonizer; but rather than evaluating himself by the colonizer's gaze, he talks back to the colonizer and establishes Indianess on his own terms. Alexie's many transformations of character in *Reservation Blues* create an intertextuality of double-sided characters allowing the narrator to talk back. By blending all of these elements, he composes a blues matrix.

Alexie both recognizes how American Indians are depicted and seen (and more often not seen) by non-Indians, and he revises these texts in a manner resembling the African American literary and blues tradition of signifying described by Henry Louis Gates:

Writers signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual tradition. This can be accomplished by the revision of tropes. This sort of signifyin(g) revision serves, if successful, to create a space for the revising text. It also alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by redefining the relation of the text at hand *to* the tradition. The revising text is written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter, the so-called Black experience. (124)

Alexie's double-consciousness works as a trapdoor that encourages responses to Eurocentric texts and media images, much in the tradition of the blues.

Alexie performs a call and response in which he alludes to assimilation, histories, and misrepresentations created by the colonizers, much like the blues tradition of speaking about bad relations and abusive treatment from the enslavers. Ellison's "painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness" permeate the stories of each of Alexie's characters as well as his people and all of Native America and Africa America. Alexie emphasizes the connection found between African American and Native American music, storytelling, and life experiences. Alexie reconstructs historical figures such as Robert Johnson, Mildred Bailey, General Philip Sheridan, George Armstrong Custer, the cavalry, and the slain Spokane horses, as well as pop culture and music personalities such as the Chess Record family, Luke Warm Water of *The Rez Road Follies* and *Walking the Rez Road*, and Veronica and Betty of the Archies. Alexie's transformation of characters, combined with horrific allusions emerging from such scenes as big Mom's memory of the slain Spokane horses, Robert Johnson's loss of autonomy, and the Cavalry Record scouts who reinvent two white women Veronica and Betty (an allusion to *The Archies*), as "Indian" musicians, demonstrates the shared cultural matrix resulting from stolen bodies and stolen lands.

While directing the reader's attention through this trapdoor, Alexie also erases the image of Indians interacting only with Europeans, using the Robert Johnson legend as a catalyst he invites readers to consider relationships between colonized and marginalized cultures without the ubiquitous white noise of the colonizer. Speaking to the shared history of blues and jazz between Native Americans and African Americans, Alexie redirects the reader's attention to a long but often neglected history of Native

Americans performing in such roots music as blues and jazz.<sup>13</sup> Alexie juxtaposes the African American blues tradition of the gentleman at the crossroads (Legba) and the talking guitar,<sup>14</sup> with Legba/Coyote/Trickster traditions and Big Mom--the gentleman's counterpart. Douglas Ford believes that the appearance of Robert Johnson at the crossroads of the Spokane reservation "bridges two different American experiences, African and Indian, and in so doing, also helps bridge discourses" (198). Alexie's use of the blues and call and response find deep roots in many tribal life-ways.

In traditional dance and songs of the southern and southeastern tribes such as the Creeks, Choctaws, Cherokees, and Tuscaroras, the sound of call and response and the percussion of the shell shakers bring to mind traditional African sounds such as gourd rattles or chekeres. Likely these similarities come as no accident since both cultures worked and lived together wherever Native Americans shared communities with African Americans. One might imagine the sound of shared work songs or field hollers heard across the fields as both red and Black workers picked cotton, or through the crossed cultures resulting from slave owning Native Americans and their African slaves.

Pura Fe, a Tuscarora/Puerto Rican musician and founder of the Indigenous music trio Ulali, discusses the little known history of Native Americans and the blues:

"The call and response thing in blues and gospel and its modulation is what Indians call 'Stomp Dance.' The blues shuffle rhythm is a 'Round Dance,' the heartbeat you hear in all Native music. . . . Taj Mahal [the

<sup>13</sup> See Brian Wright-McLeod's *The Encyclopedia of Native Music*, which lists over a century of Native American musicians performing in all genres.

<sup>14</sup> One of Alexie's many musical trapdoors to the blues. The "talking guitar" is an effect created with a steel guitar. Alexie's talking guitar literally speaks to Thomas Build The Fire in *Reservation Blues*.

head of her label] said that the wailing guitar you hear in rock and blues is based on the sound of the powwow singers; you don't hear that kind of high falsetto singing anywhere on earth. All the early blues and jazz pioneers were vocal about their mixed ancestry. . . . "I've been trying to get people to hear these [Native] connections and recognize [Native] contributions to the blues for years," [Pura Fe] says. "It's a deep oral history, just waiting to be told." (Poet 72).

The numerous Indigenous performers found on *Rez Bluez TV*, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network of Canada, would all likely agree that a close musical connection lies between Native Americans and African Americans.

Not surprisingly with a history of such music connections, Alexie's examinations of blues, rock, and African American intersections with Native Americans surge throughout his work. In his short story "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star Spangled Banner' at Woodstock" the narrator explains both his own connection to Robert Johnson and his father's to Jimi Hendrix. In "Because My Father," the narrator's father leaves prison and his troubles behind to hitchhike to Woodstock. He responds to Hendrix: "After all the shit I'd been through . . . I figured Jimi must have known I was there in the crowd to play something like that. It was exactly how I felt" (26). Hendrix's legendary and controversial rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner" was filled with long, painful reverberation and improvisations that lead the song into a brief moment of "Day is Done," just before breaking into "Purple Haze." The song played at the end of the three-day long concert, reaching the hearts of a war-tired audience. It reminded listeners of the many deaths

associated with the war and, for an African American Cherokee, Jimi Hendrix<sup>15</sup> and Spokane Arnold, perhaps the “only Indian” in the audience, it was a reminder not only of Viet Nam, but of the many lost lives of Indigenous and African people in the “creation” of America. Later in the story, the narrator, Arnold’s son, says:

On those nights I missed him most I listened to the music. Not always Jimi Hendrix. 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. That must have been how my father felt when he heard Jimi Hendrix. When he stood there in the rain at Woodstock. (“Because My Father” 36)

Many of Alexie’s trapdoors spring out of his interest in music, particularly the lives and work of Robert Johnson and Jimi Hendrix. In Alexie’s poem “Red Blues,” Alexie imagines the location of Johnson’s legendary lost song as Sand Creek, one of the many painful sites of Indian history . The real Robert Johnson’s mysterious death at the age of twenty-seven as well as his sudden capacity to play brilliant blues guitar continues to stir imaginations. Johnson recorded twenty-nine songs during his lifetime. Adding to his legend, some believe that there is a missing Johnson song that was never recorded. Alexie juxtaposes the unknown burial site of Crazy Horse with the unknown location of the missing song: “Robert Johnson, Robert Johnson, where is that missing song? Someone told me it was hidden at Sand Creek. Someone told me it was buried near Wounded Knee. Someone told me Crazy Horse never died; he just picked up a slide

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<sup>15</sup> James A. Hendrix writes of their Cherokee heritage in his 1999 biography *My Son Jimi*.

guitar. Here I am, in the reservation of my mind and I don't even have a drum" (87). Just as he brings Johnson back to life in the fiction of *Reservation Blues*, and places him on the Spokane reservation, he brings Crazy Horse back to life in the poem "Red Blues" and places a slide guitar in his hand. In the poem's intertextuality, Alexie crosses the lives of two men whose lives, deaths, and even burial sites continue to inspire intrigue and legend. At the same time, he reminds readers why Native Americans relate to the blues when recalling the bloodshed at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee.

Alexie furthers the connection between Native Americans and the traditions of the blues in *Reservation Blues* when he introduces the band's newest members, two Flathead women named Chess and Checkers Warm Water.<sup>16</sup> The two girls not only act as foils to the band's other female members, Veronica and Betty, but also function as a trapdoor to blues recording history and the church's fear of blues and the indigenous beliefs of Africans and Native Americans. Chess, who eventually shares Thomas's role as lead singer, is likely Alexie's reference to Chess records. In 1950, three years after the start of Aristocrat Records (whose first hit by Muddy Waters sold 60,000 copies), two Polish/Jewish immigrant brothers Leonard and Phil Chess (formerly Chez before Americanizing their name) bought the label. Shortly after the purchase, they changed the label name to Chess Records, which recorded and distributed the works of America's most famous blues artists of the day. In 1952, because of a broadcast industry law that limited radio stations from favoring a record label with unfair play time, the brothers created a second label, Checkers Records, which primarily recorded gospel music, and

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<sup>16</sup> In the novel, Chess and Checkers are the daughters of Luke Warm Water, an allusion to Jim Northrup's character by the same name in *Rez Road Follies* and *Walking the Rez Road*. Northrup's writing mentions very little of any children and none named Chess and Checkers.



the studio was then able to acquire more radio play time by using two labels (“Chess Story”). “Their gospel catalog is almost exclusively contained on the Checker 1000 series and includes albums by the Five Blind Boys, Soul Stirrers, Alex Bradford and the Violinaire” (“Chess Story”). Alexie takes the reader deeper into the history of blues and gospel, and the notion some had that blues was the devil’s music.

He illustrates the dichotomy of blues and church by naming two characters after the two sister labels, Chess and Checkers, and by depicting the reservation church Indians, who view the music of Coyote Springs as evil. The community hopes the band members will leave the blues and come to church. While sitting in church, a woman expresses her relief to find Thomas sitting next to her, assuming he has quit the band: “I’m glad that you quit that band. That rock and roll music is sinful.’ . . . ‘The Christians don’t like your devil’s music’” (179). When Checkers leaves the band to sing in the church choir, the Spokane church community receives her with welcome relief. David Walks Along, Spokane Tribal Chairman, writes in the *Wellpinit Rawhide Press*: “Rumor has it that Checkers Warm Water has quit the band and joined the Catholic church choir. We can only hope the rest of the band follows her. They could all use God” (176). While Checkers separates to focus on gospel music, like many blues musicians, she moves back and forth between the genres and returns to the band. From the top of the mountain, the Chess and Checkers allusion also refers to the close relationship between blues and gospel, partly due to the church declaring blues the devil’s music and partly due to the spiritual essence nonetheless found in blues music.

In early African American history the crossroads and its connection to the blues created a reference to Africans, captured and enslaved, and the spiritual beliefs that

transformed as they found themselves on a strange continent where slaves from various tribal backgrounds combined and camouflaged their spiritual beliefs to avoid the notice of Christian slave masters who feared these practices as some kind of devil work. The practice of slaves disguising and hiding their spiritual practices resembles the history of Native American spirituality during and after colonization. In conversions to Christianity, both slaves and Native Americans were taught to share this fear of “evil” indigenous religions. Out of this experience grew the music of both the blues and gospel. The blues retained many of the elements of indigenous beliefs, while gospel grew out of a combination of blues and the need to either combine old and new beliefs or disguise and continue old beliefs.

The biographies of blues musicians frequently refer to learning to make quick changes from blues to gospel in the middle of a song while playing at home. Little Duskin, a blues musician and a preacher’s son, describes always playing in B-flat “so if [his father] come, the kids would tell me and I just swing into ‘Be Not Dismayed Whatever You Do, God Will Take Care of You’” (Pearson xiii). Alexie examines the relationship between blues and gospel music as well as tensions around blues as the devil’s music when he names the sisters Chess and Checkers and demonstrates the community’s negative reaction to the band. Throughout the novel people on the reservation raise concern about the band playing the devil’s music. Robert Johnson can see the protest signs. “The Indian Christian signs read COYOTE SPRINGS, REPENT!” (263). The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota tells Thomas, ““You better be careful with that music, enit? Music is a dangerous thing”” (12). He alludes to Alexie’s found poem “Harmful Jazz”:

From the *International Herald Tribune*, January 23, 1921

Jazz music is proving too much

for the American Indian,

Says Dr. Henry Beets, Secretary of the Christian

Reformed Church Missions.

He declares that jazz and the shimmy are driving the redskin

Back to the war dance. (77)

Many others in the community also wonder if the music could be dangerous.

While examining the related lives of African Americans and Native Americans, especially in their colonization and music, *Reservation Blues* is also a Spokane tribute to the legend of Robert Johnson, a remembrance of Coeur d'Alene vocalist Mildred Bailey, and a response to the call of Walter Hill's film *Crossroads*. *Reservation Blues* opens with a Black man on the edge of the road entering Wellpinit, Washington, and the Spokane Reservation. The narrator tells the reader, "not one person, Indian or otherwise, had ever arrived there by accident (*RB* 3). For many years, like Johnson, musicians arrived searching for healing from Big Mom who lives on the hill overlooking the crossroads. Within seconds of Johnson's arrival, the reservation comes to life with speculations regarding the man, who wearing a worn suit, stands near a Spokane Reservation crossroad, without a suitcase and only his guitar slung over his shoulder (*RB* 3). The man, named Robert Johnson in this novel, is Alexie's reconstruction of the real Robert Johnson of blues history. Although the historical Robert Johnson died in 1938, Alexie bends the Robert Johnson legends slightly, like the bluing of a note, to illuminate the blues tradition of signifying through intertextuality.

Endless biographers and fans have explored the stories of the real Robert Johnson's life and death. Blues musician Son House, one of Johnson's contemporaries, frequently speaks as a Johnson authority in any work exploring Johnson's talent and life: "He blew that harmonica and he was pretty good with that, but he wanted to play a guitar. . . . And when we'd get a break and want to rest some, we'd set the guitars up in the corner and go out in the cool . . . he would pick one of them up. And such another racket you never heard!" House scolded young Johnson and suggested he stay with the harmonica, his real talent (Guralnick 15).

House reported that Johnson disappeared and that some time later while the band was playing in Mississippi, he burst through the door with a guitar on his back. He sat down and started to play, and House recalls, "he was good! When he finished, all our mouths were standing open" (Guralnick 17). Rumors of deals with the devil grew, and Johnson likely fanned the flames of his reputation with song lyrics suggesting that he went down to the crossroads to make a deal with the devil: "I went down to the crossroads fell down on my knee. . . . Asked the Lord above have mercy, save poor Bob if you please" ("Crossroad Blues"). His lyrics of hellhounds hunting him and waking up in the morning to the devil at his door furthered his reputation: "I got to keep moving. . . . And the day keeps on 'mind-in me there's a hellhound on my trail" ("Hellhound"). And when the devil does meet him at the door, he is resigned to his destiny: "Early this morning when you knocked upon my door, And I said 'Hello, Satan, I believe it's time to go'" ("Me and the Devil Blues"). The legends of Robert Johnson and his song lyrics alluding to the stories of Legba at the crossroads inspired *Reservation Blues*, in which the

fictionalized Johnson must keep moving quietly so the gentleman at the crossroads won't find him.

*Crossroads*, written by John Fusco,<sup>17</sup> demonstrates the pull of the Johnson legends. The film, *Crossroads*, was released in 1986, and while its influence on Alexie first appears in his poem "Red Blues" published in *Old Shirts and New Skins* in 1996, it continues to influence the blues themes found in much of his writing.<sup>18</sup> In the film Eugene Martone, a Julliard classical guitar student from Long Island, played by Ralph Macchio, has a passion for the music and stories of Robert Johnson. Determined to find the missing song supposedly written and performed by Johnson but never recorded, he believes he can find it through Willie Brown, a friend of Johnson's who is living under an assumed name in a New York nursing home. In the real Johnson's song "Crossroads Blues" he asks that should he die, to please contact his good friend Willie Brown:

Uumh, the sun going down, boy dark gonna catch me here.

Uumh, dark gonna catch me here.

I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman that loves and feels my care

You can run, you can run, tell my friend-boy Willie Brown,

You can run, tell my friend-boy Willie Brown,

Lord, that I'm standin' at the crossroad, babe, I believe I'm sinkin' down.

(Charters 50)

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<sup>17</sup> Screenwriter John Fusco is best known for his westerns and "Indian films," such as *Thunderheart*, *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, *Dreamkeeper*, and *Hildago*. Reviews of Fusco's work praises him for the number of Indian actors he has employed and his commitment to creating honest films about Indians (Noel).

<sup>18</sup> Alexie acknowledges the influence of the film in his front notes.

In the film, this particular song leads Martone to Willie Brown played by Joe Seneca, who claims he has gone north to hide from the law. Brown convinces Martone to take him back to Brown's home in the South, where he will show Martone the missing Johnson song. Unknown to Martone, Brown knows the missing song is pure legend, but, like Robert Johnson, he has made a deal with Legba, and he secretly intends to find that same crossroads in the South where he originally made the deal. Brown believes that once he finds that crossroad, he can meet with Legba and call it off. *Crossroads* and *Reservation Blues* connect through the crossroads, the craving for notoriety, and fear of losing one's soul or authenticity. Both the film and the novel, however, additionally offer the hope of redemption or finding oneself.

In the film when Martone and Brown arrive at the crossroads and find Legba, they quickly discover that they are both in danger. To save Brown, Martone agrees to "cuttin' heads"<sup>19</sup> with Legba's greatest guitarist Jack Butler, played by Steve Vai,<sup>20</sup> in order to win back Brown's soul. If he loses, Legba gets both of their souls. It is a close battle with Martone and Butler matching each other riff for riff in the call and response of "Eugene's Trickbag" a piece written by Steve Vai. As Butler slowly begins to wear Martone down, Martone nearly gives up until he remembers who he is, his classical training at Julliard, and the music that his professor said he was meant to play. He breaks away from Butler's blues improvisation and challenges Butler with the classical

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<sup>19</sup> One musician challenges another and each player takes a turn at a solo, matching each other riff for riff. A musical duel, which began with the call and response of the field hollers. Head-to-head or one-on-one competition, such as that of Martone and Butler, requires lightening reflexes as well as the imagination and skill of improvisation. (Gordon).

<sup>20</sup> Grammy winning guitar virtuoso Steve Vai first stepped into the spotlight in 1980 as a guitarist for Frank Zappa, and has continued to develop his art in the years since ("All about Vai").

Paganini's "Caprice #5." While Eugene's choice to switch genres demonstrates his true identity as a classical guitarist, his choice of Paganini seems ironically fitting as Paganini himself was considered demonic, and like Faust and Robert Johnson, thought to have made a deal with the devil. Paganini's talent for writing and performing compositions that other musicians could not master provided the basis for such myths. Many guitarists spend their lives trying to master just one of Paganini's compositions (Kawabata). Martone figuratively "cuts" Butler's head as Butler attempts but fails to match Martone's transition to the Paganini piece. Martone's final move saves both his own and Willie Brown's souls.

Alexie, in the tradition of "call and response," mirrors the film's plot of Brown's hidden identity and his journey back to the crossroads to regain his soul, by reinventing Johnson as a character who faked his death to hide from Legba while in search of redemption at another crossroads near the home of Big Mom on the Spokane Reservation. However, the film's Brown and the legendary Johnson have not only lost their souls but also their sense of identity and authenticity. By Son House's recollections, the real Johnson's talent lay with the harmonica, but the legends say Johnson made a deal at the crossroads in order to be the guitarist he so wanted to be. The legend is as much a cautionary tale about retaining one's authenticity, as it is an admonition against deals with the devil. Like Johnson, Martone, and Brown, the band members in Alexie's *Reservation Blues* all risk their souls or identities as they struggle between their authenticity and the promises made by the powerful lure of Cavalry Records.

In both *Reservation Blues* and *Crossroads*, people are traveling to or from the crossroads, leaving home, returning home, and often in search of home. The blues

element of movement or travel, for both Native Americans and African Americans, results from the shifting of slaves from one plantation to another, being sold “down river,” the shared experience of the Trail of Tears and other forced relocations, boarding schools, and the hopes of finding a geographic place offering freedom. The blues, like the Spokane horses throughout *Reservation Blues*, are constantly moving, going on, and carrying on. “Gotta keep movin’.” In *Reservation Blues*, Robert Johnson’s arrival at the Spokane crossroads, the appearance of The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota, the return of Michael White Hawk from Walla Walla State Penitentiary, the arrival and departure of Betty and Veronica, the appearance of Chess and Checkers, the disappearances and reappearances of Samuel Builds-the-Fire, the road trips that take Coyote Springs away from and back to the reservation--all demonstrate the motion of the blues. Houston Baker explains such movement found in blues music: “Their instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, and evolution. Like signification itself, blues are always nomadically wandering. Like the freight hopping hobo, they are ever on the move, ceaselessly summoning novel experience” (8). Voluntary movement results from a restless urge to find something better: happiness, safety, redemption. In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie’s Johnson and the many other musicians who have come to Big Mom over the years are each in search of something.

Robert Johnson and Willie Brown travel to find safety or redemption. Alexie’s novel begins with the explanation that nobody has ever come to the Spokane reservation by accident. Later the novel names numerous famed musicians who have arrived in that same spot, looking for guidance. The opening refers to the search of musicians for Big Mom in the novel. It also opens multiple trapdoors to the real life of a Coeur d’Alene



vocalist as well as the myths of Indian Territory as a place of salvation for slaves and African Americans. Ralph Ellison, in his essay “Going to the Territory,” explains that Indian Territory symbolized freedom much as did the geography north of the Mason-Dixon line. This metaphor often found itself in African American song lyrics: “But freedom was also to be found in the West of the old Indian Territory. Bessie Smith gave voice to this idea when she sang of “Goin’ to the Nation. Goin’ to the Terr’tor’.” . . . For the slaves had learned through the repetition of group experience that freedom was to be attained through geographical movement” (131). Ellison’s family lived in Oklahoma, where he received his formal and informal music education, developed his interest in the blues, witnessed firsthand the geography of the blues, and began writing.

As Bessie Smith’s lyrics and those of many other musicians indicate, for many African Americans, Indian Territory inspired hopes of escape. The Bessie Smith song titled “Work House Blues” narrates the hardships of the work house and the desire to run away to a paradise: “I wished I had me a Heaven of my own, I’d give all those poor girls a long happy home” (Davis 352-53). Chris Smith in his essay “Going to the Nation” quotes numerous blues recordings in which African Americans look to Indian country as a safe haven. While Smith compares these lyrics to what he finds as “the realities of life for Black Oklahomans,” he cannot deny that the “blues published between 1924 and 1941 which mention the state almost invariably refer to going there, and often with positive expectations” (84). Johnson’s search for redemption at the crossroads of the Spokane Reservation, although far from Oklahoma, may provide readers an Alexie trapdoor to many lyrics such as Bessie Smith’s, which speak of Indian country as a sanctuary.

For some, Indian country offered musical guidance. When Alexie's Johnson arrives at the crossroads of the Spokane Reservation, he describes a dream of a "big woman, she arrived in shadows, riding a horse. She rode into his dreams as a shadow on a shadowy horse, with songs that he loved but could not sing because the Gentleman might hear them"(6). Johnson fears that should the Gentleman (Legba) from the Crossroads hear and find him, Legba will cash in on the contract, taking Johnson's soul. When Thomas hesitates to take Johnson to Big Mom, Johnson pleads, "I sold my soul to the Gentleman so I could play this damn guitar better than anybody ever played guitar. I'm hopin' Big Mom can get it back" (8). The Gentleman has been tracking Johnson with a "Hell Hound on his Trail," and Big Mom is his only hope. Alexie connects the Robert Johnson song in his poem "Lost at Sand Creek" with Big Mom, who holds the collective memory of the slaughtered horses and who has tried for seven generation to save lost musicians.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire drives Johnson to the foot of Wellpinit Mountain, where his car shudders to a stop, the first indication that something powerful is at work. From there Johnson walks to Big Mom's house at the top of the hill, in hopes that she is the woman in his dreams. Big Mom moves seamlessly back and forth through time and space, remembering the morning when she walked out and heard the cries of the horses: "There, she 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. Big Mom stood on the rise and watched the horses fall, until only one remained" (10). Big Mom demonstrates the collective consciousness Hafen mentioned earlier, in which narratives of such travesties enacted upon one tribe are stored in the collective memory of all

Native Americans. According to Carl P. Schlicke,<sup>21</sup> on Sept 7, 1858, Chief Polatkin<sup>22</sup> and some of his men came into the camp of General Wright and were held captive. The following day Wright's men found and rounded up 800-900 Spokane horses. Though "hesitant to kill the valuable animals," Wright ordered that a few horses, not too wild, be held back, and the rest to be killed to prevent them from falling back into the hands of the Indians. At first the horses were shot one by one, but this proved too slow, so the men were ordered to fire volleys into the makeshift corral (176). Each one was shot simply to disempower the Spokane. Big Mom recalls the sound of the horses screaming one hundred and thirty years earlier when the U.S. cavalry massacred the Spokane horses. Since witnessing the slaughter, Big Mom has watched for the return of the horses and "listens to their songs" (RB 10). The horses return usually one at a time in the form of lost musicians in search of themselves. These horses arrive as Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Benny Goodman, and others who seek the guidance of Big Mom. Through the portal of the crossroads, Big Mom herself transports between time as well as identity, and she waits knowing her newest visitor, Robert Johnson, has arrived and wonders if this horse will survive.

The ghosts of the horses, and the broken people whom Big Mom could not save, are juxtaposed against the ghosts of George Wright and Phil Sheridan who in 1858 led the battle in which those Spokane horses were gathered and killed along with members of the tribe while the rest of the Spokane were forced to a reservation. In the blues tradition of collective history, the event is impressed in Big Mom's mind as she hears the

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<sup>21</sup> Schlicke's book is one of several sources Alexie acknowledges in the writing of *Reservation Blues*.

<sup>22</sup> Note the naming of Junior Polatkin in *Reservation Blues* and several of Alexie's other works.

call of the horses and responds with what she names her “morning” song, a song she sings at dawn to express her mourning:

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. (10)

While Big Mom’s description of the horses represents a collective consciousness, the horses themselves transform into the destroyed lives throughout the history of the reservation and resurrect themselves over seven generations as each horse returns as musicians rising up “from everywhere [turned] to Big Mom for rescue, but they all fell back into the earth again” (10). Alexie’s personification of the horses, also signifies on the poetry of Joy Harjo, jazz/reggae musician and poet. In her poem published in 1983 “She had Some Horses,” she describes many different horses who also represent the collective conscious of Native American experiences:

She had some horses./She had horses who whispered in the dark, who were afraid to speak./She had horses who screamed out of fear of the silence, who/carried knives to protect themselves from the ghosts./She had horses who waited for destruction. She had horses who waited for resurrection./ She had some horses. . . . (64)

Big Mom tends to the needs of the fallen horses slaughtered in 1878 as they returned “in different forms and with different songs, calling themselves Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, and so many other names. Those horses rose from

everywhere and turned to Big Mom for rescue” (RB 10). Like Bailey, Big Mom spends much of her time helping struggling musicians. She helps each one as they come to her, and sings her morning song for all the horses, the ancestors, and musicians who do not survive. In the blues tradition of improvisation and transformation, as well as the tradition of Legba whose horses act as messengers, the horses take on both historical and spiritual significance as they transform from the slaughtered horses into the fallen musicians, held in the memory of a flute song created from the slaughtered horse’s rib.

Very little remains in the contemporary American music consciousness regarding Coeur d’Alene swing, blues, jazz, and big band vocalist Mildred Bailey, a powerful woman in American music history. Robert Johnson dreamed of Big Mom as a Loa riding a horse. Convinced that she could save him, he went from crossroads to crossroads looking for her. But loas cannot appear until Legba is called at the crossroads, and Johnson hopes to avoid “the gentleman.” When Robert Johnson finally arrives at the intersection far below the home of Big Mom in *Reservation Blues*, he is about to meet the shadowy woman in his dreams, but she does not emerge from the magic of the crossroads, but rather from the spiritual world of the Coeur D’Alene. He is about to meet the once famed “Rocking Chair Lady” “Big Mom, sat in her rocking chair and waited to greet her latest visitor” (11). This trapdoor may be speaking directly to Coeur D’Alene readers, but it also opens for those knowledgeable of big band musicology. Throughout the story, Alexie leaves this and other clues to his inspiration for Big Mom’s character. Johnson and Big Mom take turns appearing in that chair, until the final scene after Johnson is saved, “Big Mom sat in her rocking chair, measuring time with her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth there on the Spokane Indian Reservation. She sang a

protection song, so none of the Indians, not one, would forget who they are” (306). In 1931 Hoagy Carmichael wrote a song titled “The Rocking Chair Lady” for Mildred Bailey. The song became her signature, and she became known as “The Rocking Chair Lady”:

Old Rocking Chair’s got me, my cane by my side  
Fetch me that gin, son. ‘fore I tan your hide  
Can’t get from this cabin, goin’ nowhere  
Just set me here grabbin’ at the flies ‘round this rocking chair. (Bailey)

Within the music industry, Bailey’s musical talent and influence, while significant during her lifetime, have since shifted to the shadows of the music industry. In her day, however, musicians described Bailey’s brilliance:

“One of the most dynamic musicians of the swing era, a fine singer . . . with perfect intonation and pitch. Her interpretation of lyrics on ballads was spellbinding, and she was superb at up-tempo tunes, where her knowledge of harmonics was utilized to sing variations on the melodic theme that was years ahead of her time” (“Crosby”).

In locating Johnson on the Spokane Reservation, Alexie also crosses Johnson’s path with Mildred Bailey through the character of Big Mom, revealing not only the appearance of Native Americans throughout the evolution of roots music, but more importantly the significant impact of Native Americans on the music industry.

Bailey’s real life impact on roots music seems a footnote today. For example, in her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis identifies Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday as the first Black women vocalists of recorded

blues and jazz and corrects any notion that the record business in roots music began with men:

Black Women were the first to record the blues. . . . At the peak of the classic blues era, which loosely spanned the decade of the twenties, hundreds of women had the opportunity to record their work. . . . Between 1923 and 1926—when Bessie Smith and Gertude “Ma” Rainey respectively recorded their first songs—few men, aside from Papa Charlie Jackson. . . . were signed up by Paramount and Columbia, the two major companies of that period. (xii)

While Davis’s work is clearly based on the influence of African American women and their important role in early African American recordings, as she lists the many influential women in the beginnings of roots music, she never once mentions Mildred Bailey or her important role in Billie Holiday’s career.

While Bailey is not African American, she is a woman of color and one who greatly influenced the career of at least one of the three women of whom Davis writes. In fact very little is written about Bailey in most music texts, but those writers who do mention her recognize hers as a significant role in music history. In 1929, Bailey became the first woman to tour with The Paul Whiteman Band, and within that same year made her first record with Eddie Lang and joined the Benny Goodman band (Giddins, Wright-McLeod 50). According to Brian Wright-McLeod, Bailey is “described by jazz historians as the greatest singer of all time,” she was also directly responsible for helping Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and her brother Al Rinker start their careers (50). Bailey’s power in the music industry drove Billie Holiday as well as Tony Bennett into the music

business (Wright-McLeod 50). Bailey's second husband, Red Norvo, describes the night that John Hammond, a music critic and later a talent scout for Columbia records, invited the couple to hear Holiday because he wanted Bailey's opinion: "So we went into this club and when [Holiday] started to sing Mildred leaned over to John and said 'This girl can sing!' and John got up and went right over to her after she got over and that's what started her. He respected Mildred's judgment" (Nicholson 40). Bailey, like Big Mom, mentored many famed artists, but she also introduced many people to the business and sang with some of the best bands and musicians of her time, including Benny Goodman, Red Norvo, and Paul Whiteman. In her day, the music culture highly respected Bailey's insights and opinions.

Growing up, Bailey lived with her family in a home filled with music on a wheat farm on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation (Giddins). Her success in the music industry would be well known within the tribe and the Northwest region. In an interview with Åse Nygren, Alexie says, "I'm aware of my Spokaness. I grew up on the Spokane Indian reservation, and my tribe heavily influences my personality and the ways in which I see the world. But there is also a strong Northwest identity. Because we spend so much time interacting now, I think Indian identity is more regional than it is tribal" (155). The allusions to Bailey throughout the novel hint at more than mere coincidence: "Big Mom sat in her favorite [rocking] chair on the porch while Coyote Springs rehearsed for the last time in her yard. 'You know,' Big Mom said, 'this is the first time I've ever actually worked with a whole band. I mean, Benny Goodman eventually brought most his band up here, but that was one at a time'" (213). Not only did Mildred Bailey sing for the



Benny Goodman band but Ken Burns in his documentary *Jazz* establishes that Bailey also offered advice to Goodman and his band which led to their success.

As Johnson and Big Mom (Bailey) refer to the shared experiences of past musicians, as well as that of stolen lands and stolen bodies, Betty and Veronica provide part of the white noise which Cox earlier identified as a “demand to abandon all that is Indian and conform to the dictates of the invader’s cultural beliefs” (237-238). Betty and Veronica briefly perform with the Spokane band Coyote Springs after the band’s first booking off the reservation, and later the two white women “play Indian” for Cavalry Records. The theme of “playing Indian” in *The Archie* comic book and television series occurs frequently, allowing the four privileged, white teenagers to invent an Indian image that fits the beliefs of the dominant culture. In the television series, Jughead teaches viewers how to “dance the Indian,” and Reggie dresses in fringed leather to recite an “Indian” poem at a school talent contest (*The Archies*). In the fashion section of the comic book series *Archie’s Girls: Betty and Veronica*, reader contributions provide “Betty’s Preppy Look” which is modeled by blonde Betty on the left page while brunette Veronica models “Fringed Fashions” complete with headband and other accessories (“Fashions” 7-8).<sup>23</sup> In *Reservation Blues* the two white women Betty and Veronica, who own a new age book store, temporarily join the band and take a brief romantic interest in Junior and Victor. Representing Hollywood, pop culture, and the appropriation of unrealistic Indian characters found in the media, Veronica and Betty are later juxtaposed

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<sup>23</sup> The positioning of preppy Betty on the left and Indian Veronica on the right comes to mind when viewing Sherman Alexie’s drawing “White/Indian” in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The white side of junior wears preppy clothes and portrays a “bright future” while the Indian side on the right wears tennis shoes from the supermarket and portrays “a vanishing past” (57).

against Wright and Sheridan, whose names allude to the military men once set on destroying whole tribes, and in the present world of *Reservation Blues* work as talent “scouts” for Cavalry records under the command of Mr. Armstrong--an obvious reference to General George Armstrong Custer.

The recording “scouts” are ordered to find a band of Indians, an authentic Indian band, or more accurately a band that the American public will accept as Indian. Wright and Sheridan, like Big Mom, move from the present to a surreal tableau from the past lives of their namesakes. The double-sided characterizations take on a dream-like feel as the twentieth century Wright and Sheridan realize their past lives, weaving back and forth between their military days to their positions with Cavalry Records. In the twelve bar blues, the twist in the last line can be a recognition of one’s own faults. Alexie is signifying when Wright hails a cab and asks to go home, he arrives at a cemetery where his historical self General George Wright and his wife are buried. Wright lies down on his own grave and cries to Margaret his buried wife. “I was the one, I was the one who killed them all. I gave the orders,” referring to the 1858 massacre he led killing hundreds of Spokane horses (*RB* 271). While he sobs, his wife assures him he is home now, but in the next paragraph, he is back in the control booth with Armstrong as they decide to make Betty and Veronica into “Indian” Rock Stars (*RB* 271). His remorse for killing the horses fades quickly as he again interacts with the cavalry against the Indians.

Armstrong doesn’t like Coyote Springs, the real Indian band, whose guitar screams and bucks violently, like the slaughtered horses, in rebellion during the recording session. Armstrong later signs Betty and Veronica as Sheridan convinces him of their potential. “We don’t need any goddamn just-off-the-reservation Indians. . . .

These women have been on the reservation. . . .They really understand what it means to be Indian” (RB 269). Alexie demonstrates that pop culture wants “Indians” that fit the popular image, are easy to control, and can be made to look like Hollywood Indians. Sheridan argues: ““Can’t you see the possibilities? We dress them up a little. Get them into a tanning booth. Darken them up a bit. Maybe a little plastic surgery on those cheekbones. Get them a little higher you know? Dye their hair black, Then we’d have Indians. People want to hear Indians”” (RB 269). In an ethereal, timeless matrix, Wright kills the horses, committing one kind of genocide, and then makes the two girls into make-believe Indians performing another kind of cultural genocide, which ironically seems to reflect Sheridan’s famed quote regarding the only good Indian. Here the only good Indian is a Hollywood-made Indian.

Alexie, like many Native writers, highlights the white noise pointing to the static and false imaginings of Eurocentric media intent on its own self-interest. Louis Owens explains the European invention of the Indian: “Since that initial moment of entanglement in the metanarrative of Western Expansionism, the identity of American Indians--or the Native Americans--has been ever subject to the psychic cravings and whims of the European colonizers” (21). In *Savagism and Civilization*, Roy Harvey Pearce states, “The interest is not in the Indian as Indian, but in the Indian as a vehicle for understanding the white man, in the savage defined terms of the ideas and needs of civilized life” (255). Betty and Veronica fall into that long tradition of what Jacquelyn Kilpatrick describes as “Indianized white intermediary. . . . They were, in fact, generally better at being Indians than the Indians” (4). They will do anything the producers want without any concern for authenticity, much like blackface of vaudeville.

Early in *Reservation Blues* with the introduction of The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota, whose giant cheekbones cause people to duck when he turns his head, Alexie's ire with Hollywood weighs heavily in turnabouts in which he embraces the ridiculous stereotypes and throws them back to the reader as jokes. The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota's exaggerated high cheekbones responds to Hollywood's embellishment of Indian phenotypes, where the actor, Indian or not, is made up with the use of clay, cosmetics, paint and feathers to look like a plains Indian, usually a Lakota. The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota becomes a caricatured transformation of the television and movie theatre Indian. In the film *Smoke Signals*, Alexie and director Chris Eyre take Hollywood to task with puns and twists around every corner of the plot to remind us that the real joke is Hollywood Indians. The characters, Thomas and Victor discuss on the bus what it means to be real Indians, and Victor mocks Thomas for watching *Dances with Wolves* too many times while Victor himself identifies a real Indian man as one who looks like he just returned from a buffalo hunt. Puzzled, Thomas reminds Victor that the Spokane people are Salmon fishermen. Victor, outraged, does not want to emulate Salmon fishermen, preferring the stoic Plains Indian chasing buffalo across the silver screen. Later Thomas comments, "the only thing worse than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV." Here Eyre and Alexie comment on the input these Hollywood images have on self-identity as well as non-Indian perceptions of Indians.

In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie turns the point into a comedy riff in the bar scene with Thomas and Chess. The dialogue comes across as a joke; something like "did you hear the one about the Indians in a bar in New York":

“Hey,” Chess said, “you ain’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.”

“Oh,” the waitress said, “that kind. Shoot, I ain’t ever seen that kind of Indian.”

“We’re that kind of Indian.” (239)

The *shtick* goes on with the appearance of the fry cook, a repeat of the whole thing, and the fry cook’s conclusion that Chess and Thomas are really Puerto Ricans pulling a joke (239). The joke, of course, examines non-Indians whose imaginations have been so twisted by TV and film, that they wouldn’t recognize a real Indian if, like Chess and Thomas, he and she stood right in front of them.

Alexie signifies with the blues tradition of talking back and responds to pop culture’s portrayal of Indians. The Hollywood Indian is not only an invention of the European mind imposing the white noise of European contact. Near the end of the novel, Thomas receives a tape from Veronica and Betty, the now “authentic” Indian band. On the tape, they sing a promise that anyone can be “Indian in your bones” (RB 296). The lyrics stab Thomas, and he destroys the tape, but the door is open to controversies surrounding both “Hollywood Indians” as well as the debate over “real Indians.”

Both the film *Crossroads* and Alexie’s novel *Reservation Blues* are about redemption, remembering who you are and not selling out to whatever devil or hellhound is on your heels. Alexie’s Johnson finds his redemption when he returns to the

harmonica, the instrument he was meant to play. Near the end of the novel, Big Mom hands something to Johnson: “Johnson held a cedar harmonica. He could feel movement inside the wood, something familiar. ‘You don’t need that guitar anymore,’ Big Mom said. ‘You were supposed to be a harp player. . . . All by yourself, you can play a mean harp’” (RB 278). The cedar harmonica releases a trapdoor to the legends of the Robert Johnson who existed outside of Alexie’s imagination. Big Mom tells Alexie’s character that he always had the talent to be a harp player, that this is who he was supposed to be, and he could do it without any magic or deals with Legba. The cedar harmonica also parallels the film *Crossroads*, in which Eugene wishes to exchange his classical guitar talents to master the blues. In *Reservation Blues*, the band Coyote Springs’ move from a local reservation band to a near deal with Cavalry Records is much like Martone’s narrow escape from Legba. Alexie signifies on history, and this time the cavalry does not defeat the Indians or offer contracts that will never be honored or will forever alter the lives of their community. For the soul of the band is a collective one, which impacts their people as well as themselves, and Cavalry Records, a trapdoor to the history of military violence towards Indians, also provides a vehicle for Legba when the company tempts the band to trade their souls or their authenticity for a record contract.

In the recording studio, the band counts off and everything seems normal until Victor remembers how the guitar (Robert Johnson’s guitar) had burned and scarred his hands. “Bar by bar, his fingers slipped away off the strings and frets. The guitar bucked in his hands, twisted away from his body. He felt a razor slice across his palms” (225). Led by the defiance of Johnson’s guitar, the band resists another destructive confrontation with Armstrong’s Cavalry, but not without avoiding a violent

confrontation with the Cavalry scouts. Victor picks up a “studio saxophone and threw it at Sheridan” (229). Robert Johnson’s guitar and Legba incite the confrontation between the Indian band members and the white Cavalry employees, but throughout the novel Alexie reminds us that, for both Native Americans and African Americans, music produces “powerful medicine”—a medicine that can heal when used properly and destroy when abused. Earlier in a concert, Thomas recognizes that the band “Coyote Springs created a tribal music that scared and excited the white people in the audience. That music might have chased away the pilgrims five hundred years ago” and he “wanted the songs, the stories, to save everybody (80, 101). During an interview with Adam from KROK radio, Thomas states, “But hey, an Indian woman invented the blues a day before Columbus landed, and rock’n roll the next day,” implying that music provides a potent response to colonization (157-58). Music, according to Big Mom, has the power to create and recreate the world (10). However, in speaking to her student Michael White Hawk, years before Coyote Springs, and just before he was arrested--coincidentally for assault with a saxophone--Big Mom says, ‘Don’t you understand that the musical instrument is not to be used in the same way that a bow and arrow is? Music is supposed to heal’” (208). Robert Johnson’s guitar tells Thomas earlier in the story that “‘the blues always makes us remember.’ . . . Ya’ll need to play songs for your people. They need you’ . . . ‘The music. Ya’ll need the music’” (22-23). In “Because My Father Always Said,” the narrator echoes these sentiments: “I figured music just might be the most important thing there is. Music turned my father into a reservation philosopher. Music had powerful medicine” (29). The response, sometimes as Ellison is so often quoted “squeezing from [the experience] a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (29).

*Reservation Blues* reminds us that through the blues, pain is both remembered and healed, something essential to surviving colonialism through the mnemonics of call and response.

Not all of the fallen horses can be saved. Victor loses the guitar in New York, but wakes up on the reservation to hear the guitar playing and finds it in the bathroom:

*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. . . . 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? (RB 255)*

In the European tradition of selling oneself to the devil, the person pays the debt with his or her own life at the end of the deal. In the Haitian tradition, “he gives others and only gives himself when no more acceptable victims can be found. . . . It must be a real sacrifice. He must give members of his own family or more intimate friends” (Hurstun 184). Victor gives up Junior whose death is marked as a suicide—another fallen horse. Rather Junior suffers for Victor’s selfish desires, and they are perhaps both fallen.

However, another future still remains possible for Thomas and the Warm Water sisters. While they remain untouched by the magic of the guitar, the collective consciousness of the tribe needs to help Thomas and the sisters find themselves. Once again travel, the blues, stories, and the community invoke hope. Jane Hafen explains “Alexie focuses not on the tragedy but on the survival and the means to survival which are tribal and specific. Part of the success comes from the process, the journey itself” (74). When Thomas, Chess, and Checkers leave the Spokane Reservation and set out for



the Flathead Reservation, their journey indicates a sign of continuance and hope rather than that of failure. The Spokane demonstrate their tribal collective consciousness when despite their hesitations and opinions of the blues, they pitch in to help Thomas, Chess, and Checkers finance their move to the Flathead reservation. Robert Johnson, in returning to his own natural talents with the harmonica, stays on the Spokane reservation where he will play the music that is needed there. Thomas, Chess, and Checkers see the shadow horses following behind them and they reach out of the car windows to hang on to them, hang on to the memory as they join Big Mom across time and distance in singing a protection song knowing that they want to survive. Junior and Victor are lost, but Big Mom pulls everyone else together in a dream in which they all sing the protection song, strengthening all of their memories so that they will remember who they are.

Robert Johnson and the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota played a duet.

Big Mom sat in her rocking chair, measuring time with her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth there on the Spokane Indian Reservation. She sang a protection song, so none of the Indians, not one, would forget who they are. (306)

Big Mom, in the tradition of the blues, holds the collective memory of the slaughtered horses, the lost lives of Indians and musicians, and those who will survive through memory and music and a clear understanding of self-identity.

While musicians of all ethnicities have and continue to travel on and off the reservation in search of Big Mom, both Big Mom and Robert Johnson remain with the Spokane. Johnson has found a new home on the Spokane reservation where he will

continue to play his harp, and share Big Mom's work with the fallen horses who seek her guidance. Alexie reminds readers that this shared history may seem invisible throughout popular culture, but there has and always will be a shared existence between African Americans and Native Americans. As Robert Warrior points out, "on the streets of this continent's inner cities and on the roads and pathways that cross Indigenous enclaves around the world, the black people and red people will keep unfolding a history that crisscrosses, zigs, zags, and doubles back" (324). Beyond the white noise, at the crossroads across America drifts the Red and Black sounds of dance, song, and story—a sound that breaks through human consciousness, calling for a response.

Chapter Three

“Red is Red”:

Transcultural Convergence and Craig Womack’s *Drowning in Fire*

Rabbit responds, “Only if you believe white always swallows up Red. I think Red stays Red, most ever time, even throwed in with white.” (*Red on Red* 24)

Transcultural space is always vulnerable, easily penetrated, and in endless flux, and in this instability lies its vitality (Louis Owens *Mixed Blood* 33)

In Craig Womack’s writing he turns toward “The Talking Text” and “Rewriting the Speakerly.” This is most evident in his newest publication *Art as Performance: Story as Criticism*,<sup>24</sup> a salad bowl of his short stories, a play, literary criticism, and satirical essays in which he is clearly speaking in his natural voice, still very witty and intelligent without the formality of the academy. In other words, if what we have read in Womack’s

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<sup>24</sup> It is unfortunate that *Art as Performance* was released in late October of 2009, just days before my dissertation deadline.

previous writings is Womack in a suit, this last book is the same guy in a pair of jeans and shirt. And don't let the change in voice fool you; he is just as compelling as he was in *Red on Red*. One of the essays, however, is critical to my discussion of the "Talking Text" in this chapter and that is "Aestheticizing a Political Debate: Can the Confederacy be Sung Back Together?" This work is vital to understanding Womack's recognition of the blues and jazz as part of the shared experience of Creeks, Black Creeks, and freedmen as well as his hope that the Creek Nation will recognize that Blacks played a critical role in the confederacy's history and future. Jimmy, the Black Creek character of *Drowning in Fire* who speaks from the Lower World of Creek tradition brings balance to This World and the World Above. Womack hears the call of Creek writing and history and responds with a Creek response, and in "Rewriting the Speakerly," he listens carefully to the written and spoken voices of the Creek Confederacy. He brings the sound of that voice into his own writing, proving through the examples of his own writing the importance when examining the Creek world of also paying attention to previous and present Creek voices.

In Craig Womack's novel *Drowning in Fire*, Lucy plays a central role in teaching two boys about their identities and history. She does this through her place in the three Creek worlds, her childhood memories of two respected gay Creeks, her stories, her participation in call and response, and her trumpet music. One of the boys, Jimmy, a Black Creek confident in his Creek identity—so unlike the ubiquitous tragic mixed blood of American literature—along with the other Creek boy Josh learn that through the flux of invasion, relocation, and attempted destruction of Creek life and government lay the

very vitality which continues to burn like the sacred fires.<sup>25</sup> Through these worlds and stories, Womack reveals the collective lives of Creeks and Blacks, resulting in shared blood and music, and the important role of women ushering Creeks, regardless of other identities, to their place underneath the arbors of their mother clan where they will participate in the call and response of Creek stomp dance.<sup>26</sup> While Aunt Lucy leads the two boys to recognize the significant role of gay members in Creek society, she also illuminates the relations by both blood and culture between Creeks and African Americans.

Writing from a Creek perspective, Womack grounds *Drowning in Fire* within the three Creek worlds. Using the “Talking Text,” Womack takes the stories of the three worlds and Tie Snake and speak back to them in his own Creek story. Each of these three characters function from within one of the three Creek worlds: Jimmy connects to Tie Snake of the Lower World, Josh flies through time and space in the Upper World, and Lucy, through the whippoorwill, finds powerful words to take her song and stories on the wind of This World, where the Wind clan of the Creek origin story began, and where she can reach both boys. Womack explains the balance between the Worlds. “In traditional Muskogean thought, there is a balance of oppositions wherein the people seek ceremony and daily life to keep Upper World from predominating Lower World, Lower World

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<sup>25</sup> “To the Muskogees, the Sacred Fire was considered their grandfather and the supreme father of mankind, *Esakata-Emishe*, ‘the Breath Master.’ The Sacred Fire ‘represents the entire community and the people’s connection to their ancestors and the Maker of Breath” (Grantham 81).

<sup>26</sup> Creek clan identity is matrilineal.

from predominating This World, and so on” (*Red* 239). Womack examines these worlds in the writings of Joy Harjo,<sup>27</sup> and carefully structures them within his novel.

Harjo’s poetry is often set in urban America and includes pan-Indianism as well as globally indigenous elements such as in the poem “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” in which Rammi, “an Igbo man from northern Nigeria” drives the narrator in a taxi to the airport in Chicago. Rammi tells her of another Igbo man who is murdered while pumping gas (“Letter” 35-36). Womack finds that while her work is influenced by so many settings and philosophies, “Creekness is essential” (*Red* 224). “In other words contact with other culture does not cancel out her Muskogean center. . . . Harjo’s Creek grounding strengthens her pan-tribal vision” (224-225). In Harjo’s poetry collection *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, the Muskogean<sup>28</sup> world is grounded in the philosophy of the three Creek worlds. The title poem “The Woman Who Fell From the Sky” is an example of the Upper World or Sky World making contact with This World within an urban setting. Saint Coincidence in This World can see the woman falling from the sky, and from the Upper World she can see him, the boarding schools, the pan-Indian experience, and the concrete urban setting with a view of the Safeway parking lot. She sees “strange acts of cruelty by strangers, as well as the surprise of rare kindness” (“Woman” 6). Harjo writes “This unnamable thing of beauty is what shapes a flock of birds who know exactly when to turn together in flight in the winds used to make words. Everyone turns together though we may not see each other stacked in the invisible

<sup>27</sup> See Womack’s chapter seven; “Joy Harjo: Creek Writer from the End of the Twentieth Century” and his discussion of her poem “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” (239).

<sup>28</sup> Muskogean or Muskogee is the name that Creeks have reclaimed for themselves. Both are used throughout this discussion.

dimensions” (“Woman” 7). Harjo’s writing is a Creek perspective that reminds one that the three worlds exist perhaps unseen by each other but exist even in the landscape outside of Creek country. This understanding of the three worlds that Womack, Harjo, and their characters hold inside themselves follows them into the outside world and continues to inform their thoughts and ideas of the world.

Water is associated with the Lower World. Josh is quickly introduced to water, to drowning specifically, and the story of the Tie-Snake, the water monster of the Lower World. When the boys swim out to the raft, Jimmy climbs aboard: “he seemed to rise up out of the lake in an unending succession; his wiry arms and upper body kept coming and coming, followed by his swimming trunks and long legs, like a snake uncoiling” (*Drowning* 11). While sitting on a permanently anchored raft, Josh is taunted for his insecurities by his macho companions, so Josh decides that he will be the one to succeed in a dare to dive to the bottom of the water and bring up a rock to prove he’d touched bottom. Successful in his quest, Josh comes up for air, only to find he has surfaced under the raft in a small pocket of air. While waiting beneath the raft, Josh recalls fishing as his grandfather told him of Tie-Snake. Here the “Talking Text” echoes as Womack reflects on the passing of traditional stories and Josh learns this story as many Creeks have through the storytelling of their elders. “Their head is shaped like deer. If you are by water it has power and will pull you in. It don’t pull just anyone in water, just certain people. . . . It makes a sound like a big snake then rises up on a sheet of water” (19). As Josh decides to come out of his hiding spot, his legs become entangled in fishing line, and he cannot reach air. When he looks down at his legs, he sees “a balled-up coil of snakes had wrapped themselves around him” (22). Seeing bubbles on the surface, Jimmy

realizes Josh is in trouble and dives in to rescue him, but when he swims toward him, Josh sees a “snake, with horns, swimming toward him. . . . The giant snake was trying to wrap itself around Josh” (22). Josh who connected to the Upper World is drowning near the Lower World until Jimmy who is associated with snake imagery and the Lower World brings him back to This World, the world between their two worlds.<sup>29</sup> Near the end of the novel, now two men, Josh and Jimmy lie in bed after making love when Josh notices Jimmy’s gaze out into the room. “There were snakes everywhere, shimmering rainbows of color and motion, circles inside circles. . . . The whip snake came down from the lamp, crawled over our way, placed his head on the edge of the sparse white sheet, and clicked his tongue at us. Jimmy turned back toward me and said, ‘The secret is don’t act like you’re afraid. And then you won’t be’” (201). In This World, when Josh and Jimmy are together they create stability and protection for each other and the other two worlds. This give and take needed to create balance is the same give and take of call and response also needed for balance.

While Jimmy demonstrates a relationship with Tie Snake and the Lower World, Josh flies through time and space balancing their relationship with the Upper World. Lucy finds her place with the wind of This World. In telling Josh the Creek origin story, she reveals the origin of wind: “When the wind swept the fog away, the band of people on the east that first come out of the blackness became the Wind Clan” (5). Throughout the novel, Lucy is associated with wind through her voice, her horn, her stories, and her connection to whippoorwill. “Now that’s where I got all my wind from; I had to blow twice as hard as any trumpet player of my time,” Lucy explains to Josh and Jimmy as

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<sup>29</sup> The Lower World is below water, and the Upper World is above the sky.



she describes her days playing behind the stage curtain (94). Later she describes herself as “a windy old lady who never made it into the twentieth century” (130). Because of her place in This World, Lucy perceives Josh’s place in the Upper World, Jimmy’s in the Lower World, and the need for all of them to find balance with each other.

Through Lucy’s important role in steering Josh and Jimmy toward a balanced, secure Creek identity, Womack relies on the matrilineal clan system of the Creek nation and the importance of women. In *Red on Red*, Womack states his belief “that one approach to Native literatures should be a study of the primary culture that produces them” specifically recognizing something about Creek culture when studying Creek literature and something about Lagunas when reading a Laguna Pueblo author such as Leslie Marmon Silko (25-26). He finds that the “sounds of shells shaking and the responsorial rhythms of Creek singing show up in Creek literature” (17). Echoing throughout the words calling and responding throughout *Drowning in Fire*, we can hear the sounds: “*Shuguta shuguta shuguta*, women stepping toe to heel, the sounds of shells shaking, the turtle voices” (49). Womack explains that “what did and does hold the confederacy together as much as racial makeup was a strong matrilineal system in which clan and town identities could be passed down on, whatever the racial make-up of the father (“Aestheticizing” 103). At the stomp grounds, the men sit under the arbor representing their mother’s clan.<sup>30</sup> Father and sons sit at separate arbors because their mothers are of different clans. This is why it is important that a woman, Josh’s Aunt Lucy, lead the boys to the words and stories that they need.

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<sup>30</sup> My description of Green Corn and the grounds combines Womack’s description of Creek and Seminole Green Corn practices, combined with my own observations while participating with women in Cherokee Green Corn ceremonies.

During Green Corn,<sup>31</sup> the fasting and work done on the grounds by the men leading up to the stomp dance may appear strictly men's business. Behind the scenes, the women work in un-air-conditioned, mid-summer camp sites preparing food, waiting for the new fire on which to cook the meal that will break the men's fast, while protecting the integrity of the ceremony from children, pets, and visitors uninitiated in the boundaries of the ceremony. The women teach one another, their daughters, and their sons, too young yet to participate, as they watch the men throughout the ceremony from outside the square. The role of women, just as Lucy's role in the novel, may go unnoticed to those unfamiliar with the ways of the stomp ground until it is time to wrap their legs with turtle shell leggings filled with pebbles and step behind each man to carry the rhythm and percussion of the head man's song as they dance around the fire

In 1999, Creek/Cherokee writer Craig Womack wrote *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. The book establishes a history of Creek writers whose works demonstrate the strength and empowerment of Creeks writing Creek stories for Creek readers. In his novel *Drowning in Fire*, the Indian high school students are treated as though they are and always have been illiterate, despite the numbers of past and present Creek writers: "Indian students weren't given much encouragement to write; everybody knew Indians didn't write, even Indians, and the silence written all over the unscribed pages of our returned papers let us know that our teachers held to the general assumption" (*Drowning* 81). However, Lucy reveals the power of story as she guides the boys toward their own legacy and future. In both *Drowning in Fire* and *Red on Red*, Womack demonstrates the need for indigenous peoples to hear their own stories as told

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<sup>31</sup> Green Corn is a yearly ceremony that celebrates the new year's corn and the new fire.

from within their own worldview and to empower Creek writers—straight, gay, full-blood, mixed-blood, stomp ground or church goers--to let their own voices be heard. In *Drowning in Fire*, Lucy gives the boys a history through her own stories, and she helps Josh find the power of his own stories in his flights.<sup>32</sup> In the tradition of the “Talking Book,” Lucy finds a way through Josh’s flight and his ability to see or imagine her stories to help him on his way to understanding his own story. In *Red on Red*, Womack begins the work of establishing a body of Creek literature. The discussion of Womack’s first two books still leaves much to ponder and discuss. It is not merely a political treaty for nationalism; it is a depiction of many facets of Creek life told from a Creek perspective and a political act of resistance. Following his study of four Creek writers: Alice Callahan, Alexander Posey, Louis Oliver, and Joy Harjo and one Cherokee writer: Lynn Riggs, Womack embarks in adding his own Creek/Cherokee voice to the body of Creek/Cherokee writing.

One of the four Creek writers, Louis Oliver, provides an example of how the power of story and indigenous writers encourage one another when they tell stories from their own tribal perspective rather than leaving readers to rely on outsiders. Oliver had not thought much about becoming a writer nor had he had training as a writer when he attended a conference<sup>33</sup> of Indian writers, editors, and publishers. The conference members both besieged him and motivated him to write his own poetry and prose encompassing his life and the stories of his people the Creek, which he later published:

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<sup>32</sup> John Gambler notes the importance of “Josh’s last name, Henneha,” which in Creek tradition is often used to mean “an assistant or speaker” (105).

<sup>33</sup> Oliver does not indicate the name or date of the conference.

*The Horned Snake* (1982), *Estiyut Omayat* (1985), and *Chasers of the Sun* (1990). In describing his experience, Oliver writes:

I was very much impressed by their urging that the Indian must write as a survival tactic. When they returned to their respective homes and businesses I received from them so much material and chapbooks by other writers that I was overwhelmed and very much inspired to write (*Chasers* 28).

Womack, much like the Indians who attended that conference, calls to Creek and all indigenous peoples to respond in writing their own tribal histories and stories as a “survival tactic,” reaffirming the vitality of indigenous cultures through the experience of writing to and encouraging writing by one’s own tribal members. Inspired, perhaps, by the words of Louis Oliver, one of the Creek writers featured in *Red on Red*, Womack presents Creek literature through the writings and stories of those Creek writings and stories preceding his own.

Michelle Henry, one of the few literary scholars or critics both to thoroughly read Womack’s work and to discuss the importance of viewing *Red on Red* together with *Drowning in Fire*, reaffirms Womack’s arguments that to discuss or comprehend Creek texts, we must engage in the Creek world-view that informs these works. She argues that *Red on Red* is best understood when read alongside *Drowning in Fire* and that any serious analysis of Womack’s work address the strong role of gay or queer natives. In summarizing *Red on Red*’s relationship to *Drowning in Fire*, Henry states:

*Red on Red* is frequently critiqued without consideration of three essential aspects of Womack’s argument. First, he argues that in order to

understand a Creek text, we must engage the Creek worldviews that inform it. Second, *Red on Red* is best understood when considered together with his novel, *Drowning in Fire*, as two different ways of illustrating the same concepts (32)

As Henry implies, many reviews written after the publication of both Womack books mention one book or the other, not how they work together, and curiously focus discussion on nationalism, mentioning very little of the main points of *Red on Red* and even less on *Drowning in Fire*, which as Henry points out works with the first book to demonstrate what Womack suggests about literary separatism. Henry's essay provides a balanced reading of both books, as well as Womack's focus on queer natives.

Arnold Krupat<sup>34</sup> in his *NCTE* review "Red Matters," feels that "Womack's book is addressed to Creeks only; it is not for 'Educating white folks about Indians,' because 'Hotgun claims [that's] like teaching hogs to sing; it wastes your time and only frustrates the hog'"(661). Krupat omits a crucial part of the quote. The complete quote within the context of its meaning states that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century many works about Indians were written by whites:

And when Indians did author their own books, they had to address a white audience, since they were writing in English, and their people, for the

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<sup>34</sup> Sean Teuton in his review of Krupat's recent *Red Matters* points to a change in Krupat's tone. He uses the terms "cosmopolitan comparativism." And "expands his discussion of the US relationship to American Indian literature from an engagement between cultures to include an interaction between nations. While in former writing Krupat has been critical of Indian claims to nationhood—and, by extension, national literatures, intellectual independence, and intellectual property—in *Red Matters*, he concedes the importance of national positions on Native literature, and even the promotion of sovereignty" (152-153).

most part, couldn't read them. Those days are over. *Educating white folks about Indians can only be taken so far* [my emphasis]. Hotgun claims it's like teaching hogs to sing: it wastes your time and only frustrates the hog. Now it's time to direct our literary efforts toward our own folks and personal letters symbolize insider efforts, speaking a special language recognized by a particular community" (*Red 21*)

Krupat misses a couple of points here. Womack does not say his book is not for whites. Womack's primary audience is Creeks, but also he encourages all Indians to read and write within their own nations, and he hopes that more non-Indians will begin to listen to what Indians have to say about themselves. The point of the book actually lies in the next line: "Posey himself resisted having his letters published outside of Indian Territory because he was trying to get things stirred up *within* the territory, among the tribes" (21). In the letters ending each chapter of *Red on Red*, Womack's character, Jim Chibbo writes back to Hotgun, one of Posey's pseudonyms. Posey, himself, uses "The Speakerly Text," in which his letters published as Hotgun use a Creek dialect, to which he has carefully listened. Womack in turn listens carefully to this dialect and writes letters back to Hotgun in the same dialect. Womack is, in a fashion, taking on the mission of Posey to stir things up *within* Creek Country: To encourage Creeks to look to their own writers and to write their own stories. The book isn't about whites, it's about Creeks, but certainly non-Indians are welcome to the discussion or Womack wouldn't, as Krupat points out, publish the book with the University of Minnesota Press or teach non-Creeks, at the time of the book's release,<sup>35</sup> at the University of Lethbridge at Alberta. He would

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<sup>35</sup> Currently Womack teaches at Emory University.

instead have acted as Posey had and resisted having his work published outside of Creek country. He obviously hopes that perhaps a few hogs can learn to listen and possibly even sing. I might also note here that Womack's Jim Chibbo letters as well as Posey's Fixico letters are packed with very subtle wit and irony that require careful reading so as not to miss the point or the joke.

In explaining story-ways, Womack records his conversation with Linda Alexander as she tells a Turtle story. Because in oral tradition the stories are told so many times, the listener knows the outcome. It is the telling itself, the performance of the story, Womack explains that outweighs the story itself:

Linda Alexander emphasizes repeatedly the fact of Turtle going around and around the pestle with the mortar nearby in the first sixteen lines of the story. The repetition is a performative ploy, like a jazz player riffing on the same note for a sustained period of time, the technique increasing tension even though the listener knows what note the sustained pitch will resolve into. (Womack *Red* 89)

In a much similar way, Womack's replicates this "performative ploy" in the creation of Lucy the jazz player and her technique of riffing and improvisation in her musical performance as well as her movement and storytelling within the novel. Josh emphasizes the technique, when Lucy is blowing smoke and stories into his aching ear: "'I don't want to hear a story. . . . You done told me that. Get out your trumpet and play 'Stardust.' I loved the sound of that dreamy old tune'" (*Drowning* 4). Just like the creation story that Josh has heard his aunt tell, he has heard "Stardust," and can

anticipate a new rendition of either but requests her “Stardust” perhaps relating the song to the Upper World.

Likewise, it is the memory of hearing the Tie-Snake stories that prevents Josh from panicking under the raft when he sees the snakes and nearly drowns. Josh thinks of his grandfather and feels safe because his grandfather has repeatedly told him the Tie-Snake stories. His grandfather tells him of the Chief’s son who was to carry a message in a clay pot to another chief. Showing off, the boy loses the vessel in the water and while attempting to retrieve it, he is carried off by Tie-Snake to a den of snakes. After four days, he is returned, and Tie-snake promises that if the boy ever needs his help, Tie-Snake will come to him, and he does (29-30). Josh’s experiences with near drowning and later sleeping next to Jimmy in his “den of snakes” parallels the story his grandfather has told him of Tie-snake, and he knows that he is secure with Jimmy.

Josh’s relationship with story begins with Lucy, passing her words on to Josh, hoping to guide him and later his friend Jimmy home to their place at the fire. Lucy holds Josh as a small boy on her lap, the burning ember of her cigarette glowing as she pulls smoke into her mouth and blows it into his aching ear and begins telling him the story of the fog and the first people. “She exhaled a long stream of smoke into my ear; I felt a hot wave against a bank of pain. Aunt Lucy, breathing smoke and stories into me, said, ‘Mama ustea say, *hononof*, long time ago, that in the beginning it was so foggy you coun’t see nowheres, not even anyone around you’” (4). Through Creek stories and Lucy’s personal stories, the boys begin to see that Red is Red and always has been regardless of whatever else goes into the mix. Words are powerful medicine that can heal an earache, protect children from unscrupulous adults, and show the next generation the



history of their predecessors, of the outside influences the tribe has absorbed, shaped as their own; demonstrating how each member of the tribe has a place around the sacred Creek fire.

Like the women at the Green Corn ceremony, Lucy nourishes the boys with stories and plays an important role in their steps toward manhood and realizing their place at the fire. Daniel Justice notes:

Interspersed through the narrative is the story of Josh's passionate Aunt Lucy, a Creek blues trumpeter who had challenged the gender and racial mores of Oklahoma when a younger woman, and now guides her nephew to acceptance of himself and his love for Jimmy. The significance of Lucy in the text mirrors the importance of women in Muskogee communities, and further distinguishes this book from many of its non-Indian counterparts, which often minimize the influence of women on the lives of gay men (40).

Lucy shows Josh the power story has in understanding his role as a storyteller and respected member of the Creek community.

Throughout the novel, Lucy, and Josh, as he grows to manhood, frequently express a need for words. Lucy's father sexually abuses Lucy during her childhood. She knows that she can stop him with words if she can just find the right ones. "I knew to get him off of me I have to say the right words" (34). She tries screaming scripture at him to no avail (34). Josh likewise finds a need for words: "He wished he could pick up words like stones, rub them to make them smooth and polished, and put them in his pocket to save and use during moments like this one. He longed for the comfort of those stones"

(29). Lucy begins to find her words while listening to the whippoorwill: “The [whippoorwill] spoke for all of them, and I strained to hear it right this time, listening with everything I had, as she called me. . . . I swear I hear her saying ‘whippoorwill’s Lucille,’ and I know she’s speaking to me” (51). When she finds her cousin Jennie in the car with Lucy’s father, she knows what he has done to her: “All the stories that pour out of me now began that day I seen Daddy and Jennie in the Ford. I been saying everything I know since to throw out the right words, to set words all around me and Jennie in order to hold off the devil hovering over us in the night time” (123). In *Red on Red*, Bruno writes a Joy Harjo poem in which he signifies on her poem “She had Some Horses”:<sup>36</sup>

She heard some whippoorwills/She heard a whippoorwill dreaming the  
devil’s shadow, a burning weight that pressed her down./ She heard the  
whippoorwill tell the devil quoting her scriptures, “You/ might try to bury  
me, but it would take a right smart of dirt to hold/ me down.”/ These were  
her whippoorwills. (267).

Whippoorwill gives Lucy the words, the song, the stories she needs, and later Whippoorwill, like Big Mom’s and Harjo’s horses, is a source of power to Lucy, bringing her the language to save herself and to help Josh and Jimmy find their own words. Whippoorwill also in the tradition of the “Free direct discourse” becomes not quite a narrator throughout the story, but a dynamic voice that demonstrates Lucy’s “emergent and merging moments of consciousness.”

In her dream, a cedar tree tells Lucy. “I will give you a song to sing when they are around, a song to sing when you are sputtering and gasping for words, a song born

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<sup>36</sup> See the Sherman Alexie Chapter for an excerpt from Harjo’s “She had Some Horses.”

out of silence, the song Whippoorwill wants to give you” (128). Whippoorwill’s song and the words that Lucy needs represent the need we have for stories, for words that fit our worlds. For Womack this means Creeks passing down the stories and words that are needed by Creek people to know their own stories from a Creek perspective. As it was for Louis Oliver, Lucy’s empowerment of words, stories, song, come with her recognition that others in her community have the same need. She shares some of this through her horn, but she does not give it all away because she knows the power of words and wants to hang on to them in case she needs them again. “I’d take that whippoorwill song and play the melody on my horn, still keeping the words for myself” (129). Lucy has found the words that she needs, and she guides Josh to find his own words.

In addition to Womack’s emphasis on a Creek-informed reading of Creek literature and the role of gay Natives, he also explores non-Creek influences that are absorbed into Creek culture without damaging it, diluting it, or creating angst ridden mixed-bloods. In Julie Gozen’s 2002 interview with Womack, he states that Indian people are not diminished or overpowered by outside influences, Rather Womack believes that “Native communities transformed outside influences” (12). Womack sees the influence of colonialism not as a destruction of Indian culture but as something incorporated into Indian culture, absorbed into the culture but not replacing the culture. John Gambler suggests that Creek identity “is constantly produced and reproduced by its own cultural subjects. These reconstructions are always in-process, resilient, and adaptable practices . . .” (103). In *Drowning in Fire* as well as *Red on Red*, Womack demonstrates a national indigenous literature; and more importantly, he demonstrates

that there have been outside influences throughout time and that these have not supplanted Indian ways. They have been an influence and incorporated into tradition but have not destroyed the core identity of tribal nations. “Creeks learned how to adopt not only new people but new ways of being as well. . . . Creeks, however, who experienced exposure to new cultures for hundreds of years, still managed to maintain their language, worldview, and government, even in a system of constant flux” (*Red* 31). Even in speaking and writing in English, Native Americans have taken this foreign language to speak to a larger audience, one that includes all English-speaking Indians of various native languages as well as non-Indian English readers.

In telling Creek stories from a Creek perspective much is included that non-Indians writers have overlooked. Tiya Miles writes, “The history of African American and American Indian relations has been a footnote in general narratives of American history, as well as in much of the literature on Native nations as well as on African American history, and Ethnohistory” (“All” 3). When Womack calls for both native and non-native scholars in all fields to be aware of and informed by tribally specific authorities in academia, he also means an inclusion of all Indian people, all mixed bloods, and Indians of all gender identities. In her discussion, Eva Maria Garrouette notes that radical indigenism “has the potential to help us formulate definitions of identity that can contribute to the survival of Indian people, even as it teaches the academy about philosophies of knowledge it has failed to see and comprehend. But it will also require the researcher to enter the tribal philosophies. Second, it will require him to enter tribal relations” (107). Womack speaks of his tribal philosophies revealing layers of identity previously not heard. Henry points out that radical indigenism is not about “‘allowing’

Indian people to speak for themselves, for they have always been speaking about their experiences; it is about *listening* [my emphasis] to these native voices, which involves acknowledging their worldviews, communities, histories, and sovereignty” (35-36).<sup>37</sup> Henry addresses the past notions of mixed bloods torn between identities in part of her discussion of *Drowning in Fire*:

Jimmy’s identity is informed by his relationship with his Indian community. While he may be identified externally as Black, he identifies himself as an Indian. What is especially significant about Jimmy’s identity is that he does not simply lament his position in between two cultures. (34)

Henry goes on to say that Womack not only challenges the over-discussed notion of “identity-torn mixed-bloods,” but more importantly he subverts the idea of hybridity as a bridge between European and Indian cultures (34). Jimmy as a Black Indian not only demonstrates his comfort in his Creek identity but he refuses to perform as a bridge between non-Indian and Indian relations. Interestingly, Womack also does not allow him to feel displaced because of his mixed race, particularly his African American identity, as we have seen in other works depicting Black Indians such as Michael Dorris’s *Yellow Raft on Blue Water*.

Womack discusses Black Creeks and the disenfranchisement of the Creek Freedmen. He states:

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<sup>37</sup> Native American writers such as Simon Ortiz and Vine Deloria Jr. discuss the importance of listening. The question when Indian writers redress previous misconceptions should not be who they are specifically talking to, but who is listening.

When we sing around the fire and in the churches a good number of our relatives are both painfully missing and obviously present. They are absent by virtue of the segregationist turn Creek history has taken more than once, and they are present in the rhythms of the songs we sing, the tribalism of the stories we tell, and the physical features of many of the very faces who sing and tell them. If the confederacy sings itself back together it will be from once again, as it has before, singing to the tune of a committed citizenship that recognizes the reality of mutual destiny. More to the point, the recent Creek Nation constitutional reforms as the constitution is being re-examined at the time of this writing should also correct the tragic disenfranchisement of in 1979 by reinstating them as Creek citizens (*Art as Performance* 113).

Also Womack's description of Jimmy's role as a Black Creek is not so idealistic as to overlook racism within the community. Jimmy's classmates who want to befriend him because he is an athletic hero, at the same time express their jealousy in racial slurs. "Jimmy, like many Creeks has Black blood and features, a fact the other boys held against him and used to discredit him in sports" (*Drowning* 12). While Jimmy seems the confident athlete throughout high school, he like his gay friends, struggles to find balance in his identity as both a Black Creek and a gay Creek. In discussing his social life, Jimmy says, "You know, I got my Black friends, the ones I grew up with and hung out with 'cause everybody in Oklahoma, except Indians who know different, think I'm Black. . . . And I like my Black friends; I mean, hell, I been around them from day one. But I'm Indian, so I like to go places where I know there's other Indians" (145). Jimmy

clarifies the importance of place here. When he's in white bars, he's seen as Black because his Indian-ness is invisible to them. Around other Oklahoma Indians who know the history between African Americans and Indians, Jimmy is visible as an Indian, and around Creeks, around home, other Creeks know him; they know his family--they know he's Creek. Jimmy's father holds their allotment certificate from 1905 and fights for their family land, their Creek land (86). In discussing the difficult of figuring out just who is Creek and who is Black Creek, Womack states:

A church member or a grounds member's racial identity would be ambiguous and hard to place in a single category. Some community members might easily be taken to be black people in certain circumstances, and among white Oklahomans, often got treated as if they were because they looked phenotypically black, yet were perceived as Indian among Creeks--for whom, perhaps, they even looked Indian rather than black in a sense. More than people realize, much of this is in the mind of the beholder (106).

Jimmy further demonstrates the visibility of Creek identity within Creek geography in describing his Comanche friend C.A.'s position in the community: "They're outsiders here in Creek country. I mean, it would be one thing if one of C.A.'s parents was Creek. . . such southern plains doings as what C.A.'s siblings participate in don't mean a whole lot to our elderlies. Around here you're either Indian Baptist church or Indian Methodist church, or stomp grounds. . . . That's how we know you in these parts" (159). While identity is in the eye of the beholder it also requires place. Where Jimmy is seen determines how he is perceived. C.A.'s family are considered outsiders because none of

the family is Creek, and though they live with the Creek, they do not attend Creek ceremonies.

Place is further illustrated in the novel when the characters judge their bearings by the Black cemetery. It is like a compass point, so well known to the community that once it's spotted a person knows where he or she is. It is also a place imbued with racial memory. It reminds everyone of segregation between Creek and Black Creek or Freedmen. Jimmy drives by on his way home: "I drive around the curve and pass the Black cemetery. A couple of non-Indian relatives are buried there" (159). Josh, when he flies, also recognizes the Black cemetery as a landmark indicating home. Although Josh is not a Black Creek himself, the history of Blacks in Creek country is very much a part of his tribal memory and meaning of home. During one of his flights back in time, Josh is on the road trying to find his way back to town. The landscape is slightly different, but he discovers that "I can figure my way back once I find the Black cemetery" (185). Once he finds the landmark, he is relieved that he knows his way. This landmark contains stories for Josh too which he notes during a walk with Jimmy: "We went outside into the night, still humid, and started walking the dirt backstreets of Weleetka, past the road at the old Black cemetery. There used to be a shack on that corner where my dad was born" (198). In this place where the shack no longer stands, the memory of his father's birth remains within the place.

The differences between Womack's character Jimmy and Dorris's Rayona lay in Womack's depiction of geographically specific Creek landscape and the language and stories that are born out of that landscape. He writes that the character Hotgun steps into the pages of *Red on Red* because as Hotgun explains:



[Jim Chibbo]<sup>38</sup> wants to convey to his readers what it's like in his little part of the world that is his home, his nations. . . . He wants you to drive around McIntosh County and take a look-see for yourself, maybe get out, walk a spell, and watch a couple turtles slip off their sunny spots on the half-submerged logs in the Canadian River (20).

In other words, Creek identity, like all identities resonate in one way or another to memory and place.

Set in the landscape, the towns, the buildings that make up our communities, we are surrounded by places imbued with stories. We know where we are; we know the history of this place. I know that tree right there is the one that my brother just barely missed one day learning to drive or that the river over ways is where my grandma told me about currents and the one that nearly took her cousin away. When you have place and know that place, you know you belong. N. Scott Momaday says this repeatedly in his work: "The events of one's life take place, take place. How often have I used that expression, and how often have I stopped to think what it means? Events do indeed take place; they have meaning in relation to the things around them" (142). In Michael Dorris's *Yellow Raft on Blue Water*, Rayona, a Black Indian of undisclosed tribal origins, struggles with her identity, particularly when she comes to live on her family's anonymous reservation. While the novel ends with hope for Rayona in finding community with her mother's people; this can only take place after she struggles through

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<sup>38</sup> At the end of each chapter of *Red on Red*, Jim Chibbo writes a letter to Hotgun, in which "Stijaati Thalaako, Big Man, and Rabbit get together to talk to some these Creek authors and trace the history of how one influences the other" (23). Jim Chibbo is Craig Womack's persona writing in a similar style of the Fixico letters of Alexander Posey in which Hotgun is a character.

the journey of the anguished mixed blood. Had Dorris given Rayona a tribe, a place, a landscape of history and stories, he could not have composed her as a torn Black mixed blood trying to find her way home.

In creating a Black Creek character and acknowledging Black Creeks, Womack, also, does not ignore the racism within the past and present of the Creek Nation and Indian Territory. In fact Jimmy provides one of Womack's strongest uses of the "Readerly Text." In "Aestheticizing a Political Debate," Womack's literary criticism addresses the racism in Alex Posey's stories about African American Creeks: "Uncle Dick and Uncle Will," "Uncle Dick's Sow," "Jes' Bout Mid'lin, Sah," and "Mose and Richard." Womack is attentive to the dialect :

Probably the most obvious characteristic is not the dialogue but the dialect—speech patterns so colloquialized it is sometimes hard to figure out what the characters are saying. A racist narrator or author might argue, 'But that's what they really sound like.' Realistic or not, of course, issues of who is controlling this speech, and the depiction it creates, makes the dialect problematic. (97)

In addition to his discussion of the dialect, Womack's essay expresses his thoughts on the treatment of Black Creeks throughout their history up to today as disenfranchised Creek citizens. He writes:

These self-inflicted wounds are realities of Creek history. No doubt they have a complicated colonial backdrop, especially given the reconstruction treaty that some argue was forced on Creeks in 1866, requiring them to accept their former slaves as full tribal members. Yet the confederacy

also has to recognize its responsibility as one of the oppressors of its Afro-Creek relatives through the institution of slavery, another reality of that same history.” (105)

Womack, obviously, uses the Posey stories to discuss and analyze the Freedman controversy. In this essay he is closely reading dialect as well as writing a Creek response to both a Creek writer’s work and the Creek history of the Freedman. Womack argues that all of the questions regarding Creek authenticity of Creeks, such as: proof of matrilineal decent, knowledge of Creek language, participation in the community through the stomp grounds or the Creek churches:

And on and on, with everyone requiring a different set of criteria and no one agreeing. If these same requirements were applied to the entire nation, assuming anyone could agree on which ones provided the true test of Creekness, those few qualifying for citizenship could gather at a small country Baptist church barely big enough to fit its baptismal in the building. (112)

While clearly Womack is signifying on Posey’s writing to voice his response to the Freedman issue, it is not the first time he has done so. *Drowning in Fire* is Womack’s earlier response in the mode of the “Readerly Text” to both the racist story and dialect of Posey’s Black Creek stories as well as a response to the ongoing debate on the Freedmen.

Through Jimmy, Womack focuses the reader’s attention on a moment in Indian and Black history during the Spanish American War: “What was of more concern was what we heard about the posse, which had started to attack Indian and black women and

children whose husbands and fathers had to flee since the blame was being pinned on anybody with red or black skin” (*Drowning* 245). In *Red on Red*, he provides the background of slavery among the Five Civilized Tribes. The slaves became culturally Indian and biologically so through mixed marriages. Eventually they were enfranchised as members of the confederacy. Freedmen received allotments with other Creeks at statehood. However, both culturally and biologically Black Indians are not fully accepted by all of their people (208). Womack, however, obviously sees European as well as Black mixed-bloods as Indian. In his letters from Jim Chibbo, Rabbit says, “Only if you believe white always swallows up Red. I think Red stays Red, most ever time, even thrown in with white” (*Red* 24).

While Jimmy sees himself as Creek and is seen as Creek in the community, he struggles as a gay Black Creek to find a lover in the white Oklahoma world where he will not be recognized as Creek. When Jimmy talks with his friend C.A. about placing an advertisement in the dating section of a gay Oklahoma newspaper, they argue about Jimmy’s preference to date Indian men. C.A. argues that Jimmy’s refusal to date white gay men is reverse discrimination. Henry offers that Jimmy’s rejection of white men is not racism: “Jimmy is not rejecting white men because of the color of their skin but because of a world view in which he is always interpreted ‘other.’ Instead, Jimmy acknowledges his place in ‘Indian Country’ rather than interpreting himself and his identity through the larger white gay world” (36-37). In other words, Womack examines and embraces what it is to be gay and a Black Creek within a Creek worldview, rather than immersing these identities in a white, gay, world view, one that sees Jimmy as other and possibly even exotic other. Henry compares Jimmy’s character to Womack’s theory:

“In the same way, it is necessary for Creek literature to be analyzed and engaged by Creek people on its own terms rather than as a side note or chapter on ‘diversity’ in an anthology of European texts” (37). Jimmy becomes a metaphor for Creek literature in all of its variations, but what makes it Creek is the same thing that makes Jimmy Creek and the same thing that makes Jimmy’s identity as well as Creek literature better understood within a Creek perspective.

Womack finds identity more in community than in blood. In Chibbo’s letters, Stijaati gets lost and knocks on a door to get directions, and a Black kid answers. He’d hoped that if he saw somebody familiar, he’d know where he was. “But this young Black kid wasn’t a Black Creek kid who he surely would have known him or his family” (71). Stijaati’s reaction isn’t because the kid is Black, but because he is Black, and he doesn’t recognize him from the Creek community. He can tell if the kid is Creek as much as he can tell if a light skinned kid is Creek, simply by recognizing him from Creek gatherings. As Rabbit says, “There were, and always have been, many different kinds of Creeks” (183). In his interview with Julie Gozen, Womack says that Indian “transform outside influences.” He thinks “it wasn’t like mixing paint. I thought you could add a lot of different colors, and it would still come out red. You don’t need to deny or negate the other colors that were added, the outside influences, but, at the same time, you had damn well better acknowledge that somehow the paint was still beautifully and wonderfully red” (12). Jimmy and Creek literature may incorporate outside influences, and sometimes, to an outsider, might not look Creek, but at the core both remain Creek centered. Womack further illustrates this in his discussion of Joy Harjo’s writing, “Reading her poems without some attention to their Creek content diminishes their

power. Further, the power of Harjo's pan-tribalism cannot be dismissed either" (260).

Jimmy's Black identity cannot be disregarded, for who he is depends on how he is perceived, but his Creek identity, the one which is at the forefront when he thinks about making a home, cannot be removed. That is Jimmy's power.

Lucy's performance as a trumpet player in a Black band is a more subtle reference to the long relationship between Blacks and Oklahoma Indians. It is clear in the stomp dances, call and response, food, stories, and music of Oklahoma Indians that in Black Indian relations a few cultural elements were exchanged. Womack says,

I would very much like to be part of a culture which along with African Americans as its main inventors gave birth to jazz, an argument by the way with a great deal of evidence given the call and response structure of the stomp dance and the pentatonic relationship to the blues scale. . . . I'll claim John Coltrane any day as one of my cousins" (*Art* 110).

Lucy certainly would claim Coltrane as kin as well. Throughout her dialogue she speaks knowingly of all the musicians she admires; but because she is a woman, and at this time, women could only sing with a band on stage, her inability to perform publicly lies in gender rather than race. When Lucy offers to step in for the horn player in a Black band, one of the band members, Walter responds, "Lucille you might could pass as colored, since you're darker than some of these high-yeller horn boys, but you'll never pass for a man" (93). Womack here alludes to the number of Native Americans and Black Indians and African Americans who have played together in clubs and recording studios.

In the world of jazz and blues, the participation of Indians has not often been noted but it has not been restricted based on race. Among Creek musicians two saxophone names stand out: Joy Harjo and Jim Pepper.<sup>39</sup> In Harjo's poem dedicated to Pepper, she writes:

When the moon has stomp-danced with us from one horizon to the/ next,  
such a soft awakening.

Our souls imitate lights in the Milky Way. We've always known/ where  
to go to become ourselves again in the human comedy.

It's the how that baffles. A saxophone can complicate things. ("The  
Place" 51)

In the poem Harjo mentions Creek stomp-dances and the saxophone. Pepper traveled the world playing the saxophone combining both the pow wow sounds of his Kaw father and the stomp ground sounds of his Creek mother. Harjo comments in her note following the poem:

After, all when the African people were forced here for slavery they were  
brought to the traditional lands of the Muscogee peoples. Of course there  
was interaction between African and Muscogees! So it was not strange  
for this particular Creek to pick up a saxophone and find his way to jazz.  
(52)

Nor is it strange for Lucy to pick up the horn inherited from her Uncle. The trumpet is a European machined instrument, an example of what Womack means when he says that Red remains Red. Although the trumpet is European, Lucy does not become any less

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<sup>39</sup> See chapter two for a fuller discussion of Native Americans in jazz and blues.

Creek in her use of it. Lucy, like Joy Harjo and Jim Pepper, has adopted a European made instrument to meet her needs as a Creek musician. Just listen to Jim Pepper's "Witchi Tai To" to hear the saxophone carry the sound of a Creek stomp song.

While Lucy can transform her trumpet to a Creek instrument and play jazz alongside Black musicians, she cannot change her gender. In her girlhood days of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, only female singers could appear on stage. Lucy is forced to pass off her voice, the sound of her horn, as that of a man. She stands behind stage while a man on stage pretends to play. Walter tells Lucy, "Now if you was a singer, Lucy, that would be another story entirely. They'll 'low that. But you can't play a horn on the stand' less you got one in your britches, too" (93). When Walter tells Lucy she'll never pass for a man, she retorts that he has never seen her in overalls (92). Several times throughout the story, Lucy is described wearing overalls: "Lucy was wearing men's overalls with a pencil protector in the pocket. She had on a men's pair of Black-framed glasses" (89). Josh, again traveling through time, describes a younger Lucy:

Her hair is in a short bob, beautiful, Black, and thick, cut in the shape of a helmet that just covers her ears. She looks a little like a 1920s flapper, though she precedes even that generation. If you put overalls on her, she'd be a dead ringer for a young, handsome Indian boy of seventeen. (175)

Lucy plays several important roles in the novel; she is a female family member who reminds Josh and Jimmy that their place at the fire is determined by their female relatives and not their relationship with men, meaning that a man's clan identity is based on his female relatives and not his choice of life partners—male or female. Although Lucy marries and has children, we don't know if Womack meant to bring her sexual identity



into question. Rather, I think, the barriers presented to her as a woman have taught her that passing or hiding are her only means to fulfill her musical passions. Her sometimes sexually ambiguous appearance as well as the necessity to hide behind the back curtain to play a man's role with the band creates a connection to Josh and Jimmy. In her consciousness of hiding and passing her own sexual identity, she identifies with Josh and Jimmy in their need to hide their sexual identity from the Creek community. She also recognizes their feelings for each other before they do because of her observations of Tarbie and Seaborn, a gay Creek couple from her childhood.

Neither Josh nor Jimmy feels confident in his role as a gay man within the Creek community because neither has heard the words or stories needed to know their historical place. Also Josh does not yet grasp that he and Jimmy need each other in order to create balance between the Upper and Lower Worlds. And Jimmy, who is searching outside his community for an Indian partner, seems to allow class differences to prevent him from pursuing Josh—although Jimmy later tells Josh he has been waiting for him. It is not until Josh gains control over his flight and finds the right words that he finds his way, and can bring Jimmy along in his flight to the past within *This World*. Lucy learned as a young girl observing Tarbie and Seaborn and through the words of her mother that men who love each other are to be respected. Dave tells Lucy's mother that his "Uncle Tarbie comes down to the stomp dances, and he's always with the same man. The young boys giggle when they see them in camp, but the old ones always frown and tell them to show respect. Mama just said, 'Dave, those two are good men, them old folks are right'" (35). Lucy wants Josh to know this and tries to find a way of addressing it in *This World*. At Jimmy's basketball game, Lucy asks Josh, "What do you think of him?" (95). Josh

cannot yet find the words to respond. Lucy is trying to teach Josh and the next generation that the Creek Nation has withstood much and still stands, and “as long as we got this nation and those square grounds we’ll keep right t on a-going, too. This is what I’m trying to learn my grandchildren” (128) But Lucy remains unsuccessful in teaching Josh until she meets him in flight.

While visiting Lucy at the nursing home, near the end of her life, Josh felt himself lift off the floor: “The words hung just above me in the treetops, but I’d have to fly up there and bring them back down to this world. It was the opposite of diving” (171). Josh begins to see his flight as the reverse of diving, but does not yet see the balance. Lucy, aware of their positions, tries to bring Josh into balance with Jimmy: “Lucy seemed to have her own crazy answer. ‘Jimmy disappeared down a snake hole,’ she said. To this she added, ‘Do you still miss him?’” (171). When Josh is in the Upper World communicating with Lucy in This World, he begins to find his Creek history. In this flight he sees Lucy, and she waves him into the direction where he will see Tarbie and Seaborn for himself. She has seen them and cannot communicate that to Josh in This World, but in the Upper World Josh can move through space and time and find them for himself. They are his legacy that he never knew: “something broke in my mind and came flooding in on me. Those men loved each other. They loved me. I knew if I ran fast enough. I could tell my story before I floated away, share the good news before I lost it” (180). Josh now knows the respect of the old folks for Tarbie and Seaborn and their respect for Josh and Jimmy. Womack stresses the importance of knowing the ancestors, either through story or imagination. “There are two levels to following the ancestor’s migration: the way the Creator, the Maker of Breath, draws one into such a journey

beyond one's own will or control, and the way one creates the journey oneself by imagining those who journeyed before (*Red* 227). When Josh travels in time back to the camp of Seaborn and Tarbie, he realizes that the two men are part of the grounds because of their female relatives. They can be together and not have wives, but they must have female family. Josh observes, "That's how Tarbie and Seaborn, two men together, fit in; it was through the women with them. They didn't need wives, but nothing at the grounds could work without the women doing their part" (221). As the Upper World and the Lower World come into focus for Josh, he realizes that he can find balance with Jimmy. Jimmy is in search of an Indian man to love and one who sees and loves him as an Indian. He does not look within his own community or within the stories of his own community where he will find gay Creek men loving each other. Josh can't understand that himself or share the words with Jimmy until Lucy leads him to Tarbie and Seaborn, and he accepts the love these men have for Josh as a gay Creek man.

*Red on Red* stresses the values of examining Indian literary works from a tribally specific point of view, while arguing the fluid nature of culture through time. Despite or perhaps because of outside cultures, red always remains red. Womack is perhaps one of the first writers of mixed blood characters, particularly Black Indians, who avoids the trope of the tragic mixed blood, torn between two races. While Josh and Jimmy struggle through adolescence as they examine their place in a homophobic community, both boys stand solidly rooted in their Creek identities. Womack's novel differs in his depiction of two boys whose mixed blood and sexual identities do not destroy them but allow them to feel their contribution to the tribal community and to build a loving relationship.

*Drowning in Fire* is both beautifully brutal and powerfully hopeful in its honesty as

Womack peels the layers of jazz music, community identity, and African American Creek mixed bloods. As they recognize their place within the Creek nation, Jimmy and Josh dance to the shaking of the women's turtle shells and perhaps in the background of that rhythm they hear the wind, Lucy's horn, and the sound of the whippoorwill.

## Conclusion

## Common Ground: Let the Music Start

Imagine Miss Winters on stage maybe playing a John Coltrane piece. Thomas joins her—gotta have a lead singer. Next hear the sound of Big Mom’s flute as she leads Lucy from behind the curtain riffing on her horn in full view of the audience. Robert Johnson starts to blow his harp, and Craig Womack begins picking his guitar. Joy Harjo’s sax improvises. In the distance on the stomp grounds, the head man begins his call, then Jimmy and Josh, along with the other Creek men holler back their response, with the sound of women’s turtle shells— *shuguta*, shuguta, shuguta. An African American, Native American, Black Indian blues matrix pulls together their shared lives and cultures.

It’s an amazing sound of percussion, the call and response of the instruments and voices. Hear other voices responding to the call. Radmilla Cody (Navajo African American) who won the Miss Navajo competition for her fluency in the Navajo language, her weaving, work with sheep, and other Navajo traditions, demonstrates that she is a Navajo woman. She is now producing CD’s with her beautiful voice and talent for song writing. At the University of Chicago Raymond Fogelson and Terry Straus began in 1999 teaching a course on “Black Indians.” Joined later by Tiya Miles, they developed an anthology: *Race, Roots, and Relations*. The book is a collection of student and faculty writing from diverse perspectives and voices. Tiya Miles, in her introduction to the book, writes:

[The anthology] illuminates the multiple sites of African and Native American diasporic displacement and dispersal, highlights the circuitous

routes of cultural transformations, and reveals the complexities of public performance as a space of exploitation, resistance, and negotiation. . . .

They boldly confront a set of dilemma that are not uncommon in the study of African Americans, Native Americans, and Black Indians. (4)

The dilemma Miles refers to involves the future study of African Americans, Native Americans, and Black Indian relations. The first problem is reconstructing a history that speaks to this relationship.

I hope that more students find themselves in their textbooks. I hope that by the time my grandchildren, the oldest of whom started kindergarten this year, leave high school, they see evidence of the relationship between African Americans and Native Americans. I hope that they will hear from teachers that Indians were slaves, that Indians befriended Blacks, that Indians enslaved Blacks, and that they will find images in their books more insightful than the image of Blacks and Indians that their uncle found in his world history book.

The second issue lies in the ambiguities of language regarding Black Indians and African Americans living in Indian communities. As Jack Forbes' work indicates, the language found in the historic documents often creates more confusion than clarity.

While studies are still coming forth, the relationships of African Americans and Black Indians living in tribal communities is also foggy, perhaps because of sentimental hopes that the slave experience and other relationships between African Americans and Native Americans might have been less dreadful than either's relationships with Europeans.

There is also a dark history here of not only the enslavement of both Indians and Blacks, but also the enslavement of Blacks by Indians. And for that reason, we have to recognize

that while Alice Walker wants to embrace all of her identities, some African Americans choose not to acknowledge their oppressors, Euro-American or Native American.

While Craig Womack states that it's been too many years to suddenly disenfranchise the Freedmen, others will argue that while enfranchising them in the first place was the right thing to do, it was inequitable compared to the termination of slavery with Euro-American slaveholders who did not adopt slave into their communities. These are not easy questions with simple answers. Miles reminds her readers that African Americans were used as the labor that aided colonization. She points out that "This fact challenges us to continually confront the distressing dynamics of power that often exist in the comparative and intersectional histories of Native Americans and African Americans" (5).

While the prospects of reconstruction seem daunting and impossible, Houston Baker's suggestion for African Americans is deconstruction:

Fixity is a function of power. Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional. The "placeless," by contrast, are translators of the nontraditional. Rather than fixed in the order of cunning Grecian urns, their lineage is fluid, nomadic, transitional. Their appropriate mark is a crossing sign at the junction" (202).

Baker is, of course, referring to the motion of the blues, the inspiration, the necessity to keep moving, keep moving on, to improvise through the blues through the troubles and find some kind of twist for that third line. Craig Womack wonders if the Creek Confederacy can be sung back together and Houston Baker believes that the "Black

Aesthetic generation was the first paradigmatic community to demonstrate the efficacy of the vernacular for deciphering—or, far more accurately, enciphering--AMERICAN” (112). In the figuration of the blues, that began with many tribal people coming together to share their stories and music, the Creek Confederacy as well as America could be sung together.

I have brought together three different voices to demonstrate how the relationships of Native Americans and African Americans have influenced African Americans, Native Americans, and Black Indians through signifying, call and response and the blues. It is merely the first four bars, if even that. It is a beginning that is in motion. It signifies on the works of all of these writers with various responses and twists. And in the tradition of signifying it now calls for a response, for an act of imagination, for the sound of a horn improvising with such power that it can't hide behind the stage, but will respond and build a succession of responses, creating a healing fusion of voices.



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