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William Apess and Sherman Alexie: Imagining Indianness in (Non)Fiction

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WILLIAM APRESS AND SHERMAN ALEXIE: IMAGINING INDIANNESS IN
(NON)FICTION

by

GABRIEL M. ANDREWS

Under the Direction of Dr. Audrey Goodman

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the notion that early Native American autobiographical writings from such authors as William Apess provide rich sources for understanding syncretic authors and their engagement with dominant Anglo-Christian culture. Authors like William Apess construct an understanding of what constitutes Indianness in similar and different ways to the master narratives produced for Native peoples. By studying this nonfiction, critics can gain a broader understanding of contemporary Indian fiction like that of Sherman Alexie. The similarities and differences between the strategies of these two authors reveal entrenched stereotypes lasting centuries as well as instances of bold re-signification, a re-definition of Indianness. In analyzing these instances of re-signification, this paper focuses on the performance of re-membering, the controversy of assimilation/authenticity, accessing audience, the discourse of Indians as orphans, and journeys to the metropolis.

INDEX WORDS: William Apess, Sherman Alexie, Native American, Indian, Literature, Indianness, Survivance, Pequot, Coeur d'Alenes, Re-membering, Remembering, Assimilation, Authenticity, Accessing audience, Orphan, Polis

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Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

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2010

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For Ellis

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FIGURE 1 Andrew Jackson Lithograph

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1. Re-membering Swamps and Horses

William Apess, a Pequot, Methodist preacher, Native American¹ rights activist, orator, and writer from the early 1800s, concluded the penultimate chapter of his 1831 autobiography *A Son of the Forest* with a remarkably rich episode about losing his way while traveling to visit his father in Colrain, Massachusetts.

[I] concluded to continue on, as I expected to reach his house by two o'clock in the morning. Unfortunately, I took the wrong road and was led into a swamp. I thought I was not far from the main road as I fancied that I heard teams passing on the other side of the swamp; and not being aware of the dangerous situation in which I was placed, I penetrated into the labyrinth of darkness with the hope of gaining the main road. At every step I became more and more entangled – the thickness of the branches above me shut out the little light afforded by the stars, and to my horror I found that the further I went, the deeper the mire; at last, I was brought to a dead stand. (42)²

Apess employed no shortage of Christian imagery, especially that of its traditional privileging of lightness and day over darkness and night. The episode continues, “I was so amazed; what to do I knew not; shut out from the light of heaven – surrounded by appalling darkness – standing on uncertain ground – and having proceeded so far that to return, if possible, were as ‘dangerous as to go over’” (42). The passage reads as a parable, for in his struggle to maintain his Christian

¹ Specific tribal names should take precedence whenever possible; however, no definite term to signify indigenous peoples of America as a whole has been settled. Therefore, I intend to use “Native” or “Native American” when discussing William Apess as he professed to prefer although rarely followed (10). Sherman Alexie, the other author featured in this study, uses “Indian,” and I will employ this term for discussing his work. In instances of overlapping the two authors, my choices are rhetorical.

² All quotations from Apess’s writing hail from *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot*. Barry O’Connell edited this edition in 1992, sparking a minor flurry of academic attention to Apess’s life and work.

faith, he often faltered. Mimicking the popular Jeremiad conversion narratives, Apess, after an initial religious enlightenment, wrestled with what he considered corrupting weaknesses: running away from his indentured servitude, abusing alcohol, gambling, and avoiding his calling to preach to his people.³

This was the hour of peril. [...] I raised my heart in humble prayer and supplication to the father of mercies, and behold he stretched forth his hand and delivered me from this place of danger. Shortly after I had prayed the Lord set me free, I found a small piece of solid earth, and then another, so that after much difficulty I succeeded in once more placing my feet upon dry ground. (42)

The traditional symbolism of the uncivilized swampland veiled in darkness as well as the unsure footing representing temptation and falter make for an accessible Christian parable. Apess came from a life of intermittent sin to a life of devotion in which he would preach to his “brethren.”⁴ As if to ensure that his audience read the swamp scene as religious allegory, Apess returned to the topic in his next chapter. This final chapter of the autobiography opens with his renewed passion with Methodist meetings in Colrain. From there, Apess expressed hesitation and doubt in the legitimacy of his calling to exhort. He gained inspiration from a dream in which he traveled “through a *miry* place in a dark and dreary way” (44 *my italics*). After difficult travel, his path opens on a plain “in which the sun shone with perfect brightness” (44). An angel comes into sight and reads from the Gospel of John on the topic of preaching. Clearly, if the parable of the swamp failed to achieve its purpose, the dream both replays his point to the audience and initiates his public life.

³ See Bizzell, Patricia for a study of his use of the Jeremiad form.

⁴ “Brethren” being a term that Apess used not just for his fellow Christians but more so to refer to his fellow Indians.

On the topic of the original swamp parable, Barry O'Connell rightly points out that Apess may be playing with irony in this passage. In American literature as well as common stereotypes, Native Americans stayed connected to nature in a state of savagery (O'Connell lii). The noble savages depicted in myriad novels, stories, and essays, such as those of James Fennimore Cooper or Washington Irving,⁵ would never have difficulty navigating swampland or a thick forest, day or night. The presumption that Apess traveled in the region at some point before magnifies the disrupted expectation.⁶ Apess may well have been chafing up against the expectations of his readers.

O'Connell welcomes a further allegorical reading of this passage as well. Apess lost in the wilderness signifies Native Americans as a whole lost from the dominant culture's consciousness, especially in the Northeast where Indians had been stricken from the annals of history despite their continued presence albeit within the far margins of society. The forest and swamp symbolically swallowed up the Natives completely. Furthermore, Apess lost in the wilderness signifies a disconnection with his cultural heritage (O'Connell lii). The latter observation rings true when considering the rest of Apess's autobiography. Born in the "back settlements" away from a reservation in a wooded area near Colrain, Massachusetts, he came up without the Pequot or another tribe's community knowledge (4). At the age of four, the aldermen of Colchester bound Apess out to indentured servitude under white neighbors. Apess remained throughout his youth under the care of white families in which the discourse of savagism⁷ conceptualized his view of Native Americans entirely. The Furmans, his first foster

⁵ Apess borrowed from Irving's *Sketchbook* for a section of the Appendix to *Son of the Forest*.

⁶ One can only speculate the extent to which Apess spent time with his estranged family in Colrain or elsewhere. He had been left with grandparents and became a ward of the state resulting in indentured servitude with three different families. Only on a few occasions does Apess directly mention time spent with his father.

⁷ I use the term savagism in the same sense outlined by Roy Harvey Pearce's influential work *Savagism and Civilization* (reissued in 1988). America forged American identity and a presumed destiny based on their study and understanding the savage, backward nature of Indians.

family, used the threat of sending him away “among the Indians into the dreary woods” to control Apess’s behavior (10). Apess displays the extent of this in his story about berry picking. While Apess and several of the Furman family members had taken to the woods to gather berries, he stumbled across a number of women out partaking in the same task. Not knowing them and observing their complexions to be as dark as Natives, he fled in terror, agitating Mr. Furman – only to be embarrassed when shown his error (10-11). Apess’s lack of Native contact severed him from his heritage and culture at a young age. He attributed his irrational fear to numerous stories of Native cruelty and violence towards whites (11). Returning to the swamp scene, O’Connell accurately reads the passage as a disconnection between Apess and his culture and heritage as well as a perpetuation of the dominant ideology concerning the vanishing Native American, bound to either be assimilated or, more likely, just die out.

However, Apess’s swamp scene ended with salvation. Through prayer and determination Apess regained solid ground and continued on. He completed his conversion to Methodism, and from there lived a public life of preaching. But as New England history shows us, the occurrence at the swamp holds another layer of significance, one representing not just a devotion to Methodism but a devotion to Native rights and identity.

Swamplands provide a key setting in William Apess’s knowledge of Native history in New England, knowledge that he gained solely from the accounts of white historians. For example, Apess had some knowledge of the history of relations between the colonists and the Pequot tribe. He certainly knew that in May of 1637 after pitching camp in the nearby swamplands, English colonists under the command of John Mason along with recruited Narragansett and Mohegan warriors attacked Fort Mystic, one of two Pequot strongholds in Connecticut. The Pequot tribe, the tribe with which Apess identified, was the first to suffer the

violent advances of English settlers poised to gain vast tracts of land in Connecticut and consequently control trade. After a brief attempt at combat, the English forces torched the wooden fortress killing six or seven hundred warriors, women, and children. The surrounding English force gunned down any Natives who made attempts to exit the burning palisades. The English distributed the few survivors to neighboring tribes and others to colonies in the Carribean as slaves (Cave 122-167).⁸ Despite not growing up within his tribe's community, Apess had an awareness of the atrocities in colonial history, especially the fate of his own Pequots. In the substantial appendix to his autobiography *A Son of the Forest*, Apess retells the terroristic acts of violence on the Pequot women and children.

“Our soldiers,” as the historian piously observes, “being resolved by God’s assistance to make a final destruction of them,” the unhappy savages being hunted from their homes and fortresses, and pursued with fire and sword, a scanty but gallant band, the sad remnant of the Pequot warriors, with their wives and children, took refuge in a *swamp*. [...] Some few broke through the beseigers and escaped into the woods; “the rest were left to the conquerors, of which many were killed in the *swamp*. [...] When the day broke on this handful of forlorn, but dauntless spirits, the soldiers we are told, entered the *swamp*, saw several heaps of them sitting close together, upon whom they discharged their pieces. [...] Many more were killed and sunk into the *mire*, and never were minded more by friend or foe. (67 my italics)⁹

⁸ For an extensive account of the Pequot War as a whole see Cave.

⁹ Apess took this passage directly from page *XVI* of the preface to Elias Boudinot’s *A Star in the West* published in 1816. Apess gave no credit to his sources. Plagiarism of this nature came as little surprise in this time period.

Similarly, Apess had knowledge of King Phillip's War, which began forty years after the near annihilation of the Pequot tribe. A decisive English victory occurred in December 1675 when the English militia forces entered the Great Swamp in present day Rhode Island. The English continued their old strategies and burned the Narragansett fort slaughtering any survivors who attempted to escape the palisade walls. Metacom, known as King Philip to English settlers, organized Native attacks and resistance to the English colonists during this war. King Philip died in August 1676 while fighting Captain Church's forces in a swamp near Mount Hope in present day Rhode Island (Lepore 173). Apess claimed ancestry to King Philip and held the sachem as an American hero.¹⁰ Apess delivered his *Eulogy on King Philip* twice in January 1836 at the Odeon Theater in Boston. In this eulogy, Apess attempted to rehistoricize King Philip and the conflicts between the Natives and colonists, portraying King Philip as a hero and predecessor of the same ideals manifested later in George Washington.¹¹

Understanding the attitudes held by Anglo and Native Americans regarding swamps gives the reader historical background to understand the complexity of Apess's scene. Swamps held utility for Natives before and in the early stages of contact with the English colonists. Native peoples stored food there, secured innocents there during times of war, and used them as places to make stands against the English. Increase Mather claimed, "every Swamp is a Castle to them" (Lepore 86). Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" published in 1824 provides a simple and thorough example of the contrasting white opinions about swamps. Irving places his version of the Faust legend in a dark swamp outside of Boston. The embankments of an old Indian fort long since destroyed provide the ideal allegorical landscape for the Devil to roam and conduct his business of hiding plunder and tempting individuals to trade their souls for

¹⁰ For more on this improbable claim of ancestry and the erroneous identification of King Philip as a Pequot, see Velikova.

¹¹ See Vogel.

gains of sinful greed. Decades after any serious Indian military resistance, Irving characterizes, not without sarcasm, the opinions of whites contemporary to Apess: “the common people had a bad opinion of it [the swamp], from the stories handed down from the times of the Indian wars, when it was asserted that the savages held incantations here and made sacrifices to the evil spirit” (Irving 218-219). The swamp signified darkness, sin, heathenism, and a bloody history.

Considering the importance of swamps to Apess’s consciousness of Native history in New England, the swamp scene in his autobiography takes on not only a religious conversion allegory but also issues of politics and identity. Apess wrote about the swamp similarly to the way colonists did: uncivilized terrain of darkness, heathenism, and savagery. His rhetoric makes it tempting to dismiss him as an inauthentic Native voice lost to Christian evangelism.¹²

However, readers must remember that Apess demonstrated next to no knowledge of pre-contact Native culture in his works. He gave us no evidence of speaking the Pequot language or valuing any of their specific pre-contact customs. Welburn, in his enlightening study of swamp discourse, errs in describing Apess’s conversion to Christianity as “erasing traditional awareness,” for we have no evidence that he ever had any traditional knowledge outside of his reading of texts from the perspective of the colonist (Welburn 98). In this light, we may understand Apess as creating an identity in a post-contact environment that had deprived him of his cultural heritage. Apess created a twofold, hybrid identity so often described in postcolonial environments, one with connection (quite limited especially early in his career) to his cultural roots as well as appropriated knowledge from the colonizer, in Apess’s case Christian Methodism.

¹² For more on the question of authenticity, see the next chapter of this study. Most recent scholarship rejects the critique of an authentic/inauthentic voice. See Carlson, O’Connell, and Warrior. In the words of David Carlson, “contact changes everything” (70).

In analyzing identities like Apess's, many critics use the term *survival* to help understand the motivation to appropriate from colonial dominant ideologies.¹³ However, in the spirit of such works as Elvira Pulitano's *Toward a Native American Critical Theory*, the use of specific Native critical lenses and terminologies work to decolonize and better suit readings of Native texts. Apess's section about the swamp and the future life that it foreshadows exemplifies Gerald Vizenor's increasingly popular idea of survivance.¹⁴ Apess's passage "creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry" (Vizenor, *Survivance* 1). Apess's appropriation of Methodism may seem as an act of survival, a means to survive in a marginalized way when colonialism continued and continues to erase pre-contact cultures. However, in addition to his Christian conversion described allegorically in the swamp scene, Apess simultaneously proclaimed himself a Pequot in, what we might call today, an exhibition of survivance. The swamp that provided the setting for great numbers of Native deaths during their resistance to colonial forces did not claim William Apess, and he escaped the swamp to live a life both of exhorting as a Methodist and as a Pequot fighting for Native rights. He lived on after the devastation of the Pequot population, and the arc of his career included advocating for sovereignty in the Mashpee Revolt of 1833 and writing and orating against colonial versions of history and the suppression of Native rights. Applying the term survivance to William Apess shifts the connotation "not toward loss but renewal and continuity into the future rather than memorializing the past" (Kroeber 25). In the last twenty years of scholarship, William Apess has become one of those keyholes in the American literary canon that, when looked into, opens up a room of further inquiry into viewing the resistance to dominant, oppressive ideology and discovering silenced histories.

¹³ For instance, Andrews, Evans, and Fitz liberally use the term when discussing the writings of Sherman Alexie. Donaldson and Vernon use the term for William Apess.

¹⁴ *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (1994) popularized Vizenor's concept.

Reading the swamp scene in this manner shows Apess writing about an epiphanic moment with cultural memories providing an underlying theme. This process, often referred in critical writing as re-membering, uses the presence of cultural memories to provide a backdrop for contemporary definitions of selfhood. This is the first in a series of connections that I hope to make between the autobiographical works of William Apess and the contemporary novel *Reservation Blues* (1995) by Sherman Alexie. My intentions are two-fold. First, I want to show how the life and the written works produced by William Apess in the early 1800s provide one common narrative and character structure for future writing by and about Native Americans. I plan to show that more than 160 years after Apess, Sherman Alexie, a Spokane / Coeur d'Alene writer who imagines contemporary Indian experience and identity through his fiction, creates characters that use many similar methods of appropriation and strategies for critiquing the culture of power as Apess did. Both Apess and Alexie's characters have similar anxieties and coping mechanisms. After close readings, it becomes evident that the two authors share a great deal in how they write conflict, experience, identity, and appropriation/abrogation of dominant ideologies. Literary critics can learn a great deal about contemporary Native American fiction, plots, and characterization by visiting and revisiting Native autobiographical writing from the likes of William Apess, Samson Occom, Elias Boudinot, George Copway, and others. The way American Indians imagine their own identities in autobiographical writing, especially hybridized or mixedblood identities, can provide critical tools for the analysis of fictional Indian identities. This study rests on the premise that autobiography lends itself to criticism in similar ways that fiction does. Autobiography¹⁵ may not just be seen as history or fact but as proclamations and interpretations of one's self and one's experiences, and therefore open to a variety of perceptions and influence from discourses. In other words, autobiography is "performative," an action

¹⁵ See Austin, Carlson, and Searle.

shaping reality. Identity has no essence or truth within a subject. Identity is a fluid and ever-evolving interaction with ideologies.¹⁶

However, my intentions here are not to further a poststructuralist idea that the author is dead, void of creative agency because of the confines of culture and discourse. I am also aware that comparative efforts of this sort will be vulnerable to criticisms of essentialism, and I do not wish to claim a pan-Indian experience when it comes to imagining Indian identity. I remain cognizant of the endless possibilities of experiences for tribes and individuals. In fact, the second effort of this study will be to locate Alexie's and Apress's creative agency. I hope to show the different ways that Apress and Alexie conduct the crucial act of re-signification. In other words, which grand narratives about Indian identity upheld by dominant culture did Apress and Alexie challenge and re-write. I will offer answers to the questions: How did Apress and Alexie confront cultural memories and to what effect? Does the binary of authenticity/assimilation apply to reading these Native authors? How do these two authors engage an audience as outsiders in similar and different ways? How do these authors perpetuate and challenge the historical narrative of Native Americans needing Anglo America as a father figure? How does a journey to the city end Apress's life but open up endless possibilities of difference in Alexie's novel?¹⁷

¹⁶ Arnold Krupat in his *For Those Who Came After*: explains an approach to Native autobiographical texts that is also literary. Krupat asserts that "whatever the historical or anthropological uses to which Native American texts may be put, the particular complexity of their mode of production seems a sufficient if not necessary reason to foreground the signifier and justify a literary reading. We note, thus, a complication in the makeup of the signifier that results not only from the nature of writing in general but from the particularities of history" (Krupat 23).

¹⁷ At a time when many scholars do not see even the possibility of any academic project conducted apolitically, I will use this opportunity to identify myself as an Anglo American writing from a privileged position. Although I do not identify with an oppressed group or as a Native American, my interest in and critique of Native texts grew from not only exposure to Native literatures in academic settings but also growing up in Western New York. I travelled to and from college every semester through a Seneca Indian Reservation. It seemed an annual occurrence that the Seneca Nation became newsworthy as some proposal came up in the local legislature to limit some right or land possession, sparking resistance. News organizations portrayed the Seneca people as politically irrational and barbaric demonstrators for picketing and burning tires on highways that ran through their lands.

For now, let us return to the existence of cultural memory in Native texts. Just as The Pequot War and King Phillip's War provided cultural memories that existed in the background of William Apess's understanding of himself as a Native American, the Yakima War produced cultural memories for Sherman Alexie's characters in *Reservation Blues*. The creation and near national success of an all-Indian rock band drives the plot of the novel, but before this plotline evolved, the narrator introduces the reader to Big Mom. She is the most "traditional" Indian in the story and also one of the only elders on the reservation who receives any narrative attention. She lives up on a secluded hill, and the reservation has a collection of rumors attesting to Big Mom's supernatural abilities despite nearly all of her interactions with the characters involving simple logic.¹⁸ 134 years before the main action of the novel takes place, the narrator describes a scene in which Big Mom hears horses scream, a scream unimaginable before the white men's presence (9). Big Mom descends the mountain and witnesses blue uniformed soldiers executing horses. The last colt seeks escape only to be shot with a pistol between the eyes.

With this passage, Alexie alludes to an event toward the conclusion of the Yakima War just after the Battle of Four Lakes that crippled Indian forces in 1858.¹⁹ Shortly after this decisive victory occurred, the US Army, traveling toward the Coeur d'Alenes near the border of present-day Washington and Idaho, came across approximately 800 Indian horses. After overtaking the nearby group of Palouse Indians who owned the substantial herd, General Wright selected 130 of the horses for the army's use and slaughtered the rest. The army corralled the colts and killed them with blows to the head and gunshots (Trafzer 89).

As Clifford Trafzer assessed the effect of the army's actions, "the horse shootings left an unforgettable impression upon the Indians. What nature of mankind, they asked, could kill

¹⁸ See Belcher for Alexie's use of magical realism and the association of magic with the West as apposed to a product of the colonized.

¹⁹ See Trafzer for a thorough historical account.

horses-stallions, geldings, mares, and colts - in such a coldblooded manner?" (Trafzer 90). The narrator of *Reservation Blues* substantiates this. "Big Mom heard the gunshot, which reverberated in her DNA" (9). This phrase functions as hyperbole, but also suggests a deeper effect on her psyche, one that will be passed, as DNA is passed, to future generations. Big Mom viewed this memory as a cultural memory. When she watched the horses fall, she saw "the future and the past" (10). After mourning the horses' deaths, Big Mom constructed a flute from a rib of the most beautiful horse, which she played every morning. The daily flute playing, its repeatability, a third example, suggests the nature of the event as a cultural memory.

The horses as cultural memory prove to be a malleable symbol. At first the horses represented struggling Indians, held down by circumstance: "The colt shivered as the officer put his pistol between its eyes and pulled the trigger. The colt fell to the grass of the clearing, to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern, to the cold, hard coroner's table in a Veteran Hospital" (10). The past and present merge as the falling horse becomes an Indian suffering from alcohol abuse and an Indian veteran dying in a hospital. The cold, hard coroner's table suggests a death lacking glory and prestige. A shift occurs right after this scene, and the horses and their screams manifest themselves throughout history as musical legends like "Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Marvin Gaye" (10). These connections to pop culture, like all of Alexie's pop culture allusions throughout the novel, appear with purpose. The public remembers Joplin and Hendrix for their excesses as well as their musical art. The connection can be made back to the excesses of alcohol abuse mentioned in the horse slaughtering scene and elsewhere in the novel. Much of the blunt social commentary throughout the novel connects to Gaye's social commentary in his music. The horses and their popular music manifestations take on the image of tortured souls with a message against oppression, and as the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota asserts later,

“Music is a dangerous thing” (12). From this passage, the reader sees that the cultural memory has been expanded beyond the tribes of the Northwest to include mainstream culture in the form of chart topping rock artists. Apess’s cultural memory in the swamp scene is inclusive as well, for he brings Anglo Christian faith to a place of high importance for Native peoples in the Northeast. However, in the same sense it is a personal and deeply codified epiphany for Apess. The horse slaughtering in Alexie’s novel blends Indian figures and icons of popular music. Its scope is broader; its exploration of the commonalities of two cultures is more ambitious. The past converges with the present. Indian converges with white and black. The famous converge with the forgotten, all in a shared human experience.²⁰

The event of the horse slaughter continues as an undercurrent throughout the novel and expands to include other related allusions. Making up the main plot in *Reservation Blues*, three Spokane Indians, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor Joseph, and Junior Polatkin, and two Flathead Indian sisters, Chess and Checkers Warm Water, start an all-Indian rock band that shoots to local fame before fizzling out from losing a chance at signing with a major record company in New York. Before the meltdown in New York, the band traveled to Seattle to compete in a battle of the bands competition. The band felt intimidated by the big city, and the narrator allowed us into Junior Polatkin’s dream as he slept in the band’s van. Junior’s dream began with horses, one of which he rode as he led a group of warriors along the Columbia River (142). The group became deeply agitated after they spotted a steamship that they could not attack as it remained anchored out of reach. This brief allusion continues the undercurrent of the Yakima war cultural

²⁰ Alexie uses this cultural memory as an undercurrent throughout the novel, yet this cultural memory has bearing outside of his fiction. *Indian Country Today* ran a story in September 2008 that reported a memorial service commemorating the horse slaughter. A Umatilla tribal member and professor at Washington State University, Ron Pond, worked to organize the event. The article opens with a quote from Pond: “We come together to remember those who gave up their lives. They’ll know we haven’t forgotten them. They are just like our relatives, so we’re here today because it’s been a long time – 150 years – since that time.” Alexie’s inclusion of this memory in the psyche of Big Mom is not an overestimation.

memories. The band's apprehensive contact with the big city of Seattle, specifically the "number of white people," connects to the tribe's first and violent contact with encroaching, militant settlers. The steamship in Junior's dream is one of the steamships that churned up the Columbia River in search of rebellious Indians. With irony, the steamship named *Spokane* opened fire unprovoked on numerous Indian settlements along the Columbia River causing destruction (Trafzer 123).

As Junior's dream progressed, shots rang out, and he heard voices from seemingly every direction. As soldiers overtook the party of warriors, one soldier shot Junior's horse between the eyes. General George Wright assisted Junior to his feet. Wright, along with General Sheridan, charged Junior with the murders of settlers. Junior pled not guilty, but Sheridan insisted on his guilt and sentenced him to death by hanging. In exchange for his life, Sheridan offered Junior a pen to sign a document. He refused, and the soldiers executed him (143-145). Alexie improvised on the Spokane history to write Junior's dream. In early September 1858, just before the horse massacre, Chief Polatkin of the Spokane and a small collection of warriors called on General Wright to negotiate for peace. Junior's dream signifies a certain Pelouse Indian in Chief Polatkin's company who, on being recognized as an attacker of settlers, received a charge of murder from General Wright. Wright hanged the Pelouse Indian "without trial or testimony from others" (Trafzer 89). Additionally, the refusal to sign the document, presumably a treaty, in Junior's dream may be an improvisation on the one-sided treaty that the Spokane tribe did sign shortly after the above cited illegitimate execution.

In *Reservation Blues*, the horses and the cultural memories do not just crop up in the dream world but also in the waking life. Most instances are brief one-clause paragraphs: "The Horses screamed" (193). Scott Andrews likens these sporadic occurrences to a Greek theater

chorus (Andrews 148). Their screams offer commentary on the events that they interrupt, despite the fact that the participating characters cannot hear the screams. However, Andrews admits that particular screams present problems when attempting to interpret their meaning. Andrews can only offer suggestions for the horse screams in such scenes as the climactic New York record company audition that fails miserably for the all-Indian band Coyote Springs. My interpretation of the repetitious horse screams involves a risky writing strategy on Alexie's part. The horse screams fall in with Alexie's other postmodern strategies of incorporating vast amounts of popular culture to create relentless parody and criticism of mainstream media. By infusing key scenes and punctuating key dialogue with horse screams, Alexie ironically plays on the cinematic portrayal of Indians. The timing of symbols found in nature showing up at the most opportune times to play up the Indian's connection to nature, like an eagle screech or a horse whiney, pervades in movie and television representations of Indians. Oliver Stone's movie *The Doors* (1991) uses a recurring wounded Indian image complete with close-ups of his eye and close-ups of an Eagle eye screeching. This film provides an excellent example of what Alexie parodies.²¹ Alexie helps the reader to this conclusion by his other numerous allusions to cinema and television including *Dances with Wolves*, *Werewolf of London*, and *The Lone Ranger*. Blunt statements about Whites and Indians learning about Indians from television and movies appear

²¹ Alexie's characters hate those who pretend to be Indian because of some new age fad speaking to the connection of Indians to nature or their supposed mystical, philosophical knowledge that they have because of this connection. For this reason, they express hatred for Jim Morrison, singer of the American rock band The Doors, on numerous occasions. "[Big Mom] never answered the door when the live Jim Morrison came knocking. She won't even answer the door when the dead Jim Morrison comes knocking" (201). Alexie writes with such ferocity against people and ideas, like "Jim-fucking-Morrison," not just because of today's broader freedom from censorship but because an author such as William Apress wrote from a position of critique requiring that he not offend too much those he was critiquing, his audience, Anglo Christians (207). Alexie writes 160 years later from a position in which he does not fear offending certain audience members because he does not have to identify with the culture of power as much in order to get that audience. Alexie demonstrates the connection of Indian struggles with the struggles of Black Americans, and Black authorship offers a good analogy. Compare the vivid descriptions and blunt diction of Toni Morrison's representations of slavery to those of Fredric Douglass. They correspond to Apress and Alexie nicely in terms of the identification with the audience and level of censorship that comes with it.

frequently (18, 36, 45, 89, 145).²² Alexie takes a considerable creative risk in taking the power behind the horse massacre cultural memory and translating it into a generic cinematic strategy used to portray Indian experience in an unrealistic fashion. William Apess criticized Anglo dominant culture by reflecting Christian doctrines back on the hypocritical actions of Christians throughout his catalog of texts. Alexie borrows to some extent from Christian doctrines but much more liberally from pop culture constructions of Indians. He critiques them and re-writes them, but the ambiguity and complexity of his irony, in this case the cinematic horse whiney, may be lost by the average reader and appear as a simple re-presentation of stereotypes.

The record company's representatives who recruited the band Coyote Springs to audition for a place on the Cavalry Records label present the clearest example of cultural memories leaking into the lives of the characters in *Reservation Blues*. The record label representatives, Phil Sheridan and George Wright, share their names with two military lifers who played critical roles in the subjugation of Indians throughout the United States. Sheridan's and Wright's boss at Cavalry Records happens to be Mr. Armstrong, a more subtle nod to George Custer's middle name. Scott Andrews deftly encapsulates the use of these loaded names. They are "the modern embodiment of a foe Thomas's people have faced for more than a hundred years" (Andrews 146). Presumably, Coyote Springs and maybe the rest of the Spokanes and Flatheads or even Indians all across America had much to gain from the commercial success that may have sprung from the record company's promotion of the band. Along with questions of authenticity, accessing an audience is a topic of the next chapter in this study. Cavalry Records may have connected the characters to an audience that would allow them to truly tell their story. The song lyrics at the beginning of each chapter in *Reservation Blues* constitute some of those stories. As Robert Johnson's guitar tells Thomas, "Y'all need to play songs for your people. They need

²² For a negative review of the cinematic style of *Reservation Blues*, see Bird.

you” (23). However, signing the document ensuring Cavalry Records’s management of Coyote Springs would also have come with a price. Wright, Sheridan, and Armstrong would have worked to exploit and control every detail of the story put forth by the band.

One must turn to examples like William Apess’s texts in order to understand Alexie’s strategies in writing fictional characters. Apess’s re-membering of the colonial violence directed at the Pequot tribe becomes a critical component in the forging of his syncretic identity. Despite major appropriations from Methodist Christianity, Apess retains his people’s past in order to realize a Native consciousness that would develop into an active life devoted to Native rights. This real-life strategy gives credence to the same strategy as it plays out in attempts at mimetic fiction. Alexie’s characters strive to create an identity through the stories of their songs, which can only be fully realized if they incorporate histories as well. In Louis Owens’s *Other Destinies*, a survey of American Indian fiction, he states repeatedly the idea that healthy identities develop in characters when they can imagine and articulate the past, present and future in a coherent manner. No future antithetical to the essentializing discourse of the vanishing, primitive, and inferior Indian can be imagined until the characters confront and unify the past and present. With varying success, Apess and Alexie’s characters strive to do this.

2. Access: the Issue of Authenticity/Assimilation

For readers and critics, a tempting question arises when reading Native American authors or any author in a colonial or postcolonial setting. Is the author more a product of assimilation, mimicry of the colonizer, or is the author more of an authentic voice, holding truer to pre-contact characteristics? Instead of answering the question, many critics dismiss it, preferring to point out the complexity of hybrid voices that explode the binary of assimilation/authenticity. For example, Louis Owens sees “no value in questioning any author’s declaration of Indian” (Owens 255). Susan Bernardin concurs: “interpretative approaches on discourses of authenticity run aground on the shifting grounds of anthropological and romantic language” (Bernardin 162). Unlike critics, the Federal government uses definitions of blood quantum and has relied on biased ethnographic studies to define the existence of a tribal identity or the lack of one. Of all the definitions that counter these questions of authenticity, N. Scott Momaday’s may be one of the most liberal. He thinks of himself as an Indian because at a point in his life he realized the history and the cultural characteristics that his father embodied, and this realization caused a reaction: “I determined to find out something about these things and in the process I acquired an identity; and it is an Indian identity, as far as I am concerned” (Owens 13). Apess lived this definition.

Regarding critical reception of William Apess and the question of authenticity, most recent critics have made Arnold Krupat, a pioneer in the study of Native American autobiographies and other Native texts, somewhat of a whipping post. Critics tend to orient their critical approaches as antithetic to Krupat’s unequivocal dismissal of William Apess, especially of Apess’s early works. Krupat deemed Apess’s works as consistent echoes of white Christian

culture, or in his word *salvationism*, which leaves no room for authentic nonwhite voices (Krupat 145).

A sampling of critical reaction will sufficiently prove my point of a small crusade against Krupat's reading.²³ Carolyn Haynes identified Krupat as a subscriber to "cultural insiderism," and argued against concepts of "racial purity or ethnic absolutism" (Haynes 25-26). Instead, Haynes believes

[i]dentity cannot be conceived in terms of ethnicity or any one category alone. Apess's subjectivity is comprised of a variety of dimensions – religious, racial, national, class, gender, etc. – which are not closed, fixed, distinct, or even perpetually in competition with one another but instead are mutually sustaining, interactive, and dialectic. (26)

Laura E. Donaldson, in accordance with Haynes, rejects Krupat's dismissal. Donaldson worked to demonstrate that for many Native Americans Christianity offered a

vehicle not only for asserting traditional forms of cultural authority, but also engaging in new modes of cultural and spiritual expression. In many ways, then, Apess's involvement with Methodism contests the argument that 'when the Native lost his land, he lost his voice as well.' (191)

The academy has much to gain in overruling Krupat and his exclusion of William Apess from the Native American canon.²⁴ If the academy continues to welcome voices such as William Apess, more papers and books are published; more anthologies are compiled; course offerings grow; and Native American Studies departments survive. However, the arguments that

²³ Carlson (91-92) and Gustafson (43), a couple of critics not included in this survey, also position themselves against Krupat.

²⁴ However, throughout his career, Krupat has published more positive and less dismissive analysis of Apess's later works. See Krupat, "William Apess: Storier of Survivance."

call for Apees to be received as a complex hybrid voice worthy of close study to reveal intriguing cultural exchanges are both compelling and responsible.

It will prove helpful to first turn to Alexie's *Reservation Blues* for a theme that will bolster an interpretation of Apees that rejects the demarcation of the assimilation/authenticity binary. Karsten Fitz identifies the power of said theme at the conclusion of her article about Christianity in American Indian novels (12). Throughout *Reservation Blues*, the characters turn to Big Mom for guidance, which in a sense represents a turn to a more traditional Indian identity, for Big Mom provides the only elder and traditional presence available to the reader and the characters in the novel. Occasionally, Big Mom lends her advice, but she always denies any supernatural abilities or prescience. Big Mom repeatedly replies, "It's up to you. You make your choices" (216). Sometimes her responses come with biting humor:

"[...] you have to leave for New York tomorrow, enit?"

"Don't you know?" Victor asked. "I thought you knew everything."

"I know you're a jerk," Big Mom said and surprised everybody. (213)

The master narrative gives readers the expectation that Big Mom will guide the characters with her traditional wisdom back to a more authentic, traditional, and content mindset, but Big Mom "couldn't teach them everything. She couldn't even stop them if they were going to sign their lives away [to Cavalry Records in New York City]" (214). Her power comes from her constant reminder of their agency. "It's up to you. You make your choices" (216). The ability to make their choices permeates the conclusion of the novel. Big Mom encourages Thomas and Chess to leave the reservation for Spokane if that is their decision. Furthermore, she reminds Victor that he has the choice to forgive the Catholic priest who molested him as a young boy. By forgiving,

Victor will have the power. Big Mom claims that forgiveness is magic (203). Here again, we see that Big Mom's rumored magic or power is simply recognizing the ability to choose.

This ability to choose relates strongly to spirituality, as it did with William Apess. In the spiritual scene discussed in the first chapter, Apess questioned Anglo-Christian symbolism by locating his epiphanic moment in the dark, dangerous swamp historically valued by Indians. In this place of Indian death at the hands of colonialists, Apess attests to his *survivance* in dissolution on Native/Christian identity boundaries. Likewise, in *Reservation Blues* the binary of Traditional/Christian collapses at numerous points in the story. For example, Thomas's mother rocked him to sleep with traditional Spokane Indian songs and sometimes Catholic hymns (22). Junior's funeral offers the fullest example with Big Mom continuing to offer the rest of the characters the possibilities of agency. She brings Father Arnold, the reservation's Catholic priest, to the funeral stating, "you cover all the Christian stuff; I'll do the traditional Indian stuff" (280). In the early stages of the story, Alexie foreshadows Big Mom's receptiveness to the blending of spiritualities by having her spotted walking across Benjamin Pond while singing a rather non-Christian song (27). Big Mom continues to see the application of a variety of faiths in the final scenes of the book. Just as she echoed Jesus with her supposed walk on Benjamin Pond, she echoes Jesus at the communal Spokane feast. With a lack of fry bread to satisfy the hungry and disgruntled Spokane Indians, Big Mom pacifies the crowd by breaking the fry bread in half giving credit to "ancient Indian secrets" (303). Her actions allude to the last supper of Jesus as well as the miracle of feeding the 5,000. We know that Big Mom "ain't Jesus," and she "ain't God" (209). She can simply remind her friends that they can make choices. They can appropriate what they need or want from the dominant culture and from their own cultural history. Louis Owens refers to this as "selective assimilation" (Owens 12). Big Mom's advice

applies to all, for Father Arnold's dreamcatcher ornamented with rosary beads also welcomes white culture to the possibilities of cultural syncretism (254). At times Alexie allows his characters to demonstrate clear and logical wariness toward organized religion and the potential for it to exploit Indian peoples, but at other points he allows the applicability of such doctrines to generate goodness. These possibilities of selective assimilation provide choices that the characters of *Reservation Blues* must learn to make.

Sherman Alexie has not eluded the same questions that critics like Krupat have had for William Apress. These questions include the issue of authenticity but also a question asking if the author has fulfilled "an authorial responsibility to create a communally accepted discourse of the real" (Bernardin 166). In proposing this question, Susan Bernardine, a la Socrates, complicates it with another question: does this obligation even exist? For Gloria Bird in her review of Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, the answer is yes. Bird chafes against the idea "that because someone is Indian what they produce is automatically an accurate representation" (47). Her argument rests on the idea that Alexie's voice fails the authenticity test yet passes for assimilation. Stephen Evans counters Bird's assessment by claiming that her criticisms of the novel's *Indianness* are "personal in nature" (Evans 3). Evans links criticism of Alexie to a broader polarizing "debate over the direction of new Indian fiction" (Evans 3). This debate rests on the question of moving toward assimilation or traditional characteristics. I will continue to develop the point that this binary is arbitrary, counterproductive, and impossible to police.

Despite my theory of this schism, it offers a starting point to begin analyzing the ways authors productively engage with dominant ideology. Reading *Reservation Blues* for the previously discussed theme of agency makes for an apt lens to interpret other Native writers such as William Apress. By taking in Christianity as the mainstay of his identity, assimilation to an

extent has occurred. Judging this action as positive or negative also depends on personal perspective. A Christian might read it as positive despite any Indian or Pequot cultural loss. Gordon Sayre, for a counterexample, reads it negatively. Sayre attributes the appropriation of Christianity to “his inability to learn Pequot culture as a child” (Sayre 15). Only later, according to Sayre, when Apess reconnects with Natives in Mashpee where he participated in one of the only successful Native rights projects in the Northeast during the 19th century, does he learn about his heritage (Sayre 15). Regardless of perspective, we cannot dismiss Apess under the label of an inauthentic case of assimilation. The cultural hybridity found in *Reservation Blues* and the theme of having the agency to appropriate what one needs to thrive and abrogating what one deems unacceptable has pertinence as a way to read William Apess’s identity found in his nonfiction works which he composed more than 160 years earlier.

Publications about Apess, post-Krupat, read Apess’s appropriation of Methodism as a deliberate, discerning action. Apess had exposure to a fair amount of sectarian difference within Christianity. Mrs. Furman of the first family of which Apess was bound out “was attached to the Baptist church and was esteemed as a very pious woman (Apess 9). Judge William Hillhouse and Judge William Williams, Apess’s second and third owners, professed a Presbyterian faith (15, 17). Of the sects that had particular potential influence over him as they were pushed by his masters, none had the lasting effect that Methodism had on him. Apess rejected the Baptist and Presbyterian sects: “I observed and felt that their ways were not like the ways of the Christians” (17). He made his reasons equally plain.

The clearest reason came from a rejection of the restrained liturgy and the privileging of knowledge offered by the Presbyterian practices. Apess applauded Hillhouse’s strict adherence to family prayer and the inclusion of himself in that number; however, he criticized the rote

memorization of the enterprise. “I could fix no value on his prayers” (15). The criticisms continue into his time with the Williams family. Apess admonished the ministers for reading their sermons. The page turning failed to arouse Apess, yet he later felt intense anxiety over his sins, an anxiety that failed to be stoked by his early church attendance.

I thought, as near as I can remember, that the Christian depended on the Holy Spirit’s influence entirely, while this minister depended as much upon his learning. I would not be understood as saying anything against knowledge; in its place it is good, and highly necessary to a faithful preacher of righteousness.

What I object to is placing too much reliance in it, making a god of it. (17)

Early in his life, Apess attained an understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge. He rejected the minister who held his place with his people due to his intellectual knowledge. This understanding of power and knowledge evolved throughout Apess’s writing and political career. In *Son of the Forest*, he admired the Methodist people in long paragraphs, especially their speech: “Their language was not fashioned after the wisdom of men. When the minister preached he spoke as one having authority. The exercises were accompanied by the power of God” (18). Apess worked to shift power from the colonizer and his knowledge to the power he found in god. In *Indian Nullification*, Apess’s history of the Mashpee Revolt for which he actively led, Apess submitted that “exhortation from several of the colored brethren and sisters, in their broken way, [...] often touches the heart of the Indian, more than all the learning that Harvard College can bestow” (255). Apess finds faith, spontaneity, and passion to be attributes more appropriate to the profession of preaching.

Critics additionally root the attractiveness of Methodism to William Apess in the commonality of orality in the Christian sect and Native cultures. Donaldson investigated the link

between the Methodist practice of *ring-shouting* and verbal performance traditions in Native cultures (189). The highly participatory woodland revivals engaged Apess in a way that formal liturgies did not. Her argument gains credence by inspecting lines from Apess's autobiography. He admired the actions in the revival meetings: "His people shouted for joy – while sinners wept" (18). Apess's early indentured servitude prevented him from immersing himself completely in the Methodist community. He *assumed* that he had agency, in this case to attend Methodist meetings.

I thought I had no character to lose in the estimation of those who were accounted great. For what cared they for me? They had possession of the red man's inheritance and had deprived me of liberty; with this they were satisfied and could do as they pleased; therefore, I thought I could do as I pleased, measurably. I therefore went to hear the *noisy Methodists*. (18)

Apess worked for his agency. He consistently escaped and deceived his masters to attend meetings. This struggle for agency continued into adulthood with a battle to be officially ordained a Methodist minister.²⁵ Alexie developed this same theme in *Reservation Blues* as explored earlier in this chapter. Alexie imagines his characters learning to appropriate and abrogate what they saw fit, a valuable lesson still worthy of being taught and elaborated hundreds of years after the first Puritan dominance over Indian peoples.

Possibly even more important to Apess than the orality of Methodism was the issue of access. All critics agree that Methodism attracted disenfranchised people by offering salvation to everyone, not just predetermined chosen ones. Carolyn Haynes explores the difference between

²⁵ According to O'Connell's historical account, Apess had extreme difficulty in becoming ordained in the Methodist Episcopal church and then turned to the Protestant Methodist church (3). The 1829 edition of his autobiography included lengthy criticism of the Methodist Episcopal church for denying him ordination based on race. This reaction and change in faith provides another example of Apess's empowerment, his desire to accept and reject elements of the dominant culture according to his own assessment.

Methodism and other Protestant sects. Elite sects “underscored ritualistic forms of worship, the availability of salvation only to a predetermined elect few, and the ineffectuality of evangelism (Haynes 26). With the differences in tenets, Methodists ignited animosity from other Protestants who marginalized the rebellious sect that threatened the hierarchy of power. Apess was attuned to the position this created for him. He wrote in his autobiography, “About this time the Methodists began to hold meetings in the neighborhood, and consequently a storm of persecution gathered; the pharisee and the worldling united heartily in abusing them” (18). For this reason, Apess found Methodism exceptionally appealing. New England in the early 1800s denied Apess a Pequot identity, so Methodism provided a medium that he could use to enter the culture of power and carve out his own hybrid identity. Furthermore, Methodism allowed him to enter the dominant culture and use the Christian doctrine to criticize the treatment of Natives from a position that was still relatively marginalized.

At the end of the 20th century, we still see a similar structure come out in *Reservation Blues*. Alexie’s characters offer plenty of shrewd criticisms of debilitating government handouts, the exploitation of Indian identity in popular culture, and racism, but their comments remain unheard by an audience outside of the reservation. Alexie imagines a way for his Spokane characters to enter the dominant culture and criticize it from within. Apess had Methodism while Alexie’s characters used rock’n’roll. In essence, they function in the same way. The music provides the orality that critics linked to pre-contact Indian cultures in the case of William Apess. Apess praised the songs of woodland revival meetings throughout his conversion narrative just as Thomas, Victor, and Junior in *Reservation Blues* praise the Sex Pistols and Jimi Hendrix. The novel as a whole acts as a nod to Robert Johnson and the blues idiom as a beautiful and cathartic enterprise.

In addition to the oral commonality, Methodism and popular music function similarly in these two instances because they act as vehicles used to access an audience in the dominant culture otherwise unattainable. The Spokane reservation knew Thomas for his countless stories.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire's stories climbed into your clothes like sand, gave you itches that could not be scratched. If you repeated even one sentence from one of those stories, your throat was never the same again. Those stories hung in your cloths and hair like smoke, and no amount of laundry soap or shampoo washed them out. (15)

On the reservation, the tribe exerts more control over their own stories and the building of their own identities. Even though it becomes apparent that the population berates Thomas and attempts to reject their long-winded griot, they cannot ignore his stories and the power that these stories have on their lives. Off the reservation, mainstream society silences these stories. Movies and TV, relentlessly alluded to throughout the novel for their essentialism, control the story of the Spokane tribe and Indians as a whole. In order for Thomas's and his friend's stories and experiences, partially collected in the lyrics that introduce each chapter, to reach mainstream America, the group must tap into an dominant culture through popular music in order to be heard.

Rock'n'roll provided the band members of Coyote Springs with a unique position similar to Methodism. Apess pointed out the public's condemnation of Methodists for their "noisy" exhortations and open evangelism (Apess 18). Conversely, the reservation condemned the rock band for practicing in an abandoned grocery store and attracting listeners.

The crowds kept growing and converted the rehearsal into a semi-religious ceremony that made the Assemblies of God, Catholics, and Presbyterians very

nervous. United in their outrage, a few of those reservation Indian Christians showed up at rehearsals just to protest the band. (33)

This scene explains the same dynamic as Apess's woodland meetings and the attraction of persecutors. Victor retaliated by hitting an open chord that appalled the Christianized Indians to the same extent that the ring-shouts and spontaneous professions of faith by Indians must have appalled the persecutors of which Apess wrote. Coyote Springs expanded their audience incrementally: abandoned buildings on the Spokane reservation, a bar on a neighboring reservation, a successful gig in Seattle, and then an audition at a New York City record label. Although their attempt at reaching a national audience and truly sharing their stories and experience with white culture failed, maybe a blessing in disguise considering the exploitive plans of the record executives, they were able to submit their critiques of society from a position of rebellious agitators, not entirely marginalized and not entirely at the center of dominant culture. This position intimates a state much like that of the trickster figure who disrupts our expectations, a coyote, found in the band's title.

Alexie allows the reader glimpses at the band member's own stories in the bluesy song lyrics that open each chapter. The titles are enough to indicate the variety of topics: "Reservation Blues", "Treaties", "Indian Boy Love Song", "Father and Farther", "My God Has Dark Skin", "Falling Down and Falling Apart", "Big Mom", "Urban Indian Blues", "Small World", "Wake." Many historians have researched to find links between Indian and Black civil rights activities, including William Apess. Alexie finds the connection a creative inspiration as he appropriates the blues form as well as the characters of Robert Johnson and Son House. This appropriation demonstrates a key divergence of Alexie from Williams Apess and his identity-forming, autobiographical writing. Alexie moves much more in the direction of what one might call today

an oral poetics. This oral poetics is in the same general movement of other Indian authors like Leslie Silko, N. Scott Momaday or Gerald Vizenor and involves re-imaginings of old stories, a communal nature to the stories, the privileging of the spoken word, and use of nonverbal sounds, among other characteristics.²⁶ Alexie's narrator tells the stories of the Spokane tribe and branches out to a broader audience. His songs contain the characteristic brevity, communal catharsis, emphasis on imagery, repetition, and nonverbal sounds of the blues idiom. The inclusion of directions such as "(repeat chorus twice)" attests to its communal nature, invitational style, and emphasis on performance (Alexie 1). Karen Ford elaborates on the de-centering nature of blues poetry as it blurs the division of orality and literariness (Ford 83-85). Indian authors who experiment with an oral poetics strive for this very de-centering union of the oral and the literary. William Apess, however many times he promoted the spontaneous evangelism of Methodism or took to the podium to orate, never came close to the oral poetics contemporary Indian authors work to include in their art. Apess stuck to a register of language quite literary and in line with Anglo conventions, at least in form and style if not in content.

Returning to Apess and the theme of agency, I would like to look deeper than Apess's general decision of subscribing to the best Christian sect, Methodism, for his purposes. I assert that Apess's identity remained fluid and did not latch on blindly to a sweeping ideology like Methodism. He continued to critique the Anglo culture of power in various ways that evolved throughout his career. Apess mimicked and subverted the Jeremiad form of conversion narratives.²⁷ He utilized the common formula used by staples of the early American canon such as the works of John Bunyan. Through Methodism and the conversion narrative, Apess took what he needed and then submitted his own assertions of freedom and the fraudulence of

²⁶ See Blaeser, Kimberly M. for orality of contemporary Indian authors.

²⁷ See Haynes for Apess's use of the Jeremiad form.

hypocritical Christianity. Continuing with the issue of religion, he also consciously accepted and rejected other notions particular to his convictions.

A striking example of this further appropriation and abrogation comes with his support for the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel theory that gained some publicity during and before the 19th century. Sandra Gustafson traced this theory, which claimed that American Indians descended from the Israelites, back to Spanish and Portuguese explorers. Major proponents and revisers of the theory included the missionary John Eliot, trader and historian James Adair, and the evangelist and statesman Elias Boudinot (Gustafson 38). While the theory had credence with some progressive thinkers, it disrupted the hierarchy maintained by mainstream Protestantism that pushed an Indian discourse that identified Indians as both heathens and uncivilized people, two delineations better understood as one characteristic during this time period according to David Carlson's research (Carlson 74). Furthermore, Apess wrote and spoke at a time when New Englanders held a strong fixation on colonial history and White/Indian relations (Konkle 102). Certainly, the interest surrounding the current events, Indian Removal and the Cherokee cause, reinforced this preoccupation with the colonial history. Condoning or condemning the history of offensive Puritan wars with the Indians made up a significant part of the historical interest. The Ten Lost Tribes theory, if seen as probable or true, made a pardoning of Puritan ruthlessness much more difficult.

By using Boudinot and Adair to make up the appendix to his autobiography, Apess attached himself not just to a sect but to specific notions within Christian possibilities that he deemed useful. In this case, the utility of the Ten Lost Tribes theory allowed him to write back to Anglo-Christian America and work against the discourse of savagism. Apess looked to characterize the Indians not as heathens but as chosen people in need of instruction and

evangelism. By referring to Mashpee Indians or Native peoples as a whole as Israelites, Apess briefly rewrites the Puritan idea of America representing a New Jerusalem to include Native peoples as participants. In revisiting the question of authenticity, clearly Apess considered himself authentic, and through the appropriation of the Ten Lost Tribes theory, he considered himself more authentic than most Christians especially as he wrote consistently about their hypocritical tendencies.

We find a similar critical interpretation of religion by Apess in *Reservation Blues*, which inspects the roles of the various Christian sects on the Spokane reservation. It comes as no surprise that the issues of inferiority and access to White Christianity that dominated Apess's writing crop up with Alexie's Christian Indian characters. The dated, erroneous, anthropologic and linguistic research that supported the Ten Lost Tribes theory passed away, but images of racial superiority still linger. Checkers, who finds community, relief, and even a forbidden love on the reservation Catholic Church, revealed the most obvious dissatisfying image.

“I wanted to be as white as those little girls because Jesus was white and blond in all the pictures I ever saw of him.”

“You do know that Jesus was Jewish?” Father Arnold asked. “He probably had dark skin and hair.”

“That's what they say,” Checkers said. “But I never saw him painted like that. I still never see him painted like that.” (141)

Unlike Apess, Checkers still needs to learn to control the texts of which to subscribe and which to abrogate, passively or aggressively, in order to make her desired claim of Christian salvation legitimate. Her “That's what they say” response shows that she has awareness of the possibility

of alternative interpretations, but she cannot imagine them and remains mastered by the old racial discourse dating back to the first contact between Puritans and Indians.

I want to conclude this chapter with a disclaimer. Although I have focused on the theme of agency as it applies to Alexie's characters and William Apess confronting cultural memories like the swamps of the Northeast and the horse massacre in the Northwest and selectively assimilating and abrogating from the dominant culture, I do not want to overstate their subversive qualities. Apess's lack of any specific Pequot cultural element in his writing proves that either the circumstances of his upbringing utterly denied him any chance at a Pequot identity or that he found no use for or expected no effect in incorporating any Pequot elements into his twofold mission of promoting Christian salvation and Native rights. Although Apess and Alexie's characters at times show agency and striking subversion, they also internalize and live out a great deal of the negative perceptions attributed to Native Americans as a whole. As David Murray puts it, "Indian deficiencies are *assumed* and are built into the language of white Christianity" (Murray 51). The next chapter hopes to delve deeper into the struggle between the assumed expectations of the dominant ideology and the actual identities of Apess and Alexie's characters.

3. Native Identity: Orphan Discourse

It is pleasing to reflect that results so beneficial, not only to the States immediately concerned, but to the harmony of the Union, will have been accomplished by measures equally advantageous to the Indians. What the native savages become when surrounded by a dense population and by mixing with the whites may be seen in the miserable remnants of a few Eastern tribes, deprived of political and civil rights, forbidden to make contracts, and *subjected to guardians*, dragging out a wretched existence, without excitement, without hope, and almost without thought. (Jackson 1118 my italics)

This quotation hails from Andrew Jackson's third annual message to Congress on December 6, 1831, shortly after William Apess wrote his autobiography *A Son of the Forest* and shortly before Apess moved to Mashpee and participated in the Mashpee Revolt. Certainly current presidential speeches act at least as a partial barometer of public opinions and controversies and the discourse concerning American Indians. In the list of deprivations Jackson attributed to heightened contact between Natives and whites, the subjection to guardians, takes on two layers of significance. The surface, literal meaning refers to adoption of Native children by white families. Even Jackson himself adopted a Creek baby named Lyncoya after Jackson's militia "systematically slaughtered" nearly 200 Creek warriors at Tallushatchee in Alabama in November 1813 (Remini 63-64). Jackson apparently loved the child although he considered Lyncoya a gift for his other adopted son Andrew Jr., and his instructions sent with the newly adopted Creek baby were to keep the child inside on account that "he is a Savage" (Remini 64). The act of adoption occurred far less frequently than the act of putting young Natives out to

indentured servitude which often meant various degrees of inhumane treatment. Again, the notion applies to Andrew Jackson, whose Lyncoya was bound to a Nashville saddler in 1827. Binding out provided a means to deal with deceased, missing, or abusive parents of Native children who were often in that situation because of contact with Anglo communities.

The second and more expansive meaning of Jackson's statement concerns a general opinion that Native Americans could only continue to live if they were governed and educated by the parental figure of Anglo America. To an ever increasing extent in the 1830s, white Americans doubted even the possibility of integration by Native Americans on any level (Peyer 123). Consequently, this notion of Native America as a weak, jejune ward of the wise, benevolent, and paternal governorship of white leaders, missionaries, and masters perpetuated.



Figure 1 Andrew Jackson Lithograph

This lithograph, though presumably unpublished,²⁸ shows with a satirical edge the literal nature of a paternal role that Andrew Jackson felt as President of the United States. The Native Americans have been shrunk to heights that do not even reach the President's knee. This exaggerates the relationship of the "Great Father" and his children in need of instruction.

This Father/child relationship became a strong part of the dominant discourse, to use Foucault's sense of the word, of Natives in America. It should be noted that this discourse

²⁸ This lithograph is presumed to have been produced in the 1830s though record of it ever being published remains unclear. Only one original survives in the Clements Library at the University of Michigan.

was national and not just related to areas of noticeable tribal resistance, namely the southeastern and western states. The language spread pervasively throughout New England and the rest of the northeast where following and commenting on government actions, especially those in Georgia concerning the Cherokees, dominated the media. The outcomes and racial debates were of national interest. Justice John Marshall's opinion for the Cherokee Nation versus the State of Georgia in 1831 referred to Native Americans as "domestic dependent nations" (Marshall 161). Marshall, like many white Americans at the time, believed Native Americans were uncivilized and, since they resided within the country, therefore subordinate to federal and state governments. In Marshall's words,

They are in a state of pupilage. Their relation to the United States resembles that of a ward to his guardian.

They look to our government for protection; rely upon its kindness and its power; appeal to it for relief to their wants; and address the president as their *great father*. (Marshall 161)

Tribal leaders who engaged in communication and negotiation with white government officials even adopted and internalized this subordinate language either for showing reverence in the hopes of gaining concessions through sympathy or because the language of the Indian/white relationship became so normative that it presented the illusion of truth. For example, the Chickasaws, one of numerous tribes, continued to communicate with officials and President Jackson into the 1830s by referring to themselves as children and the President as "Great Father" (Remini 246).²⁹

²⁹ See United States. War Department. *Correspondence on the subject of the emigration of Indians* for more examples of communication with this same rhetoric.

William Apess, certainly due to his own situation as an orphaned child and bound servant, reflected often on race in ways that related to youth and parenting.

I was alone in the world, fatherless, motherless, and helpless, as it were, and none to speak for the poor little Indian boy. Had my skin been white, with the same abilities and the same parentage, there could not have been found a place good enough for me. But such is the case with depraved nature, and their judgment for fancy only sets upon the eye, skin, nose, lips, cheeks, chin, or teeth and, sometimes, the forehead and hair; without any further examination, the mind it made up and the price set. This is something like buying chaff for wheat, or twigs of wood for solid substance. (123)

Apess wrote this in his second major work *The Experiences of Five Christian Indians* (1833), a collection of conversion narratives including his own. Apess wished for someone “to speak for” him, which points to his doubly enervated state as both a child too young to defend himself as well as an Indian considered too savage to be uplifted to a better state of living. Apess often returned to the motif of parenting throughout this work: “Little children, how thankful you ought to be that you are not in the same condition that we were, that you have not a nation to hiss at you, merely because your skins are white. I am sure that I rejoice for you” (120). Apess often employed this rhetorical strategy of reversal. By rejoicing for white children who have proper guidance, he also implies that other children should receive such quality acceptance and guidance. David Carlson notes that Apess’s constant critique of parenting and search for worthwhile parenting propels him farther from his tribal roots and towards the “nomos of Indian Law” (Carlson 86).

Additionally, in Apess's first autobiographical work *A Son of the Forest*, the emphasis on parenting flows throughout. In the second chapter, Apess goes on at length about the power of family to help children, who are otherwise prone, exhibit qualities of "truth, virtue, morality, and religion" (8). Apess's digressions from the chronological stages of his life almost exclusively deal with race and religion. Early in the second chapter however, Apess ends a treatise on parenting with a long paragraph on the incumbency of parents to not only take children to church service but make sure that they behave properly while at them (9). The reader might feel the oddity of a long digression of such nature towards the beginning of the narrative; however, the digression fits when the reader considers the consistent referencing to parental duties throughout his early works. A further example demonstrating the ongoing critique of poor parenting pervasive in the piece comes at the expense of Mr. Williams, one of Apess's abusive surrogate parents. "He said he was determined to make a good boy of me at once – as if stripes were calculated to effect that which love, kindness, and instruction can only successfully accomplish" (17). Apess repeatedly resists violence or rebuke as a means of fixing children, or as the broader theme of his early works suggest, the fixing of poor Indian children. In general, he often blames undesirable behavior on faulty parenting and guardianship. For instance, when Apess's traveling partner John chronically lies to avoid any suspicion as a runaway, he blames John's propensity to lie, an action Apess refuses to partake in because his conscience would get the better of him, on John's "dissipated parents" (23). Certainly Apess saw his life as a metaphor for the larger deficiency of Native/White relations. If he had parents who chose patient guidance over disinterest or violence as a solution for his poor Indian behavior, he would have had achieved a worthy lifestyle much sooner. This he correlates to the national problem and Native Americans in the United States who he believes need guidance not violence. Apess warns of the possibility

of what he calls “national sin.” He explains this sin in his published sermon *The Increase of the Kingdom of Christ* (1831). “America has utterly failed to amalgamate the red man of the woods into the artificial, cultivated ranks of social life” (107). Apess certainly internalized the notion of white America as the great father figure that had an obligation, thus far unfulfilled, to parent Native Americans and raise them to prosperity and salvation. His surrogate parents, three white families, failed to various degrees, and he slipped into a wretched lifestyle that he identified with so many other Natives. Apess considered his escape of a base lifestyle only possible through his faith, an act of God, and a vocation to exhort. He believed that a crucial part of fixing his own poor lifestyle would be to reclaim a father, which he worked toward. Apess fought against his own status as an orphan. Despite being abandoned by his dysfunctional biological mother and father, Apess ran away from indentured servitude to his father at one point, and after being baptized as a Methodist, he returned to his father to live with him for some time as well as learn his father’s trade of making shoes (43).

Apess internalized the Great Father/Indian children binary to a great extent early in his writing career, yet later he began to write more overtly against this construct. His compilation of texts, *Indian Nullification of the Unconstitutional Laws of Massachusetts Relative to the Mashpee Tribe; or, The Pretended Riot Explained* (1835) attempted to explain the true motives and events of the Mashpee Revolt from 1833-1834. The diction of the title alone proclaims Apess’s understanding of the revolt. Nullification points to the Nullification Crisis of 1832 in which South Carolina attempted to nullify a federal tariff law. The debate rested on the topic of state’s sovereign rights. O’Connell deems this expropriation of the “language of American democracy in the name of Native Americans” as a contributing factor to the “hysterical reaction” of New Englanders to the so called revolt (164). By choosing this title, Apess announced the

finality of the gradual shift in his writing career as he moves from exclusively criticizing white America and its social institutions of schooling, church, government, and missionaries for failing to help and integrate Indians to a much firmer and mature stance of advocating for Indian sovereignty. Instead of looking for a father in white America, Apess fought to assert Indian sovereignty. Apess's complaints of being "alone in the world, fatherless, motherless, and helpless [with] none to speak for the poor little Indian boy" changed to complaints and declarations in constitutional writing announcing freedom and sovereignty for the Mashpee people. Apess never feared blunt language throughout his catalog of published works, but his early works often assigned blame or requested help or better treatment from Anglo America. He maintained a sense Indian self-loathing and inferiority often with irony. For example, he opens chapter 7 of his autobiography with a long paragraph refuting the claim that Native Americans "are not susceptible of improvement" (34). After providing numerous reasons why this claim must be false, he elects to use the term "the expiring Indian," lapsing again into the discourse of Indian deficiencies, probably with an ironic tone (34). With the shift to a Native identity showcasing sovereignty, Apess emboldens his language and defers far less to the antithesis of Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance, which is "absence, nihility, and victimry" (Vizenor *Survivance* 1). One early instance from *Indian Nullification* describing his arrival in Mashpee demonstrates his emboldened confidence and display of survivance:

I was greatly disappointed in the appearance of those who advanced. All the Indians I had ever seen were of a reddish color, sometimes approaching a yellow; but now, look to what quarter I would, most of those who were coming were pale faces, and, in my disappointment, it seemed to me that the hue of death sat upon

their countenances. It seemed very strange to me that my brethren should have changed their natural color, and become in every respect like white men. (170)

Apess continued to work against feelings of self-loathing with proud passages like these.

His final published work stands as his finest triumph over the dominant discourse of Indians and the notion of the Father/child relationship, which I will term orphan discourse, between Native Americans and white America. He returns to old themes such as the failure of Christian missions in this work, but more importantly he revised New England colonial history in a way he had never attempted before. In the 1830s, the country surged with a second wave of fanatic enthusiasm for George Washington. Conservatives held a centennial celebration for his birth. Cities held birthday parades. Congress commissioned Washington statues. Jared Sparks edited Washington's collected letters, and many biographies followed (Vogel 52-58). The public once again asserted George Washington as the iconic symbol of republican thought and the most important founding *father*. Apess opened up his eulogy for King Philip (or Metacom), a "savage" who fought brutal battles against white colonists, with this shocking comparison:

As the immortal Washington lives endeared and engraven on the hearts of every white in America, never to be forgotten in time – even such is the immortal Philip honored, as held in memory by the degraded but yet grateful descendents who appreciate his character; so will every patriot, especially in this enlightened age, respect the rude yet all-accomplished son of the forest, that died a martyr to his cause, though unsuccessful, yet as glorious as the American Revolution. (277)

Apess followed this bold proclamation with detailed histories of King Phillip and his father Massasoit emphasizing Pilgrim cruelty. After this history, Apess can see no logical response but to trump Washington's image. "I shall pronounce him (King Phillip) the greatest man that was

ever in America; and so it will stand, until he is proved to the contrary, to the everlasting disgrace of the Pilgrim's fathers" (308). Apess even equated Washington's famous crossing of the Delaware with Phillip's crossing of the Connecticut River (297). According to Apess, King Phillip possessed characteristics of freedom and liberty before the spectacular deeds of George Washington and the American Revolution took place. For this, Apess elevated King Philip to a stature even higher than George Washington and adding a Native American to the established line of founding *fathers*. He disrupted the binary of civilization/savagery by injecting Philip into the highest ranks of civilized and enlightened leaders. He also collapsed the white father/native child discourse that can be found so thoroughly infused in the rhetoric of the time period and even ventured to use the term "common fathers" to bring the two, supposedly very different types together (308).³⁰ As if to continue his theme of the possibilities of mutual respect and a fruitful intermingling of Native cultures and white American, Apess then offered the Lord's Prayer in King Phillip's own dialect, further bringing the two sides together. This inversion may also be a subtle reference to one of the other well-known anecdotal myths about Washington. According to the much embellished but extraordinarily popular³¹ *The Life of Washington* (1800), a man "treading through the venerable grove" during the American army's encampment at Valley Forge in 1777 came across George Washington on his knees praying earnestly "in a dark natural bower of ancient oaks," a location for this activity that would have certainly drawn the attention of William Apess who, as his autobiography's title might suggest, often wrote to legitimize acts of worship in woodland settings such as camp meetings (Weems 146). The

³⁰ For a similarly conclusive reading of "Eulogy of King Philip" yet focused on Apess's relationship to notions of Jacksonian masculinity and femininity see Bayers 137-140.

³¹ We should consider *The Life of Washington* as one of the first great bestsellers by an American. By the time of William Apess's writing career, *The Life of Washington* had already gone through nearly 30 editions. From its extreme popularity and the household myths attributed to Washington in this book, such as Washington and the cherry tree, we can nearly be certain of Apess's familiarity with it.

Lord's Prayer in a Native language and Washington's willingness to prostrate himself in prayer in a woodland setting bring these two figures even closer together in Apess's perspective.

Sherman Alexie, in making creative decisions about his characters in *Reservation Blues*, incorporates what I have described in the culture and in Apess's writing as the discourse of orphanism regarding American Indians into the identities of his characters. Alexie only imagines one father in the entire narrative, and he, with biting irony, is metaphorically dead. Alexie scatters the histories of each of the band members throughout his narrative. Chapter 4, "Father and Farther," holds a concentration of memories regarding parents, but the reader must still paste together the oftentimes brief, passing, and fragmented comments about characters' families and histories in order to construct the full past of each character. Of all the band members in Coyote Springs, the protagonist Thomas Builds-the-Fire has the only living parent. His mother died of cancer when he was ten (63). In the novel, Thomas's father, Samuel, only appears in a scene passed out and drunk in the front lawn of Thomas's house, and Thomas with the help of Chess and Checkers Warm Water hauls Samuel into the house and onto the kitchen table. Victor and Junior's ironic humor expresses their desensitized feelings toward the situation of failed fathers:

"Who is that?" Victor asked. "Is it my dad or your dad?"

"It's not your dad," Junior said. "Your dad is dead."

"Oh, yeah, enit?" Victor asked. "Well, whose dad is it?"

"It ain't my dad," Junior said. "He's dead, too." (95)

Despite Samuel's status as the only surviving parent in the group, Thomas, in all but a technicality, is an orphan. Around the kitchen table that supports Samuel, Chess and Checkers

sing a Flathead song of mourning for a wake. “Samuel was still alive, but Thomas sang along without hesitation” (100).

Intermittently throughout the discussion over Samuel’s slumbering body, we hear the story of Samuel in the prime of his basketball prowess when he challenged a group of tribal police officers to a pickup game. The game represented the end of Samuel’s potential and his metaphoric death to alcoholism and the abandonment of his son. In this winner-take-all game of life, Samuel challenged officers Wilson and William. These officers looked entirely white and used their quarter of Spokane blood to get their jobs. They hated the reservation and abhorred Indians (101-102). Samuel’s opponents also included the Heavy Burden brothers named Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle, or informally as Phil, Scott, and Art (103). The final opponent may be the most despicable, the greedy police chief and soon to be Tribal Chairman David WalksAlong. Samuel loses the cheap, lawless, yet hard fought metaphoric contest against western knowledge embodied in the three philosophers and the intra-racism and “playing Indian” of the other officers. Even Samuel’s immense talent and potential cannot triumph, and the loss of this basketball game signifies the loss of Samuel as a tribal member and a father. After the loss, he becomes what we learn earlier in the novel. “Thomas’s father still drank quietly, never raising his voice once in all his life, just staggering around the reservation, usually covered in piss and shit” (57). When Samuel fails to fight any more against the forces of western knowledge and the challenges of racism and corrupt tribal leadership, he is silenced. Once he is silenced, he becomes just an animal. Thomas is left an orphan.

If we string together the snippets revealed about Victor, Coyote’s Springs’s lead guitarist, we see that he also lived a fatherless life. Victor’s father abandoned his family in Wellpinit and moved to Phoenix. Victor’s choice to turn to alcohol coincided with his father’s abandonment.

When Victor's mother had another man (Victor's stepfather) move into their home, Victor drank even harder (57). Victor's surrogate father was a white man whose cowboy hat wooed Victor's mother (25). The cowboy hat stands out as the clearest signifier of the taming of the west and the "good" side of the cowboys and Indians binary. The mother's brief two week interval between lovers and her infatuation with such an adverse symbol push Victor toward alcoholic self-medication. When Victor's father died, Thomas accompanied him to Phoenix to pick up the ashes (17). "Phoenix" and "ashes" allude to the bird of Greek mythology that lives on through death. The image of new life is optimistic, and these posits of optimism can be located throughout Alexie's novel in a way that contrasts Gloria Bird's and others' common criticism of *Reservation Blues*, that it evinces hopelessness and exaggerates a "version of reservation life, one that perpetuates many of the stereotypes of native people and presents problems for native and non-native readers alike" (Bird 47).³² Alexie offers a counterpoint to the selflessness of Thomas and the optimistic phoenix image with the next lines. Victor's small bit of background story gets interrupted by the novel's present action with Victor and Junior taking off in their truck while The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota yells his mantra, "The end of the world is near!" (17). The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota's mantra signifies the absurdity of overly exaggerating despair. Even before the page expires, Alexie has revealed the absurdity of such defeatism and pessimism. The-man-who-was-probably-Lakota comforts Thomas, "Maybe things will be better in the morning." / "You think so?" Thomas asked. / "Yeah, but don't tell anybody I said so.

³² Alcohol provides a clear example of this reading. Alexie shows no fear in tackling a problem like alcohol abuse on reservations in his fiction. Bird accuses Alexie of glorifying alcoholics, when in fact *Reservation Blues* contains many sober characters, launches attacks on the ripple effect of alcoholic abuse, and even bluntly works to counter stereotypes with lines like, "So many drunks on the reservation, so many. But most Indians never drink. Nobody notices the sober Indians. On television, the drunk Indians emote. In books, the drunk Indians philosophize" (151). Another example comes on a trip off the reservation: "The drunk couple in downtown Spokane pulled at each other's clothes and hearts, but they were white people. Chess and Thomas knew that white people hurt each other, too. Chess knew that white people felt pain just like Indians. Nerve endings, messages to the brain, reflexes. The doctor swung hammer against knee, and the world collapsed" (115).

It would ruin my reputation” (17). Despite showing defeat and self-loathing as unreasonable ways to live (which seems to be similar to the conclusions Apress made over the course of his writing career) the pain of being orphaned and adopted by an image of manifest destiny lingers with Victor. The smell of Victor’s dead father, who had expired and gone unnoticed for a week, stayed with Victor and “never fully dissipated, had always remained on the edges of Victor’s senses” (25).

Victor’s state of being fatherless and his trouble coping get more codified and complex in a dream sequence. In a dream exhibiting the dominance of white society, Victor’s white stepfather takes off with Victor’s mother locked in the car’s trunk along with Victor’s dead father. The surrogate white father abandoned the Indian son saying, “*I don’t want no Indian kid hanging around us no more*” (107). Victor chased the car with his “suddenly long hair trailing in the wind,” a signifier of his Indian identity. The next scene contains Black robed men, Christian brothers who shave Victor’s hair. With size imagery reminiscent of the lithograph of Jackson and the tiny Indians, one of the black robes carries Victor on his shoulders when he feels tired. The strong Christian Brother carrying the small Indian on his shoulders appears like a father and son scene. The scene further substantiates Victor’s need for a father figure by having the two observe the black robe’s favorite painting, a battle scene, presumably between the United States army and an Indian force, that becomes all too real from the smell of blood and smoke (108). The army killed off the men, the warriors and the fathers, and left Victor to the purveyors of Christianity. But Victor must flee from them back to his orphan state. He flees them after entering a room where many of the black robes shoveled long black hair into a fire, burning up more and more of the signifiers of Indian identity (109). Victor dreams of the Anglo paternalism

and the discourse of Indian orphanism that existed since, and before, the Jacksonian era, and he flees from it. Anglo paternalism will not heal him.

William Apess protested against the same process in his writing. The government failed in its supposedly paternal role as the army came through and defeated the Indian forces or forced them from homelands, followed by the missionaries who failed at healing and supporting Indian nations. Alexie's dream sequence contains similar themes to those of Apess's earlier works. Both focus on criticism of Anglo institutions and their failed fatherly role. What might seem to be lacking is the maturation and sophistication of Alexie's subversion. However, like Apess, Alexie works to rewrite existing master narratives just like Apess did in his rewriting of the founding father myth to include Metacom. Alexie uses the black robe as a metonymy for missionaries in a way that clearly echoes the black robe metonymy in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's popular *The Song of Hiawatha* (Longfellow 274-279). Alexie rewrites the benevolent black robes in Hiawatha's poem as cruel failures. He also rewrites the conclusion. Hiawatha, upon the arrival of the black robes with their revelations, leaves for a "long and distant journey" (Longfellow 278). Although Hiawatha plans to return, the "people from the margin" know that he will not and respond "Farewell forever!" in a reiteration of the vanishing Indian terminal creed – to use Gerald Vizener's phrase. In the dream sequence, Victor's fate is unsure, yet he will not simply disappear as everyone expects. In a flurry of digging imagery, Victor searches for his family who wait somewhere "on a better reservation" (109). Needless to say, Alexie's revision of the Hiawatha text is deeply encoded, a dangerous place to hide subversion for an author who hopes to write literature for young people, not academics (Bernardin 166). However, a careful reader may recall the blues poetry at the beginning of the chapter. In one of

many examples, Alexie's oral poetics discussed in the previous chapter provide the answer or the true story that often contradicts the master narratives created for Indians.

I had my braids cut off by black robes
 But I know they'll grow again
 I had my tongue cut out by these black robes
 But I know I'll speak 'til the end
 I had my heart cut out by the black robes
 But I know what I still feel
 I had my eyes cut out by the black robes
 But I know I see what's real
 (repeat chorus) (Alexie 132)

While Victor has been silenced, desensitized, lied to, and had his identity dictated to him by the black robe metonymy, the optimism, healing, and survivance reveals itself in the band's music.

Alexie did not allow the other characters to escape this orphaned fate of Victor and Thomas. After a decent early life with his family, Junior's parents kill themselves in a drunk-driving accident while leaving a New Year's party thrown by Samuel, Thomas's father (119). No family attended the funeral. "His siblings, who had long since dispersed to other reservation and cities, couldn't afford to come back for the funeral" (24). The economic hardships of the reservation forced many Spokane Indians away to find more sustainable lives. The "dispersal" of Junior's family and the subsequent inability to "mourn properly" (24) sounds much like the diasporic³³ movements of Apess's Pequots, who were forced away from their tribal community

³³ Calloway in *After King Philip's War* liberally uses the term diaspora to describe the pressured movements of New England Indians.

in search of day labor, indentured labor, positions on whaling vessels,³⁴ or enrollment in the army.

The final band members, Chess and Checkers, also lose their parents at an early age. Indirectly, they lose their parents due to the result of contact between white and Indian cultures. When Backgammon, the family's baby boy, contracts an illness, the parents have no one to turn to for help. "There weren't no white doctors around. There weren't no Indian doctors at all yet. The traditional medicine women all died years before."³⁵ Dad just walked into the storm like he was praying or something" (64). In this family's experience, white dominance and encroachment has stifled the passing on of tribal knowledge while assimilation had either not been perused or not been possible. When Backgammon dies, the parents fall into despair for the loss of their first son as well as for the failure of their community to save that son. Their father Luke, who never drank at all, turned to whiskey (96). Their mother Linda walked into the woods to die, a suicide (69). When Thomas inquired about the whereabouts of Luke, they simply respond, "He's gone" (96).

Both Apess and Alexie allowed the discourse of orphanism into their writing, Apess through his constant petitioning for good white parents and Alexie through his inability to imagine fathers for his characters. However, through the arc of Apess's writing, he disengaged himself with the idea that Indians needed the parental role of white society to improve in order for natives to thrive to a stance of native sovereignty. His evolution climaxed with the delivery and publication of his audacious *Eulogy of King Philip*. It rewrote New England history and inserted Metacom as an Indian father of the values used to create the myths of the United States.

³⁴ Recall *The Pequot* from Melville's *Moby Dick*.

³⁵ The observation calls to mind Vizenor on medicine and assimilation. "Native American Indian medical doctors are scarce, and for that reason they were once the measure of assimilation and invitational civilization" (Vizenor *Manifest Manners* 45).

As for Alexie, his creative decisions built an ensemble of characters all of which had no parental presence by the time the primary action of the novel begins. For these decisions, Alexie has drawn negative reviews such as Bird's "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*." Susan Bernardin follows her brief summary of Bird's attack on Alexie's novel with a series of complicating and possibly unanswerable questions. Do "Native writers have an authorial responsibility to create a communally accepted discourse of the real in their texts"? "Whose community should be represented"? What "narrative forms are more effective conduits of "the real" (Bernardin 166)? If these weighty questions can be definitively answered, the risk of lapsing into the language of authenticity, language crusaded against by so many critics, becomes inevitable. In defense of Alexie's text, what appears to be formulaic reanimations of predetermined narratives for Indian characters such as the vanishing Indian, the stoic noble savage, and the un-fathered race become complicated protests after close reading. If the reader pastes together the fragmented histories of Alexie's characters, we see a deeper questioning of social issues and hegemony. Thomas's father and his game of basketball turns from a macho test of basketball skills to a metaphor for the privileging of western knowledge and the crippling effects of both Indian posers and tribal council greed. Victor as an orphan highlights the damaging effects of a history of violence with white society followed by the supposedly assuaging efforts of Christian missionary work, missionary work that left Victor both disillusioned and sexually abused. Junior's, Chess's, and Checkers's loss of a father and mother emphasize the ripple effects from the loss of community. Junior's family demonstrates an example of diasporic conditions for many Indian groups, and Chess and Checkers lose their parents to despair after being caught in the contact zone between two cultures that has left one subordinate and without resources and another as dominant. Alexie's pervasive fatherlessness

comes not from blind acceptance of stereotypes but from careful critique of culture, a critique unafraid of blunt proclamations: “5. Honor your Indian father and mother because I have stripped them of their land, language, and hearts, and they need your compassion, which is a commodity I do not supply” (154). Attentive readings complicate Alexie’s sometimes deceptively simple use of Indian stereotypes. To counter Andrew Jackson’s words, Alexie’s characters and Apess refuse to be “*subjected to guardians.*” Their existence has “excitement,” “hope,” and “thought.” To continue to use Gerald Vizenor’s word, Alexie’s characters and Apess exude “survivance.”

Thus far I have discussed the questioning of terminal creeds and master narratives such as swamps equating heathenism, the Indian need for an Anglo-Christian father, and the binary of authenticity or assimilation. The final chapter will dissertate further on this process of re-signification, a re-defining or a refusal to define what Indianness is, by exploring the conclusion of *Reservation Blues* and William Apess’s last days.

4. Journey to the Center of the Polis

“Discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions.” (Foucault 219)

“The most profound changes reflected in novels by Indian authors, however, have come about because of the movement of Indian people from rural reservations into urban cities.” (Owens 31)

Reservation Blues starts nowhere. The town of Wellpinit on the Spokane Indian Reservation “did not exist on most maps” (3). The white maps do not even have Indian roads on them (49). They are the presence of an absence. Likewise, William Apess begins his story with his birth in what he calls the “back settlements,” not the town of Colrain proper but “in the woods” (4). While in these negative spaces on maps, both Thomas and Apess define themselves early in their stories through violence done to them. Thomas was “the weakest boy” and the “smallest Indian man on the reservation” (14). Junior and Victor consistently abused him physically and once pushed him into fresh sidewalk cement causing scars on his face from the removal of the substance (13-14). The reservation literally left its impression on Thomas as scars on his face. Apess relates numerous stories of beatings from his grandmother caretaker and his white masters. The former being the most charged with significance as Apess suggests his beatings continued on one occasion because of a lack of language, possibly Pequot language: “she asked me if I hated her, and I very innocently answered in the affirmative as I did not then know what the word meant and thought all the while that I was answering aright” (6). Both

Apess and the character Thomas defy the valued stereotype of the native warrior, strong and stoical; however, they valorize another common role as the underdog who lacks physical strength but leads or triumphs being two of the best adjusted characters through the development of their respective narratives. Consequently, Apess and Alexie's characters all journeyed away from their reservations.

As Owens submits in the above epigraph, so many Native American contemporary narratives propel their plots through movement from reservation life to the metropolis. This disrupts the "calculated distributions", an essential element to the organization of power in Foucault's thinking. This movement adds conflict to a story or further complicates a conflict already existent for a character. David Carlson explores Christian identity and its connection to stationary lifestyle during Apess's time (84). A nomadic existence signifies heathenism and the Native American peoples as a mobile part of nature instead of masters over it. New England Native Americans wandered looking for day labor or customers for their wares. When the townships failed to support them, many joined military units or whaling and merchant ships. Colin Calloway and Robert Warrior go so far as to adopt the term *Diaspora* to accurately describe the nomadic existence of Natives in New England after the colonial histories that I related in Chapter 1 of this study (Calloway 6, Warrior 11). Apess incorporates this into his own understanding of the world as he believes "the disposition of the Indians" was "to wander to and fro" (120). Apess's narrative of the spiritual wanderer Sally George as well as his own adherence to the often persecuted Methodist preaching circuit (Haynes 39) reinforce his contentedness in disruption of this discourse of mainstream Christianity and its state of being landed.

Instead of remaining stationary, indentured with paperwork to a white family in a township setting, William Apess as a young man felt drawn to the city. He wished to pack up and run away and to adventure into the cities. However, his draw to the city came from reasons that he mocked. Apess planned undoubtedly to be “metamorphosed into a person of consequence” by leaving the rural for the urban (14). He emphasized the desire “to *do business for [himself] and become rich*” (14 his italics). For this conviction, Apess called himself a fool. He allowed himself to believe the capitalistic lure was for him, a socially disqualified Native American. Mr. Furman, his white master, checked this ambition and made Apess stay, but only long enough to transfer his indentured service to someone else. Furman presumably had no patience to socially condition his naively ambitious property.

Sherman Alexie adopts a relatable structure for his novel. Thomas and his band travel to Seattle and New York City with hopes of acquiring wealth with relative ease. Robert Johnson’s guitar, the magical realist presence that propels them to a place of great potential by allowing its handler, despite any level of previous training, to play spectacular music, punishes the band members for their selfishness. But more importantly, the reservation punishes their progressive ambitions in one of Alexie’s most lucid indictments of reservation society in its failure to welcome back those who once felt empowered enough to leave for other-than-Indian reasons, too quick in the stifling of counter narratives. Thomas struggled to articulate this dynamic, “Not everyone wants to kill us. Nobody wants to kill us. They’re just talking. We just let them down” (257).

Thomas’s outcast status in Alexie’s fiction has precedent in an autobiographical gap in William Apess’s writing. Apess’s notable political action in support of Mashpee sovereignty seems to have eventually soured his relationship with the tribe leading to his removal or

voluntary dismissal. Judging from the Massachusetts court orders and the high profile nature of the case, Apess achieved some sort of infamous celebrity status deemed damaging to Mashpee interests. Robert Warrior rightly notes a change in his person and his writing. *Indian Nullification* reads with a dramatic lack of his previous evangelicalism (35). The success of his political moves led to a smear campaign of Apess's character by Massachusetts government officials that probably presented itself to the Mashpees as a force they would not contend. They abandoned their support and investment in Apess's political ambitions. William Apess gives no direct account of his fall from grace and support within the adoptive Mashpee community.

The small gap in Apess's writing proves an important parallel, but the time spent after his last writing is paramount to this study. Between 1836 and 1839, Apess appears to have spent his time living in New York City. This time period remains for the most part undocumented except for the inquest report concerning his death. Robert Warrior writes to imagine Apess traveling to New York City as an ambitious intellectual. He sees Apess's move through the term *synchronicity*. Apess was one of many Native intellectuals, like Warrior himself, who would leave rural beginnings for a chance to speak, publish, and critically engage politically and socially in the metropolis. Warrior posits that "thinking in terms of synchronicity opens new vistas for viewing the history of native writing as unified" (45).

But unintended danger lurks in a wish for total unification in our fragmented existence. Apess ended his life in "intellectual despair" (Warrior 44). He attached himself to no known writings or reform groups in New York during those years. Multiple people testified to his days of binge drinking in the report of death. While O'Connell emphasizes the irony of Apess's death hastened by the administration of faulty white-man's medicine from a doctor (O'Connell *Once More Let Us Consider* 168), Warrior unabashedly stresses the evidence for alcoholism (Warrior

45). After a remarkable life of religious conversion and service, political engagements, and public speaking, Apess lapsed into one of the “abject, miserable race of beings” he wrote about, and so wanted to help, in his most often anthologized passage from “An Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man” (155). Alcoholism, violence, child abandonment, a warrior’s mentality, journey to the polis, all of these stereotypes of Indians, terminal creeds, master narratives, or any such chosen academic terminology have presence in Apess’s story, and they compete to win out and become the defining identity because they have come to be the defining identity of Indians in mass culture. It becomes more important for authors, readers, and critics, however antithetical, to dialectically hold onto tradition and unification and also, even more so, to stress the richness of difference – differences between cultures and, just if not more critically, differences within each culture.

Sherman Alexie in his contemporary novels about Indians receives both praise and admonition for his creative decisions when he writes difference and when he writes in line with master narratives about Indians. In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie refuses to write a definitive conclusion for the main characters. Chess and Thomas leave for Spokane.³⁶ Chess will work as an operator at the phone company, but their success or failure remains to be determined. As the two drive off toward Spokane, the horse motif returns. “Those horses were following, leading Indians toward the city, while other Indians were traditional dancing in the Longhouse after the feast, while drunk Indians stood outside the Trading Post, drinking and laughing” (306). This sentence encapsulates the critical theme in Alexie’s narrative world: choice. Thomas and Chess may go to the city. Other Indians may decide to find an identity in the adherence to cultural and traditional preservation. The problem comes when still others may (or be compelled to)

³⁶ The going to Spokane elaborates on this contradictory need to hold tradition and to celebrate difference. Chess and Thomas leave their reservation home for the new city. But in another way, going to Spokane for Thomas is also going home since Spokane, the city, finds itself on land once held by displaced Spokane Indians.

internalize the prescriptions of native identity like alcoholism and lethargy. Others will go so far as to refuse life like Junior. “There’s good and bad in the world. You get to make the choice” (167). Do authors have an obligation to write a communally accepted discourse? To answer Susan Bernardin’s question simply, no. It is oppression. It stifles difference.

Alexie privileges difference, not just unification. Gloria Bird’s well-known critique of the novel submits that “the representation of alcoholism in *Reservation Blues*, however accurate, still capitalizes upon the stereotypical image of the “drunken Indian” (51). But to leave out this aspect, “however accurate,” suggests a denial of the existence of the “drunken Indian” construct altogether, a creative decision Alexie refuses to make. This relates to Apess’s case when Robert Warrior refuses to spin William Apess’s death positively as he reads Barry O’Connell and Maureen Konkle doing. In the same vein, Bird criticizes Alexie for creating a pan-Indian experience that does no spotlight specific tribal differences (51). Alexie would agree with this attack, for he writes this very problem, a lack of difference, throughout his novel as his Indian characters surf televisions and movies looking for Indians, looking for an Indianness in the essentializing discourse of the media (36, 70).

Not all of Bird’s criticisms are unwarranted though. The critique found in her piece’s title accuses Alexie of an exaggeration of despair in his representation of Indians. In “The Experience of the Missionary” William Apess wrote that the children of the forest “drop a tear, and die, over the ruins of their ancient sires” (119). In 1971, the award winning “Keep America Beautiful” ad campaign depicted trash thrown from a car at the feet of an Indian in traditional attire. The camera then zoomed in on a solitary tear dropped from his eye, an action supposedly magnified by the irony of the man’s name, Chief Iron Eyes Cody. In *Reservation Blues*, Victor, inebriated in a bar, “smiled a little, a single tear ran down his face, and then he passed out face

first onto the table” (241). The image of sorrow repeats. What lacks here is difference. What lacks is possibility. No discourse is perfect. Someone’s perspective will always be left out and consequentially marginalized. To paraphrase the conversation of a successful academic writer of identity politics, if you write about class, someone will ask about your ignorance of race. If you write about race and class, someone will ask about gender. If you try to write everything, you will either be incomprehensible or someone will accuse you of totalizing. When writing Indian characters, one will always lack something. Some part will always be a simulation of Indianness, or/and some parts will fall on the other end of the spectrum. In the words of Junior, “That’s too damn Indian” (45). The inability of signs, language, and narrative to represent reality in some true or perfect way, however, is no reason to stop writing and critiquing narratives that de-center us and proliferate meaning and difference. One can imagine that a swamp signifies relief and a continuation of life instead of death and heathenism. One can imagine that a bone flute offers a daily musical reminder of a horse massacre long forgotten, or that a young boy doesn’t need a Christian father to heal him. We cannot abandon the perpetual process of re-signification or we are stagnant, dead, and moored to the present systems of power and subjugation.

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