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# BEYOND FISTFIGHTS AND BASKETBALL

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Reconstructing Native American Masculinity

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**Abstract:**

On New Year's Eve 2016, my 21-year-old cousin was discovered stabbed-to-death in an alley following a two-week search by family members. Twenty-five years earlier another 21-year-old cousin was murdered in a bar and fifty years' prior my cousins' father was found bludgeoned-to-death days before her birth. All three were Blackfeet men, died on the reservation, and represent a small percentage of 'disappeared' Native American men. Substantial and necessary research examining the violence perpetrated against Native women continues to flourish, while violence and masculinity studies focused on Native men draws little attention. Meanwhile the murder rate of Native men is three times higher than Native women, twice as high as white men, and occurs at the hands of the police more often than any other U.S. racialized group. Colonization divided 'Christians' (white) and 'heathens' (Native) with settler whites identifying Native men as 'wild' and threatening. I suggest this settler colonial construct of Native masculinity continues today and impacts Native men internally (psychologically) and externally (relationships), contributing to violence perpetrated against and by them. This paper is an interpretive analysis of 'Scary Brown Man' (Ross 2014) and 'Reservation Blues' (Alexie 1995) examined through the intersection of the gender/race bias intrinsic to settler colonialism. Alexie's novel offers 'typical' reservation life and the spirit of survivance, while Ross's article brings real-life situation into the conversation, providing a step toward encouraging the intersectional discourse around Native masculinity in the arena of gender/bias research as applied to settler colonial studies while questioning the role of identity politics within the discipline. The use of survivance as a methodology within this treatise embraces the active resistance demonstrated by Native men against their assimilation into settler society.

On New Year's Eve 2016, my 21-year-old cousin was discovered stabbed-to-death in an alley behind our auntie's house. He was missing for two weeks before his beaten and broken body was found dumped in a mound of snow with over ten fatal knife wounds in his back. There had been no warning of impending danger; he was a living, breathing, healthy young man who left one evening with a group of friends and inexplicably never returned home. My family searched frantically for two-weeks, hoping against hope that he would be found with some ridiculously youthful and inconsiderate explanation for his absence. However, within days of his disappearance we were anticipating the same dreaded outcome experienced by families of other unaccounted-for Native men. We had been here before. Twenty-five years earlier my cousin was murdered in a bar, and twenty-five years before that another cousin's father was found bludgeoned-to-death in an alley days before her birth. All three were men, Blackfeet, died from violence on the reservation, and represented just a fraction of 'disappeared' Native American men reported every year.

The 'Bureau of Justice Statistics'<sup>1</sup> and the 'Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice'<sup>2</sup> report the murder rate of Native American men as three times higher than that of Native women (which is twice the rate of non-Native women), twice as high as white men, and occurs at the hands of law enforcement at a higher rate than any other racialized group in the United States and Canada<sup>3</sup>. While substantial and necessary research examining the violence perpetrated against Native women continues to flourish, violence perpetrated against Native

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Perry, *'American Indians and Crime'* (Washington D.C.: US Department of Justice, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Mike Males, *'Who are Police Killing'* (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Indigenous Peoples in Canada are often 'identified' as 'First Nations' peoples. Many Native peoples refer to themselves by their tribal affiliation (i.e., Blackfeet, Osage, Aleut, etc.), but due to the lack of separation in national statistics it remains difficult to delineate. For the purposes of this paper I will refer to First Nations, Native Americans, and Alaskan Natives as Native peoples unless otherwise referenced.

men is epidemic, under-reported, and under-researched, inviting the question: “Who’s walking with our brothers?”<sup>4</sup>

Research examining the struggles of Native women continue to flourish, bringing attention and activism to an all-time high. Native women’s bodies are sexualized, sexually assaulted, and fraught with violence against them, making facilitation of this research necessary and invaluable. However, when tackling the deeply ensconced problem of structural violence perpetuated against Native peoples through ongoing colonialism, it simply makes no sense to limit or ignore half of the population. UCLA law professor Khaled Beydoun links the “negative treatment heaped on men of colour not only to racial discrimination but also to gendered discrimination.”<sup>5</sup> It is his contention that gender discrimination is academically reserved for women, particularly white women, and seldom used to examine the conjoined race/gender bias experienced by black and brown men. To even have this conversation it must be opened by cautiously announcing that to focus on examining Native masculinity does not downplay the experience of Native women. This is a harrowing path to negotiate, which itself points to gender bias against Native men creating the artificial need to apologize for focusing on men *instead* of women.

This paper is an interpretive analysis of Blackfeet writer/attorney Gyasi Ross’s ‘Scary Brown Man’<sup>6</sup> and Spokane-Coeur d’Alene novelist Sherman Alexie’s ‘Reservation Blues’<sup>7</sup> examined through the intersection of the gender/race bias intrinsic to settler colonialism.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Alexander Innes and Kim Anderson, *Indigenous Men and Masculinities* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Gyasi Ross, *‘Is there a problem?’ – That Scary Brown Man and White Privilege* (<http://kuow.org/post/there-problem-scary-brown-man-and-white-privilege> 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Warner Books, 1995).

Ross's article is a first-person account of racism and white privilege as experienced by a contemporary Native man, followed by his own reflective analysis. In narrating his own experience Ross provides and contributes to the framework for a counter-narrative deconstructing the constructs behind the stereotypical representations of Native men today. Alexie's novel 'Reservation Blues' is a funny and sad fictional account of reservation life as experienced by three Native men written with the feeling and truths that only a Native man raised on a reservation would be able to clearly articulate. By exploring Ross and Alexie's work as accounts of survival and resistance, what Smith refers to as 'survivance,'<sup>8</sup> the impact of the ongoing settler colonial process on Native masculinity is explicated, helping us see and understand some of the structural forces behind what is often represented as senseless violence, opening up a masculine Native space without violence at the core.

### Settler Colonialism and Native Men

Central to making sense of the experience of Native men is understanding the ongoing nature of colonialism, which is usefully theorized as settler colonialism. Patrick Wolfe defines settler colonialism as a "structure rather than an event,"<sup>9</sup> which "destroys to replace"<sup>10</sup> encouraging "miscegenation, the breaking-down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions..., a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations...including frontier homicide."<sup>11</sup> Settler colonialism is ongoing and preceded by the physical acts of colonialism.

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith. 'Decolonizing Methodologies' (Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press, 2012), 146.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,' *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no 4 (2006) 390.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 388.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

Colonization divided ‘Christians’ (white) and ‘heathens’ (Native) with settler whites identifying Native men as ‘wild’ and threatening. This settler colonial construct of Native masculinity continues today and impacts Native men internally (psychologically) and externally (relationships), contributing to violence perpetrated against and by them.

Stereotype, misinformation, and willful ignorance reinforce the “mythical Indians” of America – savage, fierce, feather wearing teepee dwellers, perpetuating the sense that the settler must remain vigilant against impending danger at the hands of the ‘scary brown man’. This is perpetrated through white supremacy and reinforced by education and media, creating a normalized and acceptable racism.<sup>12</sup> Native men are left to the exhausting chore of defending themselves against stereotype and altered perceptions, or hazard becoming so inundated that they internalize and self-sabotage. These ideas are so deeply ingrained in American society that racism and stereotyping of Native peoples remains socially tolerated.

Some of the pieces of the settler colonial construct in place contributing to violence perpetrated against and by Native men are arcane enough to appear harmless like the “constructed Indian-ness”<sup>13</sup> of mascotry. There are no racialized group in North American society in which it is acceptable for racist slurs to publicly represent an entire community besides Native people. It is ludicrous and bizarre to imagine that America would accept a professional sports team called the Washington N\*ggers or the Kansas City Sp\*cs, yet the National Football League continues to support the use of the R\*dskin name and mascot




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<sup>12</sup> Robert Alexander Innes and Kim Anderson, *Indigenous Men and Masculinities* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Taylor, *Contesting Constructed Indian-ness* (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), title.

despite the term being defined as “dated and offensive”<sup>14</sup> by Oxford Dictionaries and the on-going public outcry by Native organizations (‘Not Your Mascot’ ‘MascotsDB’ ‘Change the Mascot’) for termination of all Native mascotry. The Cleveland ‘Indians’ participated in the 2016 World Series using the offensive ‘Chief Wahoo’ mascot without constraint, celebrating the cartoonish stereotypical image of Native men. Johnnie Jae, Otoe-Missouria/Choctaw journalist and founder of ‘Not Your Mascot’ explains:

People don’t understand that these issues are rooted in racism. They [white settlers] did eradicate almost 99 percent of the population. Today, a lot of people are not aware we’re still here. They talk about Native Americans as if we’re in the past, and you never really hear about Native Americans as we are now in the modern times. So it really does perpetuate the idea that Native Americans are an extinct people.<sup>15</sup>

This concept of Native Americans as an “extinct people” is created and proliferated by settler society<sup>16</sup> that reflect the ideas of “conquest, colonialism, dislocation, dispossession, identity, tradition, and nationalism”<sup>17</sup> as their inherent right as superior beings, creating an environment in which Native men and boys are historicized, romanticized, and villainized as “savages” erasing the space to imagine contemporary Native masculinity. Michael Taylor draws a correlation between Native mascotry and “black-face” as a settler white male method of “mimicking blacks and Native peoples in

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<sup>14</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/redskin>

<sup>15</sup> Britni Danielle, ‘Native American Groups Want You to Know They’re More Than Mascots’ from [www.takepart.com/article/2014/11/27/not-your-mascot-movement](http://www.takepart.com/article/2014/11/27/not-your-mascot-movement).

<sup>16</sup> Settler or settler society is used throughout this paper as a theoretical term to distinguish non-Indigenous, predominantly Euro-white persons whose ancestors came to North America to live permanently through the act of colonialism.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Taylor, ‘Contesting Constructed Indian-ness’ (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), 10-11.

order to establish a personal and social hierarchy of power through mimicry.”<sup>18</sup> Mascotry and stereotype continue today as one form of settler colonial racism and oppression.

### ‘Scary Brown Man’

Gyasi Ross’s article, ‘Scary Brown Man’ illuminates the racism and white privilege perpetrated against Native men in North America with humor and insight, giving the reader an emotional look at the feelings of rage, humiliation, and ultimate analysis as experienced by the author. The article is divided into two parts, ‘the incident’ and the ‘analysis’.

The incident precipitating ‘Scary Brown Man’ is located in airline travel from Washington to New York necessitated by an invitation for Ross to appear on television following the release of his book, ‘How to Say I Love You in Indian.’<sup>19</sup> Ross describes the first leg of his trip (Seattle to Chicago) on Southwest Airlines (SWA), on which he’s flown “a million times”<sup>20</sup> as unremarkable. On the second leg of the flight (Chicago to New York on Southwest Airlines) trouble begins at boarding.

SWA does not have assigned seating and with Ross in boarding group “C” he knows he is destined for a middle seat. He locates an open [middle] seat in the front of the plane, with two of the three seats occupied by a middle-aged white couple holding a baby. Ross asks if the seat is occupied and the woman quickly replies that she is “waiting for a friend.”<sup>21</sup> He waits patiently, assuming by her demeanor that the woman is lying. Ross isn’t mad or impatient with the woman, he knows the unassigned seating game and her hope that no one will take the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>19</sup> Gyasi Ross, *How to Say I Love You in Indian* (USA: Cutbank Creek Press, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Gyasi Ross, ‘Is there a problem?’ – *That Scary Brown Man and White Privilege* (1).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid



middle seat. When the final person boards, another middle-aged white woman, the seated woman grabs her hand as she walks by and asks her to sit with them. Ross states to the women that it is obvious to him that they do not know each other and asks the seated woman if she realizes the rudeness of her actions. The unknown woman quickly moves on while Ross stores his carry-on luggage and takes the aisle seat now vacated by the man who has “chivalrously”<sup>22</sup> moved over to sit between his wife and Ross. The woman chips away at Ross, telling him not to look at her and loudly proclaiming to her husband, “I don’t want him sitting there.”<sup>23</sup> Here Ross breaks character by stating to his readers: “White privilege is the inherent suspicion that people of color – and predominately men of color – are doing something wrong. Big black men and big brown men are presumed guilty. All the time.”<sup>24</sup> This moment signals to the reader that this work is as more than an op-ed piece written about one man’s singular experience, and is instead an essay reflecting the hatred toward ‘others’ acquired by white settler society. Frantz Fanon in talking about the way racism has changed since the era of lynching identifies this hatred as something that “cries out to exist”, which must be embodied through “action and the appropriate behavior.”<sup>25</sup> The words and actions of the settler characters in Ross’s article personify this accepted practice of discrimination.

Ross responds with carefully controlled anger telling her that she has “no input as to where I sit or where I look”<sup>26</sup>, while remembering his childhood training: “You’re a big brown guy – don’t be too scary. Don’t be too big. Don’t be too brown.”<sup>27</sup> Then the woman’s husband,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 35-36.

<sup>26</sup> Gyasi Ross, *‘Is there a problem?’ – That Scary Brown Man and White Privilege* (2).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

a petite built white man, tells Ross to shut his mouth. This experience characterizes the way race and settler colonialism continue to function through abuse of the Native male body. White men have the comfort of knowing they will be afforded the privilege of assumed innocence and victimhood, while the Native man is assumed at fault based on his appearance as a brown man.

During the winter quarter of 2017 I lead a class discussion around Indigenous masculinity in which I asked the men, particularly the brown men, to elaborate on what it meant to be a non-white man.<sup>28</sup> Four men of color spoke of the pressure, particularly as an adolescent, to fight when any, even in a very small way, a threat is perceived, or risk identification as a coward. Walking away from confrontation was never an option for them, because of social pressures to ensure their resistance to the existing power hierarchy. To walk away from these encounters was to accept the social and political structures as they were, something they subconsciously understood was detrimental to them and their communities. They also noted that it was acceptable for a “white boy” to back down or run away from a fistfight because his privilege of self-preservation was supported by his community. White boys have white privilege. They are protected from physical confrontation, or the shame of evading physical confrontation, due to the “institutional set of benefits granted [them]” from their resemblance to the “people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions.”<sup>29</sup> We discussed how settler men were raised to be wary of the dangers and violence of brown men, making walking away an option that can be taken with the threat of appearing less masculine,

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<sup>28</sup> For clarity and accountability, I intentionally advised the class that I was interested in their responses as it could directly apply to my work. No identifiers are used beyond broad race and gender.

<sup>29</sup> Francis Kendall, ‘Understanding White Privilege’ (2002)

unlike the experience of brown men. This is complicated by the reality brown men have in knowing that if a physical confrontation occurs between one of them and a white man there is the distinct probability that the brown man will be assumed to be at fault. Their non-existent safety net forces them to choose between preserving their masculinity or risking jail. Given the colonial stakes of the encounter, brown men fight or risk identification as 'unmanly' or cowardly.

The exchange between Ross and the white couple, although muted, garners the attention of the flight captain, a white man, who confronts Ross with, "Is there a problem here?"<sup>30</sup> Ross initially feels relief, but quickly realizes that the captain assumes he [Ross] is the "problem". He is given no opportunity to explain, is threatened with being removed from the flight, and is forced to back down or risk missing his meeting. The flight leaves with Ross silent and "stewing" about the incident. Ross followed up with an email complaint to SWA, who responded with "an incredibly condescending email"<sup>31</sup> stating they were sorry for his "less than pleasant" experience. For Ross the experience was not less than pleasant, but "humiliating," created by privilege, and supported by the fact that there was nothing he could do at the time of the incident without the risk of getting thrown off the flight or being provoked into a physical conflict – "In the same way cops provoke men of color by staring us down and asking if we have a problem and other rhetorical questions intended only to provoke."<sup>32</sup> This provocation effect is constructed by the settler colonial nation-state to place Native men into the role of criminal aggressor, thus limiting discourse on the spaces of their masculinity to the stereotypical fighting

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<sup>30</sup> Gyasi Ross, *'Is there a problem?' – That Scary Brown Man and White Privilege'* (3).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

Indian.<sup>33</sup> If Native men are raised to believe masculinity is defined by their willingness to fight when challenged or risk feeling like they are reinforcing the structures of power that place them as inferior, they carry a constant burden. The constructed image of Native masculinity is a burden that some brown men push back against by reframing themselves as family men, community men, and Native men who bring value to their community and nations.

Ross breaks his analysis of the episode into two categories: racism and white privilege. He defines the white couple as racist, because they react to Ross based on his physical appearance, that of a large brown man, allowing the husband to feel innately comfortable telling Ross to shut his mouth, which could not occur without the settler's security of superiority ensconced in settler colonialism. Glen Sean Coulthard<sup>34</sup> (Yellowknife Dene) reinforces this theory as he quotes Fanon's statement "I am not given a second chance. I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the 'idea' that others have of me, but to my appearance,"<sup>35</sup> to describe the subjectification resulting from colonialism. While it is his appearance that identifies the "Scary Brown Man" to the settler, triggering the embodiment of action and behavior, there is real danger saying we are a slave to our appearance. Rather than seeing brown male bodies as causing racist reactions, we need to understand how these reactions are structured by the ongoing process of settler colonialism. Holding the brown man responsible for his physical appearance as cause ignores and erases the responsibility of the white settler for creating and perpetuating the binary of settler colonialism and gender-race

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Henry, 'Social Spaces of Maleness' in *Indigenous Men and Masculinities* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press 2015) 182.

<sup>34</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2014), 139.

<sup>35</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 95.

bias. Ross pushes back against this perceived responsibility for the settler colonial response to his appearance by stating, “I don’t think it’s possible to see a stranger as a human being and talk to them like that...,” bringing to attention how racism and privilege positions brown bodies as less than human in the minds of the oppressor. This is important as it shifts the dichotomy of settler colonialism back off the colonized onto the colonizer where it rightfully belongs.

Ross questions racism as the inherent reason for the captains’ response, instead declaring him to have a “very bad case of white privilege.”<sup>36</sup> White privilege, as defined by Ross, is the inherent suspicion that people of color are doing something wrong. He supports this by referring to his first jury trial as a young attorney, in which the white prosecutor saw him and asked, “Excuse me sir, are you waiting for your attorney?”<sup>37</sup> She saw him and assumed in her privilege that a young brown man in a court room must be a defendant. She spoke to him politely, but her privileged assumption of white superiority didn’t recognize that the brown man in a suit might be a peer. While white privilege is a legitimate frame from which to analyze comforts afforded white skinned persons, it is important to draw on Anne Bonds and Joshua Inwood’s argument that white supremacy is a fundamental part of white privilege. They argue that white privilege “accentuates the structures of white power and the domination and exploitation that give rise to social exclusion and premature death of people of color in settler colonial states.”<sup>38</sup> As off-putting as the term white supremacy is, it is meant here not in the milieu of the Ku Klux Klan (although that can be included), but in the context that settler whites

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<sup>36</sup> Gyasi Ross, ‘*Is there a problem?*’ – *That Scary Brown Man and White Privilege*’ (4).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Anne Bonds and Joshua Inwood, “Beyond White Privilege: Geographies of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism,” *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no 6 (2015): 716.

innately consider themselves superior to people of color. When a huge Native man argues with a middle-class white couple and a white airline captain he [Native] is assumed to be the cause of the problem. That is white privilege. It is significant to understand that white privilege is simply a polite way of narrating the systemic oppression that stems from white supremacy, which is a direct result of settler colonialism. Gyasi Ross, and scores of other Native men, live under these conditions every day; they “bite their tongues” and “swallow their pride” to avoid being “beat down, pepper sprayed and thrown in jail.”<sup>39</sup> Ross eloquently lays out in ‘Scary Brown Man’ the assumption placed on Native men by the settler colonial construct that to be brown is to be dangerous and pushing back against this is fraught with its own peril.

#### ‘Reservation Blues’

Sherman Alexie’s novel, ‘Reservation Blues’ is a fictional account of several contemporary Native peoples on the Spokane Indian reservation. Alexie’s writing is considered by some readers as representative of the struggles experienced by contemporary Native peoples living on reservations/reserves throughout the continent.<sup>40</sup> This belief generates concern that some readers, particularly non-Native readers, could use it to point to the ‘backwardness’ and ‘afflictions’ of Indian country, without considering the same issues proliferate in non-reservation poverty stricken areas throughout settler North America or the larger structures that create these conditions. Barbara Chasin contemplates interpersonal violence as a way in which “the less privileged react to their situation, for instance, by engaging in street crime; or they may direct their anger at an unjust social order against scapegoats or

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<sup>39</sup> Gyasi Ross, ‘*Is there a problem?*’ – *That Scary Brown Man and White Privilege*’ (5).

<sup>40</sup> Gloria Bird, “The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie’s “Reservation Blues”” *Wicazo Sa Review* 11, no. 2 (1995).

the weaker and more vulnerable sectors of society.”<sup>41</sup> Poverty and violence aren’t just an ‘Indian Problem’. Spokane poet and scholar Gloria Bird expresses a similar concern in her critical review of ‘Reservation Blues’ stating, “As a Native reader, my concern is with the colonialist influence on the Native novel, and how that influence shapes the representation of Native culture to a mainstream audience.”<sup>42</sup> Bird’s critique of Alexie’s work emphasizes the difficulty of writing from an Indigenous perspective within a colonial narrative. In his February 2017 talk in Seattle, WA, I had the opportunity to question Alexie about the possibility that non-Native readers might use his work to perpetuate stereotypical ideas about Native peoples. Alexie confirmed that was a risk, but said, “I write stories based on my experiences that Indians can relate to, laugh about, and sometimes cry about. Always write yourself, don’t pretend.” Alexie writes his truth in a story that offers the reader enough insight to laugh out loud while at the same time feeling an incredible sadness. ‘Reservation Blues’ is a valid story of survivance movingly bringing to life the experiences of some Native men today despite what Bird refers to as its “terminal dysfunction.”<sup>43</sup>

‘Reservation Blues’ opens with the main character, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, meeting Robert Johnson, a down-and-out blues guitarist that arrives at the Spokane Indian reservation in search of Big Mom, a Coeur d’Alene elder who is rumored to be a mystical, hundreds-of-years-old musical genius. Johnson made a deal with the devil to be the world’s greatest guitar player, but the price he paid is weighing heavy on him and he believes only Big Mom can undo

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<sup>41</sup> Barbara H. Chasin, ‘Inequality & Violence in the United States – Casualties of Capitalism’ (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), 45.

<sup>42</sup> Gloria Bird, "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's "Reservation Blues", 48.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 52.

the deal. When Thomas takes Johnson to see Big Mom he (Johnson) purposely leaves Thomas his bedeviled guitar. Thomas, inspired by the new guitar forms a band called “Coyote Springs” comprised of struggling Spokane men Thomas, Victor, and Junior, and later two women named Checkers and Chess Warm Water, from the nearby Flathead reservation. The inclusion of female Indians is vital to the story for incorporating a gender balanced nuance to the relationships, indicating the need for community and family involvement in masculinity.<sup>44</sup>

In large part due to the bedeviled guitar, Coyote Springs quickly becomes popular with white people anxious to watch and listen to some ‘real Indians’. Two white groupies, Betty and Veronica, eventually join the band for a short period, but quickly quit to form their own band of pretendians<sup>45</sup> to capitalize on the popularity of Coyote Springs. Also, included in the story line are two men from the aptly named Cavalry Records, Sheridan and Wright, who represent history and settler colonialism. While Sherman Alexie does not offer a happy ending, his narrative tracing Coyote Springs rise and fall provide the framework to discuss issues relevant to Native Americans today. Each chapter begins with the lyrics to a blues song framing the historical pain and mistreatment of American Natives that continues today through settler colonialism. This subtle reference may be lost on a white audience that hasn’t experienced directly or through close relationships, the oppression of settler colonialism.

When Thomas meets Johnson, he wants to learn more about the stranger on his reservation, but he is “too polite and traditional”<sup>46</sup> to risk offending him. A brief explanation of

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<sup>44</sup> Although this “viewpoint” is fictional, it remains as valid a reference point as the expression included from the male characters in the story.

<sup>45</sup> A ‘wannabe’ American Indian exhibited by non-Indians for personal financial or social gain.

<sup>46</sup> Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Warner Books, 1995) 4.



what it means to be a “traditional” Spokane Indian follows claiming rules of conduct that are “thousands of years old” and have “been forgotten by most Spokane.”<sup>47</sup> The use of the word ‘traditional’ in defining who, or what kind of Indian Thomas is invites discussion around the conflict surrounding Native peoples of classifying traditional, non-traditional, urban, and/or reservation Indians. The labels in themselves are discordant and contribute to the identity politics playing out within many Native nations today. The question of ‘who is Indian enough’<sup>48</sup> contributes to internal conflict regarding where one fits in the world, already a concern of many Native peoples.

Alexie writes Thomas as ‘traditional’ with a character that develops as gentle, sensitive, prone to visions, storyteller, and tends not to drink, smoke, fight, or play basketball. His bandmates, Victor and Junior have been in Thomas’s world his entire life, and have a long history of bullying him physically and verbally. Victor’s character is defined by Alexie as one of those “Indian men” that “savagely” opened cans of commodities, “roared from place to place, set fires, broke windows, and picked on the weaker members of the Tribe.”<sup>49</sup> He is a fighter, bully, and [former] basketball player. Junior is Victor’s sidekick, tall and good looking like “Indians in the movies”, with long, straight, purple-black hair, and a former basketball star. He is a college drop-out who may or may not have fathered a few white babies during the two semesters he was away at college, and although he participates in bullying Thomas he stops Victor from carrying it too far. Junior tries to be good, but is haunted by the death of his

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Hilary Weaver, “Indigenous Identity: What is it, and Who Really Has It?” in *Native American Voices* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2010) 28-34.

<sup>49</sup> Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Warner Books, 1995) 15.

parents in a drunk driving accident, and is easily led astray by Victor. Both Victor and Junior drink to excess daily when money to buy alcohol is available. Junior's internal struggles result in his suicide at the end of the book.

With each of the three male characters' readers are presented with a stereotypical Native man: a mystic traditional, an angry fighting and drinking basketball player, and a college dropout alcoholic that wants to be good, but just can't seem to overcome the struggles of reservation life. Herein lies the conundrum of fictional works representing contemporary Native men. While scholarly research and statistics support the characterization of alcoholism, violence, and poor education systems on reservations and reserves throughout North America, Alexie's characters fail to push back against stereotype making it difficult for the uninformed reader to recognize the vast number of Native men flourishing today. This lack of recognition contributes to what Vine Deloria, Jr. referred to as the "plight of the Indian"<sup>50</sup> serving to reinforce the need of a white 'savior' to rescue the down-trodden Native. Not only does this reinforce the settler colonial construct of white superiority, but it may serve to reinforce internalization of the settler colonial construct of Native inferiority.

Thomas is a soft-spoken storyteller. He doesn't fight (although he is beat-up regularly), he doesn't drink, and he doesn't play basketball. He is part of his community, but he's invisible in his difference. Thomas doesn't fit the standard reservation male mold in either a positive or negative way. He isn't a "warrior" in the constructed stereotypical manner accepted by settlers and [too often] Native peoples. His character in the story is positioned as frail physically and emotionally, but Alexie skillfully weaves him through the story to emerge powerfully as an

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<sup>50</sup> Vine Deloria, Jr. 'Custer Died for Your Sins – An Indian Manifesto' (New York: MacMillan, 1969), 1.

alternative to the troubled and hopeless Native men portrayed through Victor and Junior. Thomas generates hope by accepting himself and allowing his masculine self to work non-violently with 'Chess Warm Water' in creating a future for themselves, in direct contrast to the abusive relationships of the other characters. When Thomas and Chess leave the reservation at the end of the novel it highlights their story of survivance and hope, because they're celebrating being together at an "ordinary human level and affirm[ing] their identities"<sup>51</sup> as Indigenous man and woman removing themselves from their toxic circumstances toward hope and renewal.

Nearly all of Alexie's novels use basketball as a means of navigating conflict. In this text, Thomas, the only non-ball player, uses it as a means to think through how it is that men earn respect on the reservation. Thomas narrates the story of his father Samuel, once the reservation's greatest basketball player, and a friend playing against a squad of tribal police led by Officer Wilson (a white man who hated living on the reservation but claimed a little Indian blood whenever it was useful)<sup>52</sup> to get out of a drunk-driving arrest. They face-off, two against six, in an epic clash of Indian vs. settler. Throughout the basketball battle the teams engage trash talk with Samuel calling out historical grievances with each of his legendary shots:

That was for every one of you Indians like you Tribal Cops. That was for all those Indian scouts who helped the U.S. Cavalry. That was for Wounded Knee I and II. For Sand Creek. Hell, that was for both Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, ...Leonard Peltier, too. And Marilyn Monroe. And Jimi Hendrix...<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith. 'Decolonizing Methodologies' (Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press, 2012), 146.

<sup>52</sup> Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Warner Books, 1995) 101-2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

Colonialism brought reservations and restrictions to the activity of Native men, strictly limiting their roles as providers and protectors and eliminating their opportunity to celebrate their bravery by counting coups, thus creating the need for an alternative means of earning honor and respect. Alexie's lifelong affair with basketball encapsulates the common joke among Native men that basketball is the new "Indian wars." High school gyms in Indian country fill with fans anxious to watch their team represent their community. In the words of Polish scholar Jozef Jaskulski the "basketball court on the reservation functions as a mock-heroic battleground/sweat lodge in which young people earn respect...a basketball player may be perceived as a transfiguration of the pre-colonial warrior, while making basketball plays might correspond to counting coups."<sup>54</sup> Indian basketball doesn't escape the racism inherent of settler colonialism however, as this year in Montana well-known radio personality Paul Mushaben posted a blog called "Indian Basketball" calling for a separate state league for "Indian teams" stating it's "not safe anymore" and "the majority of the problems occur when Native Americans play," comparing Indian basketball to "gang violence in cities like Chicago, which comes basically from the African American community."<sup>55</sup> Mushaben was suspended "indefinitely" by the radio station, but outrage over his comments have been overshadowed by the pouring of support he has received for what some believe to be a violation of his right to free speech. Even Native children playing basketball are regulated by the too big, too brown, and too "savage" rules of white privilege.

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<sup>54</sup> Jozef Jaskulski, "More Than a Game: Basketball as a medium of History in Three Early Works of Sherman Alexie," *Americana E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*, Volume X, Number 2, Fall 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Bob Cook, "Montana Radio Host Calls for Segregation of Native American School Basketball Teams" in [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com) (February 23, 2017).

Victor is a drunken bully, whose behavior is traced to his upbringing and abandonment by his alcoholic father and mistreatment from his white stepfather. His life is a cycle of suffering, including molestation by a Catholic priest, culminating in his own anger and substance abuse. Victor and Junior are “veterans of that war between father and sons... [and] knew the best defense was sleep.”<sup>56</sup> He is every stereotype of reservation Indians rolled into one sad character. Although I recognize Victor in the faces of some Blackfeet men, it is troubling to believe that this idea of Native masculinity is what settler society is comfortably applying to all Indigenous men without hesitance or thought. Identity politics of settler whites too easily regulate the “Victor’s” of society to the forefront as the “face” of Native masculinity, while ignoring the role gender bias and racism, created and reinforced by settler colonialism, plays in creating these dynamics.

Junior shares with Victor the traits of drinking and fighting, but he tries to push back against the stereotype by holding a job and showing erratic compassion. Initially he has the long-term job of driving the reservation water truck which identifies him as stable and dependable, but the more time he spends with Victor and the band the less interested he becomes in steady employment and he gets fired. He is a college dropout haunted by the death of his parents and the abortion of his child by his white college girlfriend. In the end, Junior is so overwhelmed with his history, current situation, crushing loneliness, and sense of failure that he climbs the reservation water tower with a stolen rifle and commits suicide.

The rate of suicide among Native population is indicative of the toll the structural violence of settler colonialism has on the physical and emotional bodies of Native peoples.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 96.

Junior is the tragic character of the 'Reservation Blues' story. His death is a pivotal point in the story, but it is in some ways taken in stride by the other characters. Native peoples have higher rates of suicide than any other group and it presents differently than the general population. Native American suicide presents most often among young male adults aged 18-24.<sup>57</sup> Young Native men are dying at phenomenal rates yet they continue to be portrayed as "victimizers, not as victims" within the "normalized" hegemonic masculinity perpetuated through white supremacist patriarchy.<sup>58</sup> This wide-spread normalization of settler colonial hegemonic constructs supports an environment so toxic that many Native men internalize and accept it as reality, responding with violence toward themselves or others; while settlers use it to continue to justify stereotyping and violence perpetrated against Native men by non-Native peoples.

Cherokee psychiatrist Dale Walker in addressing the perceived lack of empathy by Native peoples regarding suicide answers, "One of the most difficult things to hear is when the community says, 'We can grieve no more. We're cried out. We just can't respond anymore to the problem.'<sup>59</sup> Chasin identifies the high rates of suicide and violence among racialized groups as anger and rage transmuted into physical symptoms, with suicide being an "inward directed aggression."<sup>60</sup> Junior's suicide and the reservation communities lack of reaction reflects the commonality of suicide among Native American and First Nations population. Suicide within

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<sup>57</sup> Anna Almendrala, 'Native American Youth Suicide Rates Are At Crisis Levels,' *The Huffington Post* (10/02/2015).

<sup>58</sup> Robert Alexander Innes and Kim Anderson, *'Indigenous Men and Masculinities'* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 10.

<sup>59</sup> Anna Almendrala, 'Native American Youth Suicide Rates Are At Crisis Levels,' *The Huffington Post* (10/02/2015), <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/native-american-youth-suicide-rates-are-at-crisis-levels>

<sup>60</sup> Barbara H. Chasin, 'Inequality & Violence in the United States – Casualties of Capitalism' (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), 165-66.

the oppression of settler colonialism is self-inflicted genocide reflecting the on-going erasure and disappearance of Native men.

Reservation Blues is a survivance story of contemporary Native Americans facing structural violence with the peculiar sense of gallows humor that often develops from enduring a tough life. Alexie narrates us through the alcoholism, stereotypes, racism, and government-supplied food with a fatalistic sense of humor. Exaggerated accounts of reservation life and Indian humor make an entertaining story, but can also encourage readers to think critically about issues related to Native Americans and the inequities and constructs associated with settler colonialism.

### Conclusion

In Ross's 'Scary Brown Man' and Alexie's 'Reservation Blues' we're presented with situations in which Native men are defined and judged by outsiders and themselves. Ross, a well-educated and traveled Native man experiences racism and the impacts of systems of white privilege based on his physical appearance. He looks too Indian and too brown. The truth remains that Native men in the United States and Canada are the most likely racialized group of people to be killed by police. Native men also have the highest rate of incarceration and are more likely to have violence committed against them by someone *outside* their Native community than any other racialized group.<sup>61</sup>

Cree/Metis feminist scholar Kim Anderson has begun speaking out in support of research around Indigenous masculinity, realizing that "our families are only going to be as healthy as our men are, too. Perhaps it's time to pay attention to men who haven't had as

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<sup>61</sup> Steven Perry, 'American Indians and Crime' (Washington D.C.: US Department of Justice, 2004).

much of the focus.”<sup>62</sup> The identity politics of dividing and ranking the needs of Native men and women is an effective way to divide and conquer, which perpetuates the settler colonial agenda. For Native men to effectively reconstruct their own masculinity they must be supported by their peers, communities, families, and partners without restriction.

‘Scary Brown Man’ and ‘Reservation Blues’ are survivance stories about the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism on Native men. As long as settler colonialism exists, with its tentacles of racism, white privilege, oppression, and violence, we will need to explore and advocate for ways to lessen its damaging impact on Native masculinity. We must simultaneously work to build movements that can challenge settler colonial power and self-serving priorities. Failing to understand how even the violence perpetrated by Native men is representative of the violence on Native men will create more casualties. Recognizing what is happening is a first step toward seeking solution. Too many of our men have vanished. It is time to walk beside our brothers in support as they move beyond fistfights and basketball.

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<sup>62</sup> Sam McKegney. ‘Masculindians – Conversations about Indigenous Manhood’ (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 92.



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