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## Conjuring the Colonizer: Alternative Readings of Magic Realism in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

WENDY BELCHER

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Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* has inspired both admiration and castigation.<sup>1</sup> Critics such as Stephen Evans, Adrian C. Louis, Joseph Coulombe, and James Cox have praised Alexie's satiric upending of stereotypes about Native Americans, claiming that Alexie's work "uses stereotypes . . . of the . . . Indian, in new and entirely moral and ethical ways."<sup>2</sup> Other critics such as Gloria Bird, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Kenneth Lincoln, and Louis Owens have argued instead that Alexie's work "simply reinforces all of the stereotypes desired by white readers [of] . . . absurd and aimless Indians."<sup>3</sup> Yet in his review of the positive and negative scholarship on Alexie, Evans insists that Alexie is "a consciously moral satirist" and not a "cultural traitor."

I would like to contribute to this debate by suggesting a further reason to see Alexie's work as subversive rather than complicit. In contrast to quite a bit of "multicultural lit," Alexie's *Reservation Blues* does not associate magic with Indian culture so much as with white culture. Much of *Reservation Blues* turns expected magical tropes on their heads with American Indians presented as the antithesis of magic and the embodiment of rationality. Whether intentionally or not, Alexie confronts stereotypes with their opposites. The text thus inheres magic in the Western rather than in the indigenous, articulating the material struggle at the heart of the colonial relationship.

### MISREADING MAGIC REALISM

Magic realism is widely considered a literary style, but it is more often a critical category. That is, *magic realism* (codified in German, Spanish, and English in the mid-twentieth century) is more often a term that twentieth-century critics

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apply rather than a term twentieth-century authors embrace. Critics depend on categories, but writers eschew them, and *magic realism* is a term almost no writer will claim.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, we can talk about magic realism as an important critical approach linking discussions of literatures written outside Europe or North America or written by immigrants to those centers.<sup>5</sup> This critical approach attends to textual instances in which the fabulous is detailed, the supernatural meets the everyday, and the ordinary and the extraordinary are presented as analogous. Critics identify a text as magic realist if it treats the extraordinary as real.

Not incidentally, this critical approach also attends to the relationship of such instances to oppression. For many critics, magic realism is rooted in politics and is a literary form of the colonized. Critics as diverse as Frederic Jameson, Gabriel García Márquez, Elleke Boehmer, and Luis Leal have claimed that the sources of magic realism rise from the space where Western colonial structures intersect with and dominate indigenous traditional structures.<sup>6</sup> And there seems to be something to the idea that magic realism emerges out of a struggle between dominator and dominated. We see such a struggle at work in our examination of the earliest recorded instance of magic realism.

In the Tanakh book of Numbers, in a story from the Yahwist source written around 960 BCE, the Hebrew God approaches the foreign prophet Balaam, and a series of intimate conversations ensue.<sup>7</sup> At one point, however, God grows angry with the prophet and sends an angel to block Balaam's way. Balaam cannot see the angel, but his beast of burden can and keeps turning from the path to avoid the dreadful figure. Each time the supernatural appears, it is more unavoidable, appearing first in a wide open space, then in a fenced lane, and then "in a narrow place where there was no way to turn right or left." Each time, Balaam beats the ass to spur her to keep going. Beaten once, twice, three times, the subjected creature, impossibly, speaks. "And God opened the ass's mouth and she spoke." There is no comment on this magical occurrence in the text; Balaam indicates no surprise. He simply talks back, threatening to kill the ass. In this exchange, the persecuted ass does not challenge the master but instead asks three questions: What have I done to deserve this? Don't you know me? Have I ever behaved this way before? Balaam grows quiet and then God "uncovered Balaam's eyes," revealing the angel, to whom Balaam bows. The angel announces that the ass has saved Balaam's life, for God surely would have killed Balaam had he continued on the way. Balaam apologizes to the angel, although notably not to the ass, Balaam is spared, and the ass is never heard from again.<sup>8</sup>

This passage can be read as an example of magic realism that dramatizes relationships of power through the extraordinary. The master and his slave both exist in the world of the real. But the master is not open to the extraordinary and persists with hubris in the face of every sign that an over-arching power is present. The slave does see the extraordinary, suggesting that the slave is part of the extraordinary but under some charm that veils her knowledge and power. Double subject, to this world and the other, the slave saves the master from certain annihilation, but the master is ungrateful, unknowing, and vindictive. Finally, the supernatural opens the master's eyes,

allows him to see the sacred, and thus reveals a reversal: the subjected has saved the subjector; the slave is more knowing than the master. With this the story ends, one assumes, with the ass returned to speechlessness and the master returned to sovereignty. The story is a sort of parable in which human domination is combated with indigenous knowledge of the extrahuman. Balaam is the foreign power writ large; the dumb ass is the subaltern writ small. The even tone in which the ordinary and extraordinary are detailed highlights the bizarre relation of power between two animals more similar to each other than to the all-powerful.

Although there is something to the critics' idea that magic realism arises out of contexts of domination, the easy pairing of the form with colonial contexts is not without its drawbacks. Critics have made some troubling statements as a result. Jameson, in a much-cited formulation, sees magic realism as arising from capitalism "locked in conflict with traces of the older mode" of precapitalism and from "peasant society" as a form of "sophisticated . . . tribal myth."<sup>9</sup> Salman Rushdie makes a similar point that magic realism comes from elevating "the village world-view above the urban one" as does V. S. Naipaul who locates it where "the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new."<sup>10</sup> In many readings of magic realism, critics split the two-part term into negative and positive halves to be used as a binary weapon with which to attack the wedded realities of colonial and postcolonial life. Critics align *magic* with the supposedly primitive, ancient, indigenous, mythical, and tribal past (the negative half of the binary) and align *realism* with the modern, advanced, and Western present (the positive half of the binary). This magic-realist critical approach perpetuates the view that other peoples are superstitious primitives, and Western peoples are rationally advanced.

I have addressed this critical problem elsewhere and will not pursue it here.<sup>11</sup> My interest is in whether this critical approach merely reflects the texts or is a misreading of them. What happens if we look for a magic-realist text in which "magic" aligns with the West and "realism" with the Other? Although applying any binary to a text is not an appropriate end for a liberatory project, I believe that in this case it can be an effective means to an end. Reversing the magic-realist binary shows up the absurdity of the original in a way that a more nuanced reading may not.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, I challenge the magic-realist critical approach by looking at magic realism in a famous US multicultural text to determine what is magical in the text and if this magic is always aligned with traditional indigenous beliefs. Is it possible that, in the oppressive colonial context, magic is sometimes portrayed as what is foreign to the colonial situation (that is, the Western)? Perhaps some texts represent the foreign not as the West's foreign, but the foreign to the colonized subject, the alien and bizarre powers of the West arriving *deus ex machina* with cold light, deadly sticks, and executed gods. Perhaps some texts imagine that what is magical about the colonial situation is the modern, the Western, the technological, rather than some ancient, precapitalist past.

Michael Taussig suggests such a possibility in his astonishing book *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*.<sup>13</sup> The book is not one of literary criticism, but in several asides he applies the term

*magic realism* intriguingly. He does not use it to describe the work of Latin American writers but to describe the project of the “diseased” colonial imagination in Columbia, which created a reality on the ground out of Western fictions of superiority and savagery. The Spaniards’ paranoia about the supposed violence of the Indians was worked up into wild stories that

were a potent political force without which the work of conquest . . . could not have been accomplished. What is crucial to understand is the way these stories functioned to create through magical realism a culture of terror that dominated both whites and Indians. . . . Like children [the colonizers] had nightmares of witches, evil spirits, death, treason, and blood. The only way they could live in such a terrifying world . . . was to inspire terror themselves. (121–22)

Taussig’s use of the term *magic realism* is not split. He does not align magic with the Indians and realism with the Spaniards; he aligns both with the modern culture of terror, the nightmare that is colonialism, the way illusion becomes a social force, and magic becomes a medium of domination. The hallucinatory relationship between the colonized and colonizer is magical, not one or the other.

Tzvetan Todorov is also suggestive in this context, as he makes a useful distinction between fantastic, uncanny, and marvelous literary genres in his structuralist classic *The Fantastic*. According to him, the fantastic is about uncertainty, hesitation, and ambiguity, while the uncanny and the marvelous are about certainty. Each of the three genres has different relations to the real. For instance, in the gothic novel, when a character experiences an inexplicable or impossible event, she and the reader wonder whether it is real or no more than an illusion. We remain in the category of fantasy as long as there is uncertainty as to whether the event represents the true presence of the infrequently experienced extrahuman or is just a trick. Usually we make some decision by the end of the gothic novel. If a natural explanation is reached (the curtain moved due to wind not ghosts) then one emerges from the fantastic into the genre of the uncanny. If the supernatural is accepted, one emerges into the marvelous.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, when from the beginning a text expresses no doubt and forbids doubt by presenting the inexplicable and the explicable as equally real, it is marvelous.

Todorov’s distinction can be used to highlight the political nature of magic-realist texts, which do not explain away the bizarre as coincidence or natural law or trickery but as the deliberate, everyday occupation of reality by the mappable forces of utter Other. In the colonial situation this Other is the West. Both Taussig’s and Todorov’s work suggests that magic realism—the marvelous—is about the awesome illogical power of the foreign.

#### REREADING MAGIC REALISM

Let us look at a text to see if we can effect this reversed binary reading; if there is a novel in which the marvelous, or magical, is not related to the “negative”

half of the binary, a novel in which magic does not revolve around the primitive, indigenous, traditional, mythical, folkloric, religious past. Perhaps there is a US multicultural novel in which the magical is more related to the "positive" half of the binary, revolving around the modern, the rational, the Western, the technological, the scientific. I reverse the binary to deconstruct the term not because any binary is an accurate or fair way of describing the interaction of a multiplicity of cultures across an enormous field of multivalent agencies. For the purposes of this article, magic is defined as inexplicable physical phenomena, and/or phenomena that are sometimes conjured by the human hand or voice.

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, a novel that won its author the American Book Award and *Granta's* Best American Writers under Forty Award, is a brilliant engagement with magical myths, especially those about rather than by First Americans. As James Cox points out, many Native American authors, including Sherman Alexie, "write new narratives of self-representation that critically question and often radically revise and subvert the dominant culture's conquest narratives and the mass-produced misrepresentations of Native Americans."<sup>15</sup> *Reservation Blues* is particularly interesting in this respect.

In this novel, Coyote Springs, an American Indian rock band, begins and ends through a magical guitar. The guitar appears on page one, carried in on the back of blues music progenitor Robert Johnson, and provides the motivation for most of the plot developments in the book because it seduces various characters into playing it. Of its own will, the guitar speaks, moves, telepathizes, teletransports, burns, cuts, and re-members itself. Johnson "buried that guitar, he threw it in rivers, dropped it off tall buildings. But it always came back to him" (173). Like a familiar, the guitar also purrs, snuggles, and nuzzles (223, 29, 202).

Such magical events sometimes perplex the characters but are never questioned. Thomas Builds-the-Fire has a matter-of-fact conversation with the guitar (21–23). Victor thinks nothing of the scars he receives from playing the guitar (33). The dentist calmly replaces fillings shaken out by a powerful guitar chord (34). Audiences can actually see music rising from the guitar (41). The down-to-earth human response to the animate object assures us that that we are in the realm of magic realism when the guitar is present.<sup>16</sup> The extraordinary is being treated as ordinary.

Yet the guitar is definitely not a traditional, indigenous, religious, or American Indian object. The traditional instruments of the Americas are drums, rattles, flutes, and whistles. The guitar is a secular, Western stringed instrument developed in Spain in the sixteenth century, one that traveled to the New World with colonialism. Not only is its general history and form Western but also in *Reservation Blues* the guitar is specifically marked as Western by its affiliations. The characters use it to play urban popular music, such as rock and rap, not "the standard Indian soundtrack stuff" that Thomas disparages: "a vaguely Indian drum, then a cedar flute, and a warrior's trill" (295). The guitar's sounds are worldly not religious, Anglo not Indian, a fact an "old Indian woman" criticizes, saying that "the traditionals don't like your

white man's music" (179). Furthermore, the modern metal, not wooden, part of the instrument comes in for the most comment, cutting like a razor and sending off sparks, thereby branding its owners. That a Western, slightly technological textual object should be magical does not follow ordinary magic-realism tropes. For instance, in a book such as Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, only traditional, indigenous objects are magical.<sup>17</sup> In *Reservation Blues*, expected magical tropes are turned on their heads. For the magic guitar is clearly associated throughout the novel with whiteness, Western cultural domination, and colonization.

First, its power was gained through the touch of a mysterious white man. According to this story, a desperate African American man with a guitar comes across the Gentleman, a "handsome white man [who] wore a perfectly pressed black wool suit" (264). The Gentleman, his class and race clearly indicated, then offers the untalented player the chance to "play this damn guitar better than anybody ever played guitar" (8). All the Gentleman needs in exchange is that which Robert Johnson loves most: his freedom. Johnson knows what this means: he will gain mastery over a powerful object by giving up mastery over himself. The text is clear that to agree is to become abject to white power: listening to the Gentleman's voice, Johnson "felt the whip that split open the skin on his grandfather's backs. He heard the creak of floorboard as the white masters crept into his grandmother's bedrooms" (264). Furthermore, when Johnson agrees to the deal because "he only felt loved when he was on stage," the text states that "the horses screamed" (263, 265). This is a reference to the Indian horses slain as a military maneuver by white officers colonizing the West.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the negotiation, the Gentleman reaches out, touches the guitar "with a tip of his fingernail," and fades away with "the majority of stock in Robert Johnson's soul" (6). Johnson gains magical power through the white man, not through any African talisman or Indian ritual performed by a shaman. *Reservation Blues* is clear that the guitar becomes magical through white oppression. The guitar is not magical because of any indigenous connection to the supernatural but because a man of color gave up his freedom. White magic is the bad magic in *Reservation Blues*. It inheres in all Western objects, manifested as the commodity fetish that enslaves. As just one example of such reification, the band comes across another magical guitar, one of cardboard whose sound "defied its construction" (153). Despite its lack of "real" value, it has enslaved its player.

Second, the Gentleman's guitar participates in and is a weapon of the white colonizer. The guitar gives false promises: insinuating that the band will appear on the cover of *Rolling Stone* (28). The guitar ruins the player: so wounding the hands of both Robert Johnson and "an old Indian man singer" that they can no longer play (6, 153). The guitar humiliates the player: bucking and writhing out of Victor's hands during the studio session that would mean financial success (225–26). The guitar murders the player by convincing Junior to climb the water tower and commit suicide (248). Finally, the guitar leaves the player. Returning from their disastrous experiences in New York, Victor fights with a white man over a guitar case at baggage claim. Walking away with the guitar, the white man asserts the provenance of the

instrument, "You act like I'm stealing something from you. This is my guitar. This is my name. I didn't steal anything" (260). Guitars ultimately belong to whites, no matter who the owner is. They are complicit with and equivalent to Western cultural domination.

Third, as a magical object, the guitar embodies colonialism's ability to make traps feel like freedom. For it brings perhaps the ultimate seduction for the invisible subaltern of the Western world: recognition. As the guitar says to Victor, "you can be anybody you want to be" (255). Through the magic of the guitar, the marginalized can leave the shadowy, unseen world and enter the "real" Western world. They become visible, believable selves, and this feels like triumph to the subjected individual. So Thomas warns that receiving stage acclaim means that they will hear their names "chanted over and over, until we are deaf to everything else," but they proceed anyway (211). The appeal of being recognized, of emerging from the margin into the spotlight, is too powerful: for Thomas, "I want strangers to love me. I don't even know why" (213); for Johnson, "he only felt loved when he was on stage" (263).

To be believed in and seen as a natural part of this world, not the next, is too great a human need to be resisted. When Checkers has a nightmare about officer Sheridan, she keeps insisting, "I don't believe in you," but even in the dream world the colonizer has power, leaving physical marks on her body (237–38, 241). In such a world, the desire to leave the ghostly realm of the Other to enter into an acknowledged materiality is almost overwhelming. As the man-who-was-probably-Lakota says, "Music is a dangerous thing" (12). "Maybe something bad is going to happen to us if we don't have something better on our minds," Thomas predicts (72).

Resistance to this golden trap must come in the form of the rejection of commodity culture. As long as Johnson doesn't "play music for money," he's safe from the blandishments of the guitar (173). But how is one enabled to make this all-important rejection? Interestingly, it is not through magic.

Spokane Indian Big Mom is the one who enables Robert Johnson to free himself from his Faustian deal with white power. Although their connection is magical, his freedom comes through largely practical measures. For instance, Big Mom appears to Johnson in dreams, so he searches for her to become healed (5). "You're safe here," she tells him in her home on the reservation mountaintop (173). Over time with her, "he gained weight, his eyes were clear, his hands had healed" (278). He stops obsessing about guitars as the pull of the magical guitar, forever present, lessens (263). Final healing comes when Big Mom carves a cedar harmonica and gives it to Johnson, who feels "a movement inside the wood, something familiar." Big Mom tells him that he was never meant to be a guitar player. "You were supposed to be a harp player. You're a good harp player. All by yourself [without Western magic] you can play a mean harp" (278).

Big Mom does not cast any spells over Johnson; she does not charm a new instrument from the air. She simply calls forth Johnson's innate talent, just as she does with the members of the band Coyote Springs. Although the harmonica she carves of cedar is magical—it has "a movement inside the wood"—it is not magic that heals. Johnson heals himself through another

human being's corporeal protection by responding to his true calling. By eschewing the easy solutions of Western, technological, instantaneous magic, and depending on one's own self-discipline and hard work, one becomes whole.

Big Mom is a fascinating character in terms of the binary of magic realism. Although she is the most magical figure in the text (for instance, she is more than 134 years old and was once seen to walk on water [9, 199]), she is also the most practical. In many ways, Big Mom is represented as the antithesis of magic and the embodiment of rationality. She is preternaturally wise but neither omniscient nor omnipotent. "She was never sure what would happen to" her students who invent "stuff I never would have thought of, like jazz and rap" (216). She doesn't foresee Junior's death (278), cannot prevent the horses from dying (10), and can't stop the band from wanting to sign their lives away (214). She doesn't fly, can't raise the dead, and doesn't suddenly appear and disappear.

Rather, her powers are earthbound. "I ain't God," she says at one point, "I'm just a music teacher" (209). Of course, she is a very gifted musician and teacher, "a musical genius" who has taught even birds to sing (201). But her gifts are more human than religious. She has a talent for reading people's minds and seeing their psychic wounds, as when she advises Victor to forgive the priest who molested him, an aggression no one knew of but Victor (203–4). If she is magical, it is in the unnatural way she has developed the human ability of empathetic understanding, rather than in any connection with the supernatural. She is more of a guardian, a custodian of traditional practices, than a magician.

In many scenes, the idea that Big Mom is magical is rebuked. When Big Mom knows in advance that the band is going to play for a record company, Victor insists that she knows this information because "everybody on the reservation knows about it by now. Ain't no magic in that." She agrees, mildly adding that "gossip can be a form of magic" (203). When Thomas asks for the source of her wisdom that "it's bad luck to travel on an empty stomach," Big Mom replies, "I just made it up" (299). When Father Arnold asks her, "Don't you know everything?" she replies, simply, "No" (279).

Finally, in one of the most important scenes about magic in the book, Big Mom deliberately mocks belief in her superhuman powers. At the Longhouse feast, there is not enough fry bread for everyone. "There'll be a fry bread riot," the cook predicts. But Big Mom saves the day.

Just as the feast was about to erupt into a full-fledged riot, Big Mom walked out of the kitchen with a huge bowl of fry bread. The crowd, faithful and unfaithful alike, cheered wildly.

"Listen," Big Mom said after the crowd had quieted a little. "There's not enough fry bread. . . . But there is a way," Big Mom said. "I can feed you all."

"How?" asked somebody.

Thomas, Chess, and Checkers peered from under the table, listening for the answer.

"By ancient Indian secrets," Big Mom said.

"Bullshit!"

"Watch this," Big Mom said as she grabbed a piece of fry bread and held it above her head. "Creator, help me. I have only a hundred pieces of fry bread to feed two hundred people."

Big Mom held that fry bread tightly in her huge hands and then tore it into halves.

"There," Big Mom said. "That is how I will feed you all."

The crowd cheered, surging forward to grab the fry bread. There was a complete feast after all.

"Big Mom," Thomas asked later as they were eating, "how did you do that? What is your secret?"

Big Mom smiled deeply.

"Mathematics," Big Mom said. (301–2)

This splendid parody of the biblical story of Christ feeding the five thousand makes a deeper point about real wisdom. The source of community strength lies not in the supernatural but in human ingenuity. Need can be met with science, not magic. Big Mom's human warmth, strength, and practicality, not any connection with the supernatural, make her a figure of strength. In humorous stories like this, *Reservation Blues* distances any easy correlation of Indian culture with New Age ideas about Native American magical powers.

*Reservation Blues* also refuses to portray the magic realism of every day life as a conflict between a supposedly magical Indian culture and a supposedly real Western rationality. Rather, Indian culture and people frequently embody rationality while the West spews easy, dangerous magic. For instance, Victor does not believe in magic (203) or that "the reservation . . . still possessed . . . magic" (96). He conflates "Big Mom's magic" with New Age crystals (207), the force of *Star Wars* (203), and other "spooky shit" (200). When Victor sees white women or snakes where there are none—it's not magic but alcohol at work (57, 211). It's true that the characters in the book do have vivid visions, take comfort in eagle feathers while on airplanes (219), are baptized and pray (138), and die with colors streaming from their mouths (65). But most often, the only named Indian "magic" is that of nature (167) or reading people's minds (204). Most of all, magic is never offered as salvation for the Indian characters. As Big Mom says to Father Arnold, "It's up to you, no matter what, enit?" You have to do it yourself without the help of magic—either Native or foreign.

Although Western magic surrounds the Indian characters, they rarely perform it themselves. Alexie often mocks the idea that they have magical powers. Checkers feels pity for Indian men, who claim "I'm Super Indian Man. . . . Able to leap tall HUD houses in a single bound. Faster than a BIA pickup. Stronger than a block of commodity cheese" and yet weep for their lost, stolen, and pawned manhood (114). Thomas bemoans the Indians who expect too much from other Indians, who ask "a reservation hero" to "change a can of sardines into a river of salmon" (97). When Samuel does fly—"there he was, flying for real. Flying true. Flying four feet above the basketball court.

He flew over the Tribal Cops”—it makes no difference; he misses the shot, and the cops don’t (126).

The characters also reject as a Western projection the idea that Indians have a special magic. As Thomas laments, white people tend to “think that Indians got all the answers” (158). They don’t, Chess tells the white women Betty and Veronica, who “want the good stuff of being Indian without all the bad stuff” (184). Life isn’t like that, Chess tells them. The reservation is not divided, “a concussion is just as traditional as a sweatlodge,” and “every place is sacred” (184). God is composed of “Indian and woman pieces” and also “white and man pieces” (205). After their meltdown in the recording studio, Victor loses control, shouting that Big Mom “ain’t magic.” Then he heartbreakingly adds, “and even if she was, she’s a million miles away. What the fuck can she do?” (230). Indian magic cannot reach into and alter the lies of the Anglo world.

Salvation comes only when magic is rejected. When Johnson gives up the guitar, as the Old Indian man did, Johnson gains a breathtaking voice. When he sings then, “those blues created memories for the Spokanes. . . . Those blues were ancient, aboriginal, indigenous” (174). This music made far from the magical Western guitar is sacred. This is not due to the tricks of magic or technology but from “generations of anger and pain” (174). As Thomas adds, “We have to keep our songs private and hidden” if their power is to be kept from appropriation (178).

In contrast, *Reservation Blues* often presents the West as having significant magical powers. When the white Catholic priest is burning “the devil’s work,” the child Thomas “grabbed the first book off the top of the pile, and ran away” (147). What was this powerful book of Western wisdom that needed to be destroyed? *How to Fool and Amaze Your Friends: 101 Great Tricks of the Master Magicians*. Thomas finds out that Western magic helps you trick others, not help them; helps you master others, not heal them. *Reservation Blues* is full of such tricky Western magic. When the white officers fell the Indian horses, *Reservation Blues* links this action magically to the present: “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’s Hospital” (10). Sometimes this Western magic is a visibly false trick: “Undercover CIA and FBI agents dressed up like Indians and infiltrated band practices but didn’t fool anybody because they danced like shit” (33).

Most frequently, the magic revolves around Western commodities. For instance, on hearing a mournful word of loss, “the secondhand furniture in Thomas’s house moved an inch to the West” (97). In a more stereotypic magic-realism novel, the dream catchers would have shivered, or the sage bushes would have trembled. Not in *Reservation Blues*, where the very mark of Western-produced poverty, secondhand furniture, is what is affected. In *Reservation Blues*, metal “folding chairs proved the existence of God” rather than miraculous appearances of spirits. The machine of the blue van is vivified, as it stops and proceeds of its own accord (49, 169) and refuses to go more than forty miles per hour (134). “This van don’t want to go to Seattle,” Junior comments placidly, accepting the reality that Western goods fail to

serve. Likewise, "commodity food" is full of "failed dreams and predictable tears" (220). Thomas, "in a ceremony that he had practiced since his youth," keeps opening his empty fridge "expecting an immaculate conception of a jar of pickles" (47) and dines on "wish sandwiches" (187) because the food never appears. When Thomas cries, "those tribal tears collected and fermented in huge BIA barrels. Then the BIA poured those tears into beer and Pepsi cans and distributed them back on the reservation" (100). The products of capitalism are magical; they are not traditional wedding cakes, as in other magic-realism texts such as *Like Water for Chocolate*.<sup>19</sup> Even when traditional figures are invoked, they don't control traditional objects. Coyote performs his magic on Western technology: "Coyote stole Junior's water truck and hid it in the abandoned dance hall at the pow-wow grounds" (45).

In *Reservation Blues*, magic imbues alcohol, the most poisonous of the Western colonial commodities. The white officers Sheridan and Wright drink from "old, antique, stained" flasks that they have been using for more than a century (193). These colonial flasks show up magically in Junior's coffin, and, like an "alcoholic magician, Junior pulled flask after flask from his clothes and handed them to Victor, who threw them out the window into Turtle Lake" (291). This act of defiance does not erase the flasks' power, however. When Victor succumbs again to drink, "that little explosion of the beer can opening sounded exactly like a smaller, slower version of the explosion that Junior's rifle made on the water tower" (293). This linked narrative of addictive Western goods evidences the terrible power and persistence of the magical in the disciplinary processes of Western colonization.

Finally, magic revolves around the white figures on the reservation. When Samuel makes a small mistake, a white authority figure is conjured. "Surprised, Samuel swerved across the center line, which caused Spokane Tribal Police Officer Wilson to suddenly appear" (101). The Federal Express delivery person is always appearing and disappearing instantaneously, magically (47, 124, 294): "Thomas opened the door to nothing. He looked around. Nobody. He was about to shut the door when he heard a voice" (124). In another scene with the white deliveryman, Thomas actively wonders what ghost has come to haunt him (294).

In all these ways, *Reservation Blues* opposes empire by inhering magic in the Western rather than in the indigenous. Through magic, Alexie articulates the material struggle at the heart of the colonial relationship, even critiquing the traffic in culturally "othered" artifacts and goods. As he has said elsewhere, "the passage of money invalidates any sort of sacredness."<sup>20</sup> Magic is not the good news. Rather, cultural production that has not been exchanged for use value is the source of strength, as when "Big Mom taught them a new song, the shadow horses' song, the slaughtered horses' song, the screaming horses' song, a song of mourning that would become a song of celebration: we have survived, we have survived" (306). In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie resists exoticism by redeploying magic to uncover differential relations of power.

## CONCLUSION

Part of the reason I want to insist on such a reverse reading of the binary of magic realism is that the easy alignment of magic and the indigenous means that magic realism is increasingly read and, I argue, produced to support exotic and nostalgic notions of immigrant communities that are no more than racist reductions. As another critic has put it so well, “the dominant reading formation that currently canonizes the narratives of Cisneros, Alvarez, Garcia, and Castillo often works to exoticize the culture of the Latina Other within such preconceived categories as ‘magical realism.’”<sup>21</sup> Frank Chin has also noted problems with magic realism in *The Big Aaaaaieee!*<sup>22</sup> In this sense, multicultural novels may not always maintain a position beyond the cooptations of postmodernity but must actively avoid being subsumed by the power of magic realism to feed into preconceived notions of the Other.

Graham Huggan warns that it is dangerous to see such writers as pandering to a Western metropolitan demand:

To accuse postcolonial writers/thinkers of being lackeys to [late-capitalist commodity exchange] is . . . to underestimate their power to exercise agency over their work. It may also be to devalue the agency, both individual and collective, of their *readers*, who by no means form a homogeneous or readily identifiable consumer group.<sup>23</sup>

But it is interesting to contrast magic realism in other texts with the more subversive project of *Reservation Blues*. In other texts, that which is Western, modern, or technological is almost never magical. Few concretize the power of colonialism through a seductive magical Western object; most people further abstract it with metaphors, mystifying rather than clarifying human relations of power. The magic realism of many multicultural texts comes in the way of a more progressive presentation of the irrational horrors of colonization.

Of course, reversing the binary reading only takes us so far into *Reservation Blues*. The Indian characters cannot be reduced but, like the shirts that Big Mom weaves, are “made of highly traditional silk and polyester” (303). Neither the Indians nor the Westerners are limited to either magic or rationality but are a complex mix of both. Many readings of this complex text are possible. Further, whether Alexie intended the reversal of the traditional stereotypes of Indian magic and irrationality that I see is uncertain. The magicking of the West may be the effect of other intentions.

In interviews, Alexie rarely talks about magic realism but emphasizes his own interest in the real, the everyday, and the human. “I want my literature to concern the daily lives of Indians,” he has said, adding that Native American literature is too often “obsessed with nature” rather than people.<sup>24</sup> He has also said that his main intention in writing *Reservation Blues* was to write a “funny” book with a “happy ending.”<sup>25</sup> Intriguingly for my argument, however, he has also asserted that “I don’t write about anything sacred,” largely because he wants to protect Indian cultural privacy (67). He has not wanted to do “a traveling road show of Indian spirituality.”<sup>26</sup> Alexie’s natural impulses toward

the humorous and the everyday, and away from revealing cultural secrets, may have resulted in a text that overturned typical magic-realist tropes and aligned magic with the commodity colonialism of the West.

Whatever his intentions, when Alexie writes in his short-story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* about the “crazy mirrors” of the carnival, which “make a white man remember that he’s the master” and “can never change the dark of your eyes,” he is making the move he makes so well, turning the West inside out, revealing its hollow, complicit magic.<sup>27</sup> He is theorizing the “antagonistic relationship between indigenous and colonial” peoples as an engagement vexed with a supernatural level of Western tricks and violence.<sup>28</sup> Through reverse appropriation, Alexie projects stereotypes of the primitive and magical on to the Indian’s other. In the debate about whether Alexie is supporting or challenging stereotypes, a reverse binary reading of the text’s magical realism helps reveal Alexie’s subversive project and encourages us to embrace the trickster, not traitorous, nature of the text.

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### NOTES

1. Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Warner, 1995).

2. Quote from Stephen F. Evans, “‘Open Containers’: Sherman Alexie’s Drunken Indians,” *The American Indian Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 46–73. See Adrian C. Louis, “Foreword,” in *Old Shirts and New Skins* by Sherman Alexie (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1993); Joseph L. Coulombe, “The Approximate Size of His Favorite Humor: Sherman Alexie’s Comic Connections and Disconnections in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*,” *The American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 94–117; James Cox, “Muting White Noise: The Subversion of Popular Culture Narratives of Conquest in Sherman Alexie’s Fiction,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 52–70.

3. Gloria Bird, “The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*,” *Wicazo Sa Review* (Fall 1995): 47–52; Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, “American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story,” in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, ed. Devon A. Mihesuah, 111–38 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Kenneth Lincoln, *Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry 1890–1999* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 79.

4. See the complaints of Nuruddin Farah in Liam Connell, "Discarding Magic Realism: Modernism, Anthropology, and Critical Practice," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 29, no. 2 (April 1998): 95; and the complaints of Francisco Goldman (author of *The Long Night of White Chickens*) in Karen Christian, *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 122. Even García Márquez claims that he is a social realist (*Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995], 4).

5. Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

6. Frederic Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Winter 1986): 301–25; Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 235; Gabriel García Márquez, "Latin America's Impossible Reality," trans. Elena Brunet, *Harper's* 270, no. 1616 (January 1985): 13–16; Luis Leal, "El realismo mágico en la literatura hispano-americana," *Cuadernos Americanos* 43, no. 4 (1967): 230–35. Translated by Wendy B. Faris as "Magic Realism in Spanish American Literature," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*.

7. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 137.

8. Numbers 22: 21–35.

9. Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," 302.

10. As quoted in Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London: Routledge, 1998), 16.

11. Wendy Belcher, "Magic Realism as a Critical Category: The Persistence of Binary Readings in Literary Discourse," unpublished paper, African Literature Association Conference, San Diego, CA, 4 April 2002.

12. Thus, feminists have argued that to insist that God is female is the only way to convince others that God is not male. To argue that God is neutral, or neither, or beyond gender, may be more accurate, but such an argument will not alter perceptions of God as male. They are not shocking enough to shake the long-standing belief.

13. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

14. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 25, 41.

15. Cox, "Muting White Noise," 52.

16. Another essay that comments on the magical guitar is Janine Richardson, "Magic and Memory in Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 39–51.

17. Ana Castillo, *So Far from God* (New York: Norton, 1993).

18. It is a sentence frequently repeated throughout the book when Indian characters give up their power or Anglo characters take it; see pp. 9, 123, 193, 213, 225, 265, and 271.

19. Laura Esquivel, *Como Agua para Chocolate* (Like water for chocolate) (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

20. John Purdy, "Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 16.

21. Ellen McCracken, "Subculture, Parody, and the Carnavalesque: A Bakhtinian Reading of Mary Helen Ponce's 'The Wedding,'" *MELUS* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 117.
22. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong, eds., *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese-American and Japanese-American Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1991).
23. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 30.
24. Joelle Fraser, "An Interview with Sherman Alexie," *The Iowa Review* 30, no. 3 (2000): 62.
25. Tomson Highway, "Spokane Words: Tomson Highway Raps with Sherman Alexie," *Aboriginal Voices* (January–March 1997): 40.
26. Purdy, "Crossroads," 16.
27. Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 58.
28. Highway, "Spokane Words," 39.