

## ***Red, Black and Blues: Race, Nation and Recognition for the Bluez<sup>1</sup>***

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For centuries, the First Nations have been systematically disenfranchised from their lands and denied their place both in North American cultural history and contemporary culture. This article explores recent attempts to recognize First Nations music as the roots of North American popular music, specifically the blues, while considering the role of race and ethnicity in the rise of the Rez Bluez genre in Canada and the United States.

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*"I think the history of American music is more Native and Black than European."*  
Cyril Neville (poet 2005)

*"The blues comes from us, you know. Slaves learned it from the Indians"*  
Pura Fé (Pura Fé 1998)

In the opening scene of Sherman Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues*, blues legend Robert Johnson strolls onto the Spokane Indian Reservation seeking escape from his deal with the "Gentleman" and healing from Big Mom. Thomas Builds-the-Fire picks him up at the crossroads and gives him a ride to the base of Big Mom's mountain:

Thomas watched Johnson walk up the mountain until he was out of vision and beyond any story. Then Thomas saw the guitar, Robert Johnson's guitar, lying on the floor of the van. Thomas picked it up, strummed the strings, felt a small pain in the palm of his hands, and heard the first sad note of the reservation blues (Alexie 1995:8-9).

Builds-The-Fire's actions, his contact with and delivery of Johnson, his strumming of the strings, the liminal connection of hands to strings to pain to blues, launches the tragic and comic story of the Spokane blues-rock band Coyote Springs. It is no coincidence that the blues is brought to the Spokane Nation by Robert Johnson. Johnson serves as a seminal figure of North American popular music. Indeed, for many musicians and some scholars, Robert Johnson's brief performing career marks the beginning of North American popular music. Although clearly North American popular music has roots much older than Johnson, the combination of a legendary short and tragic life, blackness, musical greatness and recording technology has made Johnson a central figure. Guitar legends including Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, and Jimi Hendrix have promoted Johnson and his music as something "everybody should know" (Richards 1990:22) because he is "the most important blues musician who ever lived" (Clapton 1990:22). By the late 1960s,

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these guitarists helped to establish Robert Johnson as the foundational figure in the canon of North American popular music.

In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie uses Johnson as a carrier for this great music, but the gift is tainted, because for Alexie, blues and pain are inseparable. Alexie emphasizes the shared history of pain and oppression between African-Americans and the First Nations, saying that this shared experience with colonialism gives Natives the right to perform the blues, and the knowledge to perform it well (Alexie 2005). Both in his novel and when questioned directly, Alexie depicts the trajectory of the origins of the blues as *unidirectional*: blues begins with African-Americans and is transferred to Aboriginals, whose performance adds to the blues canon. For Alexie, any other claim about the origins of the blues is false and “aggrandizing.” *Reservation Blues* and the film *Smoke Signals* (Eyre 1998), which uses Rez Bluez in its soundtrack, have focused attention on the rising popularity of the Native popular music genre Rez Bluez, and concurrently, regardless of Alexie’s perspective, have given further legitimacy to Native musicians who claim that Aboriginals “invented the blues.” Although this claim has received scant scholarly attention from musicologists and ethnomusicologists, it is a subject of vibrant debate among blues musicians of African-American, Native, and “mixed-blood” descent. This article addresses the debate, considering the importance of the blues in the history of North American popular music, the exclusion of First Nations music from this canon, the affect of historical and contemporary complications and interactions between the First Nations and African-Americans, and the current popularity of the Rez Bluez genre among First Nations musicians in Canada and the United States.

The term “Rez Bluez” was coined by Elaine Bomberry in 1993 at a Rez Bluez showcase in Toronto (Bomberry April 1, 2007). Elaine Bomberry shortened the phrase “Reservation Blues”, which was coined by Curtis “Shingoose” Jonnie (a.k.a. Goose) in his song “Reservation Blues,” originally recorded in the early 1980s. Long before Sherman Alexie titled his book *Reservation Blues* (Alexie 1995), Native comedian Charlie Hill popularized the song and the term, as he jammed on harmonica with Jonnie and performed the song, with Jonnie’s blessing, in his solo comedy act in Native communities across North America (Bomberry 2007). Native musicians have been actively performing blues since its earliest manifestations. Rez Bluez musicians see the Rez Bluez genre as a specifically Native sub-genre of blues, influenced by contemporary urban blues and Chicago & Detroit-style 1960s R & B. Rez Bluez usually addresses Native themes and issues and is performed by First Nations musicians in Canada and the United States. Most importantly, musicians performing in this genre acknowledge and promote the Native roots of the blues, and see this connection as a defining component of Rez Bluez. Today Rez Bluez is featured in concerts, showcases, festivals, radio shows and on television as an expression of contemporary Native popular culture.

“No one who is seriously interested in contemporary rock music is likely to deny the importance of the blues in giving it form and expression.” (Oliver 1989b:195)

The blues influence on popular music is profound, including “the twelve-bar, three-line structure...sliding bottle-necks on guitar strings, back-beat drumming, crossed-harp harmonica...electric guitars and electric basses, amplified harmonicas and shouting singers” (Oliver 1997:1). The persona of the blues artist is also fundamental to North American popular music: a loner, with a violent, tragic life, a virtuosic male guitarist or female singer, a great musician pursuing art despite misunderstanding and hardship, a musician who uses music to express the most intense emotions, dedication to music over material gain, and an “authentic” life experience that others can hear through the music but not express themselves. Not coincidentally, these are also all elements of the modern rock performer’s persona. Because of its romanticized racial and geographic origins, shared musical characteristics and persona tropes, the blues remains central to our understanding of the origins of North American popular music.

Obviously, the African diasporic roots of North American popular music cannot be overstated and deserve to be researched by scholars. However, scholarly attention is focused so exclusively on their influence that the possibilities presented by other ethnic groups are sometimes omitted from written history. Currently, First Nations music is a striking example of this scholarly neglect. And yet this was not always the case. The importance of First Nations music is acknowledged in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century North American art and popular music,<sup>2</sup> especially music composed or performed by whites, so why has it been excluded from consideration in twentieth-century popular music? In other disciplines, like dance scholarship, Native influence is assumed in African-American-associated genres like tap dance (Knowles 2002). Why do musicologists, ethnomusicologists and popular music scholars disregard possible Native influence on North American popular music? More specifically, why has musical scholarship ignored the potential contributions of the First Nations to the blues?

Some reasons are straightforward, not as mired in the colonialist project of anthropology and ethnomusicology - for example, technology and the means of collecting. Recording technology developed after the establishment of what we now call the blues, so we have no direct recorded evidence of a Native origin for the blues, or indeed, any specific origin at all. Additionally, by the time early ethnomusicologists and record company representatives were collecting the blues in large numbers - by 1920 when Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" proved that blues could sell to whites - they were recording African-American musicians, and not Aboriginals. This is not to say that the early blues performers were racially "all black." Many blues musicians are racially mixed and some identify primarily as Aboriginal. For example, "Charley Patton was Choctaw, Scrapper Blackwell" (poet 2005) and Eddie Clearwater are Cherokee (Herzhaft 1997:214), Screamin' Jay Hawkins was an adopted Blackfoot (Herzhaft 1997:415). This pervasive identification by blues musicians as indigenous has drawn the attention of blues scholar Paul Oliver, who writes:

It has not escaped the notice of a number of writers on American popular music, in particular on blues, that a considerable body of musicians and singers claim some degree of Red Indian [*sic.*] (Native American) ancestry. Though blues collectors tend to consider that this is peculiar to their music, it is in fact a wider phenomenon. Popular entertainers like Josephine Baker or Pearl Bailey, jazz musicians such as George Lewis, Bunk Johnson or Pops Foster, songsters and blues singers like Leadbelly or Lowell Fulson, more urban singers such as Lena Horne or Tina Turner, not to mention artists like Paul Robeson and "white" singers like Jack Teagarden or Lee Wiley -- all these and many more have stated that they had a parent or grandparent who was Native American. (Oliver 1989a:213)

Identification as indigenous by people with no Native identity and/or with no indigenous ancestry is very common. Philip Deloria terms this embrace of indigeneity by non-Natives "playing Indian" (Deloria 1998). At the end of *Reservation Blues*, Sherman Alexie satirized this scenario, when, after the failure of Coyote Springs, the Native blues band, two white women (former groupies) record a hit song with "a vaguely Indian drum,...a cedar flute, and a warrior's trill, all the standard Indian soundtrack stuff" (Alexie 1995:295). The song's chorus expresses the characters' belief that anyone has a claim to authentic indigeneity:

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<sup>2</sup> See Levine (2002) for discussion of the historic use of First Nations music by North American composers and McBride (1997) for an analysis of the life and career of an early twentieth-century Native vaudeville performer.

And my hair is blonde  
 But I'm Indian in my bones  
 And my skin is white  
 But I'm Indian in my bones  
 And it don't matter who you are  
 You can be Indian in your bones  
 Don't listen to what they say  
 You can be Indian in your bones (Alexie 1995:296)

"Playing Indian" allows non-Natives to engage in the romanticized discourse of North American history without experiencing the realities of life as an Aboriginal. Additionally, many non-Native artists have capitalized on tropes of indigeneity to increase their market value, especially in the New Age genre.

This practice is so common, as is the practice of identifying a distant indigenous ancestor, that Aboriginals often mistrust claims of indigeneity by those who are not phenotypically Native. However, this situation does not explain why scholars typically ignore or discount claims of Native ancestry made by non-Natives, especially claims made by African-Americans. Indeed, many of the performers that Oliver mentions are publicly identified as African-American, and not as "mixed" or indigenous, and scholars are left to wonder, as Oliver does, if, when claims to Native ancestry can be substantiated, this affects the performance of music at all. Or, on the other hand, does a claim of Native ancestry simply make one more "Canadian" or "American" because one's genealogical roots can be traced back to the First Nations of the Americas?

Ethnomusicologists have preferred to focus on African retentions in the blues. For instance, drawing upon his fieldwork before World War II, ethnomusicologist and song collector Alan Lomax reiterates the most common of the blues origin stories in his ethnography *The Land where Blues Began*:

Working class blacks [in the lower Mississippi Delta]...created the blues in the postslavery period (Lomax 1993:xv) ...The birth of the blues...could be seen as a creative deployment of African style in an American setting, the operation of African temperament in new surroundings. In a sense, African-American singers and dancers made an aesthetic conquest of their environment in the New World. (Lomax 1993:xiv)

Lomax's use of "conquest" is interesting, as it conflates white American colonialism with the aesthetic achievements of African-Americans. Lomax seems to be saying that aesthetically, African-Americans defeated the very people who enslaved them. Since Herskovitz' *Myth of the Negro Past* (Herskovits 1990) this has been a common metaphor in American anthropology. This argument seems to imply on some level that the one of the positive outcomes of slavery is North American popular music. Lomax allows for the conquest of North America by European colonists and the conquest of Africans who were imported as slaves. These conquests allow for the subsequent conquest of North American popular culture by descendants of these slaves. But throughout, the original North Americans seem to have disappeared. Perhaps this is reading too much into one small word, through which Lomax clearly means to celebrate the resilience of African-American culture, but nonetheless it is a striking word with strong and inescapable connotations. His use of the word "conquest" creates a hollow silence around the contributions of the First Nations.

Surveying music collected from Aboriginals on reservations and reserves by early comparative musicologists, ethnomusicologists and folklorists fails to further clarify the situation. From the first recordings of the 1890s through the 1960s, collectors focused on "traditional" music, usually ignoring songs that were in English or French or songs that

didn't "sound" indigenous as inauthentic appropriations -- music which did not belong in their archives, because they were tasked with preserving First Nations "authentic" musics before Aboriginals disappeared. Although, in the past thirty years, many ethnomusicologists have engaged in reflexive and dialogic research on both Aboriginal traditional music and popular music,<sup>3</sup> none has addressed the Native story of the blues.

In my research, I found few references to First Nations music that were not specifically marked as "Native." However, in 1963, musicologist Harold Courlander wrote:

Although Africans or slaves of African ancestry had numerous contacts with Indians in various parts of the country... there is no substantial evidence that Indian musical elements were absorbed by the developing mainstream of Negro folk music. Curiously enough, a study by an outstanding ethnomusicologist, George Herzog, indicated that at least one group of Cherokee Indians took over elements of African musical style from the Negro slaves. (Courlander 1963:9-10)

At the 1939 International Congress of Musicology, ethnomusicologist George Herzog's paper "African Influences in North American Indian Music" asserted that African musical influences survived in southeast First Nations music, even though he believed African influences did not survive in African-American popular music (Herzog 1939:131). Herzog believed that musical transmission was from the African-American slaves to the Cherokees, not vice-versa, in other words, not an exchange of musical ideas. In general, ethnomusicology and now popular music studies have retained this point of view.

Although scholars have researched the influence of other minority musics, such as Latino musics, historically, popular music studies have focused on music created by whites and African-Americans in North America and Western Europe. This focus suggests that North American popular music begins with the mixture of European and African diasporic musics. But what if this basic premise is incorrect? What if North American popular music begins before the importation of African slaves? How have other musics influenced the formation of North American popular music? What if, instead, North American popular music begins with Aboriginal music and has been profoundly influenced by Aboriginal music? This possible influence has been dismissed by many popular music scholars. For example, in Peter Van der Merwe's *Origins of the Popular Style*, his one mention of First Nations music is in the introduction:

It may be wondered why there is no mention of the American Indian. Even in South America, where native musical traditions were undoubtedly more important, it is often difficult to distinguish their influence from that of Africa. In North America [...] it would be next to impossible. In any case, no such influence seems to have occurred to past observers; so perhaps we can thankfully leave them out of an account that is already quite complex enough (Merwe 1992:8).

Although one is sympathetic to the lack of scholarship and data available about Native influence on North American popular music, this pervasive silence and negation of the possibility of a First Nations contribution by scholars is striking. Indeed, at some level this seems to be about race, the construction of race and ethnicity in North America and the generalized disregard for Native existence in postcolonial/continuing colonial Canada and especially the United States.

This disregard for the existence of Aboriginals, and especially for those of mixed

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<sup>3</sup> See Vander (1988), Nettle (1989), Little Coyote & Giglio (1997), Frisbie (1977) and Heth (1978, 1993) for some examples in traditional music and Scales (1999, 2002, 2004), Diamond (2002) and Vosen (2001) for popular music examples.

Native and African ancestry, has been common in the history of the United States and Canada for centuries,<sup>4</sup> but remains fundamental to our understanding of contemporary North American culture today. To comprehend the situation of the blues, we must understand the differing racial situations of the Tuscarora and of the Five Civilized Tribes both historically and today.

The Tuscarora were originally from North Carolina, but were allied with the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. When the British colonists first came to the area, they kidnapped many Tuscarora and sold them into slavery, sending them to the northern colonies and as far away as the Caribbean. According to Smallwood, "Pennsylvania received so many Indian slaves from North Carolina that in 1705 the Legislature passed a law forbidding the importation of any more, under the threat of war with the Five Nations if trade was not stopped" (Smallwood 1997:67). This slave trade continued and was one of the reasons for the Tuscarora Indian War of 1711 through 1713. The Yamasee War of 1715 through 1716 exacerbated the conflict between the colonists, the Cherokee, who allied themselves with the colonists, and the Tuscarora. Most of the Tuscarora fled to southern Ontario and northern New York, forming the Sixth Nation of the Iroquois Confederacy (Smallwood 1997:98). The Six Nations and the Cherokees remained historic enemies and continued to fight battles through the American Civil War. After 1715, a number of Tuscarora remained in Indian Woods, North Carolina, and gave refuge to escaped slaves. The Tuscarora in North Carolina and southern Ontario set up networks with "Quakers, Moravians and leading abolitionists" (Smallwood 1997:104) and helped establish part of the Underground Railroad on the Tuscarora trails (Smallwood 1997:105).

Pura Fé, a Tuscaroran, a leading musician and promoter of the Rez Bluez genre, describes Tuscaroran history and the interaction between the Tuscarora and African-Americans:

My Nation has been systematically disenfranchised and disregarded. Many people think we have nothing to do with the development of Southern culture. Not only were we captured and shipped off as slaves to West Africa and the Caribbean, we were bred together on slave plantations during colonization of our land. African and Indian slaves were harbored, escorted and smuggled across the Canadian border through Indian country.

This union gave birth to a rich new culture blending religion, dance, and food, good looking people and the Blues! Many of these grandchildren became influential musicians. Charley Patton, the first King of the Blues is Choctaw, Scrapper Blackwell is Cherokee, Jimi Hendrix, Don Cherry, Duke Ellington, Thelonius Monk, Little Richard, Tina Turner... .... There are so many blues and jazz pioneers that have expressed their Native ancestry through their work. This story needs to shine...Hallelujah...for the Red, Black on Blues!" (Bluesweb 2006)

As a former member of Ulali, Pura Fé has had a great impact on the promotion of the Rez Bluez genre within Native communities. For years she has fought for recognition for the Tuscaroran contribution to the genre. She mentions it in every interview, and certainly it was the first thing she told me when I met her in November of 1998. In Ulali, another way she has promoted Tuscaroran history and their contribution to the blues is through the song "Going Home." Both the lyrics and the music of the song specifically describe this history. The lyrics reference the Tuscarora homeland in North Carolina:

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<sup>4</sup> The situation in Canada is very different from the United States, both because the Métis people, through the strength of their history and their continued political action, created a paradigm for "mixed-blood" people in Canada that is (mostly) supported in today's society, and also because blackness is defined much more broadly in Canada.

Where the Neuse River runs through a land  
 Where my great-grandmother sleeps  
 Under the earth, the...Nation was free

and then reference African slavery and the Trail of Tears, which affected the other Southern Nations:

I hear Nigerian chains, they say are buried real deep  
 Tobacco fields, Trail of Tears  
 Stolen people on stolen land

and later in the chorus assert the Tuscarora claim to the blues:

Hidden truth, tell the world  
 The blues where it comes from (Ulali 1994)

By evoking the public memory of slavery and its current repercussions, in "Going Home" Ulali reminds their listeners of an earlier genocide, a part of American history that, unlike African-American slavery, is not in the daily consciousness of most non-Natives; in other words, one guilty remembrance triggers another. The audience's response, identifying the pain of the Native experience of colonialism with the African-American experience of slavery and then connecting this to the shared experience American identity creates a "sentimental wound" (Noble 1997:295).

The "sentimental wound" of the lyrics is deepened by the musical effects in the construction of "Going Home", which also evoke this shameful history. The first section of "Going Home" is a slow blues shuffle, which Pura Fé connects to the Round Dance (poet 2005). In using the blues aesthetic, Ulali elicits all that is associated metaphorically with it, engaging an audience reaction based on emotion regarding the African-American experience. The vocal timbre of Ulali, especially that of Pura Fé, fits within the blues aesthetic for female singers: a deep, resonant, and powerful chest voice, with an edge of roughness. In the beginning, and to mark certain sections, Pura Fé sings solo. When Soni Moreno and Jennifer Kreisberg join in, it is at first in a brief call-and-response form, which Pura Fé associates with the Stomp Dance and not with African diasporic music (poet 2005), and then in the next line, they sing in full harmony with Pura Fé.

By extending a metaphor for African-American oppression to First Nations oppression, Ulali engages emotionally with the audience in a discourse of sentiment. This use of sentiment, expressed both lyrically and musically, moves the audience profoundly, and shifts the way they hear the music, and the way they think about First Nations and U.S. history. To bolster the musical association of the African-American experience with the Indigenous experience, Ulali play frame hand drums, a typically female Native instrument, in a triplet swing rhythm. In African-American music, this rhythm is considered a loose swing rhythm. In First Nations music, it is classified as a "heartbeat" rhythm. After a transitional section meant to evoke a Stomp Dance with its typical modulation (poet 2005), "Going Home" shifts into a full-fledged Stomp Dance. Today, the Stomp Dance is usually associated with the Cherokee, although it is found across the American South. However, the Tuscarora claim it as one of their own genres. Because it is similar to some West African genres, some scholars have speculated that the Stomp Dance came from escaped slaves. The Stomp Dance uses call-and-response and choral singing considered typical of southern African-American music, but according to the Tuscarora, mass choral singing of this style was common among them before the importation of African slaves (Pura Fé 1998). Pura Fé calls this music "pre-blues," emphasizing its legitimacy through the trope of timelessness, establishing its role as the roots of the blues.

Today the Tuscarora are active in the Rez Bluez genre both in southern Ontario and in North Carolina. They believe their history offers a unique perspective and contribution to the blues and seek ways of promoting it through their music. For the Tuscarora of North Carolina, many of whom are "Black Indians," this genre has a special resonance. Although previously recognized, currently the Tuscarora living in Robeson County, North Carolina are not recognized by the federal government as a separate nation. "The U.S. Department of Interior has said that the tribe falls under the Lumbee Act of 1956, which designated all Indians in Robeson and adjoining counties as Lumbee" (Futch 2005), so for the Tuscarora, asserting their place in musical history helps them establish their legitimacy and their right to sovereignty with the United States government.

The Tuscarora's historic enemies, the Cherokee, are just as important in the history of the blues, but have a very different relationship to the initial colonial history and to race and slavery in the American South. The Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole Nations (collectively known as the "Five Civilized Tribes" because of their adoption of the colonists' customs) at various times allied with each other, the US federal government, with the Confederacy during the Civil War and against the colonists. Elite and wealthy members of these Nations were also slaveholders, although they did not engage in large-scale plantation slavery like their white neighbours. Some members of the Five Civilized Tribes hid escaped slaves and assisted in the Underground Railroad. Additionally, members of these Nations often integrated the slaves into the Nations through marriage. In 1830, the Five Civilized Tribes and their slaves were ordered to leave the American southern states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina, and move to the Oklahoma Territory west of the Mississippi. Most refused to go and they were forcibly expelled in 1838. Over one-third died en route to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears.

Some speculate that the Trail of Tears was President Andrew Jackson's ultimate retribution for the Indian alliance during the War of 1812, where Jackson had served as a general. Tecumseh, a Shawnee chief, orator, and military leader, allied with the British, led a confederation of Southern and Midwestern Nations to war against the United States in exchange for the British promise of a permanent Indian state in the trans-Mississippi region. When he was killed in battle, the alliance disintegrated, and shortly thereafter the war ended. Ironically, the original intent of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, as voiced by Thomas Jefferson years before, was the establishment of a buffer state, allowing the United States to expand westward to the Mississippi, while protecting the U.S. from British and Spanish colonies in the far west. But by the time of the Trail of Tears, any thought of a buffer state dissolved in the face of American expansionism. Of course, the primary reason for the removal of the Southern Nations was economic. Their removal freed land during the Georgia Gold Rush for white settlement and allowed for the proliferation of the plantation-based economy, therefore dramatically increasing slavery in the Deep South and west to the Mississippi River.

After the Civil War, the primary conduit for racial mixing in the American South was Aborigines, who married and formed alliances with both African-Americans and whites. In some cases, such as the Black Seminoles and the Creoles, the descendents of these alliances built communities with their own distinct cultures. Cyril Neville, a Creole best known as a member of the Meters and Neville Brothers, says:

We have Native blood, but we're not sure what nation.... It goes back hundreds of years. The shuffle and hesitation in the second line rhythm is probably a combination of the two musical cultures. Africans and Natives had similar ways of worshipping and playing music, and they were thrown together by racism and slavery.... there are a lot of Native/Black people in this country who have



forgotten their tribes and languages and origins. New Orleans is the only place that it's celebrated. (poet 2005)

While not specifically referring to Creoles, blues great Taj Mahal also believes that blues originated among mixed African-Americans/Natives of the American South. He says:

The majority of African-American people have some Native blood.....That fast vibrato you hear in the vocals of Little Brother Montgomery, in songs like the "Vicksburg Blues," it's both African and Native. That vibrato and tone, you have to work at it from the back of your throat and nose to crank it out and go up into that falsetto that happens. He might look Creole, but when you hear him sing, it's Native American singing.....There were a hundred years when the races blended hard-core. They were Black Indians in jazz, blues, gospel everything. It's an untapped history and when people start investigating it, they're going to be surprised. (poet 2005)

In much of the American South, any sort of racial mixing was prohibited, not celebrated. In story and song, racially-mixed people were portrayed as confused, unstable, sexually promiscuous, and ultimately doomed to tragedy, a description which suits the persona of many blues and rock performers today.

Despite these difficulties, pre-World War II blues lyrics refer to Oklahoma (the Territory) as a refuge where escaped slaves could find freedom and African-Americans could integrate with the Native populace (Chris Smith 2007). However, this ideal did not fit the reality of Jim Crow (segregated) Oklahoma. Since segregation, Black Indians have had to constantly fight for their right of recognition and citizenship in their respective Nations. In 2000, the Seminoles expelled their "Freedmen" and in March of 2007 the Cherokees voted by a margin of 77% to do the same. The Freedmen were reinstated to the Seminole Nation because of pressure by the US government -- the threat to revoke their sovereignty. Cherokee Principal Chief Chad Smith believes the vote to expel the Freedmen was a vote to limit the Cherokee Nation to those who actually have "Indian blood" (Smith 2007). The Freedmen are considered descendents of the slaves owned by the Five Civilized Tribes, as designated by the Dawes Rolls of 1806 and 1807, where those who were phenotypically African-American were listed by US government workers as "Freedmen" regardless of their genetic or cultural ancestry.

Perhaps because of some of these racial complications between Natives and mixed African-Americans/Natives in the American South, the center of the Rez Bluez genre today is not in the American South, but instead in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. To the casual observer, this may seem odd, but in reality, there are several historical and contemporary reasons for this phenomenon. Perhaps most importantly, says Elaine Bomberry, is the coupling of the "Native affinity for blues...with late-night blues radio shows, broadcasted from the United States in the 1950s and '60s and heard by budding musicians living on the Six Nations Reserve in Brantford, Ontario" (Schweitzer 2003).

Several important musicians and genres of First Nations popular music emerged from the Six Nations Reserve of the Grand River outside of Brantford, Ontario, the most populous reserve in Canada. Six Nations is home to the historic Iroquois Confederacy of Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Tuscarora, as well as a group of Delaware. Only 110 kilometres from Toronto and less than 120 kilometres from the American border, Aboriginals from the Six Nations Reserve have sought employment and economic opportunity in cities outside the Reserve for generations. Some work in the Toronto area and others have joined steel-working Mohawks from the Kahnawake Reserve in Quebec, or work in New York City. Commuting between large cities and the Reserve, members of the Six Nations have returned to the Reserve excited about the

latest popular music and culture. For example, Robbie Robertson, founding member of The Band, solo artist, composer, producer, and now promoter of First Nations popular music, is part Jewish and part Mohawk and spent his summers with his mother's family on the Six Nations Reserve.

One hundred and fifty years before Robbie Robertson was central in forming The Band, Six Nations was involved in the formation of the blues. In the eighteenth century, the Iroquois Confederacy took in their allies the Tuscarora to form the sixth Nation of the Iroquois. This alliance added a southern Nation to the Confederacy. Some of the Tuscarora were racially mixed with African-Americans, and many had been slaves. This legacy of racial mixing and escaped slaves continued as many of the Six Nations, especially the Tuscarora, served as guides on the Underground Railroad, bringing escaped slaves into Canada. Some of these former slaves stayed with the Six Nations. So perhaps, the rise of the Rez Bluez genre in Toronto is a return of the blues to one of its originators, if not geography.

Contemporary southern Ontario and the city of Toronto offer an ideal breeding ground for the Rez Bluez genre. First, the city is situated close to the Six Nations Reserve, home of the Tuscarora Nation. Second, Toronto prides itself on its "multiculturalism" and it is perfectly normal and acceptable for one ethnic group to perform music associated with another ethnic group, especially when that music is already removed from its perceived "original context," in this case, the American South. Although Canada also has a legacy of slavery,<sup>5</sup> racial issues are constructed very differently in Canada, and Canadians, specifically Southern Ontarians, are likely to have a wider perspective of race and ethnicity and what constitutes "difference" than American Southerners. Third, the federal government of Canada and the provincial government of Ontario provide small grants for up-and-coming musicians and foster public performances through government-funded festivals and workshops. Some of this funding is reserved for Aboriginals. Finally, we must acknowledge the importance of an individual in this movement: Elaine Bomberry, of Rez Bluez Productions, who has promoted this genre in southern Ontario since 1993.

For Bomberry, blues became a passion when she realized there was a Native connection:

The blues was just one genre of many being played on the stereo at my house, but I always felt a connection with the blues. It wasn't until my late twenties that I heard the Native blues theory – that, as Native people, we had contributed to its early development. Then a light bulb went off in my head. Of course, we're a part of the blues. Our drumbeat is the heartbeat of Mother Earth, and it's this same heartbeat that we feel in the blues. Then I was made aware of the cultural intermix that happened with runaway African slaves and Native peoples in the deep south of Mississippi, and it made even more sense to me that from the cross-cultural exchange of these two cultures came the birth of the blues. But the Native contribution has never been acknowledged by the mainstream music industry. My passion for the blues deepened as a result of this. To hear Native musicians play the blues, you know it's coming from a deep soulful place. (Bomberry 1996)

Elaine Bomberry strongly believes that Toronto's Aboriginal community needs to hear "their own blues and their own musicians" (Schweitzer 2003). Therefore, Bomberry and Jani Lauzon put together the first Rez Bluez showcase in 1993 (briefly called Rez Blues),

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<sup>5</sup> Slavery was outlawed in Canada (and all parts of the British Empire) in 1833.

sponsored by the Toronto Blues Society. Murray Porter, Faron Johns, Derek Miller, Jani Lauzon, Gloria Eshkibok and others performed for a sell-out crowd at the old Edgewater Hotel (Bomberry 1996). In 1995, Bomberry began producing the Rez Bluez Showcase independent of the Toronto Blues Society, with concerts at the Silver Dollar, a club in downtown Toronto. Although Bomberry has now moved to North Vancouver, she still produces concerts in Toronto, Hamilton and Vancouver (Bomberry April 1, 2007).

Bomberry's work establishing the Rez Bluez genre has been acknowledged by her peers. In 2003, Bomberry won the Music Industry Award from the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards (Bomberry April 1, 2007). The Toronto Blues Society named her Blues Booster of 2003 (Schweitzer 2003), and in 2004 her radio show *The Aboriginal Music Experience*, which features Native blues musicians and discusses the Aboriginal influence on the blues, won the Canadian Aboriginal Music Award for Best Aboriginal Music Radio Program. Bomberry was instrumental in the organization of Planet IndigenUS at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto during the summer of 2004. Planet IndigenUS featured a roundtable<sup>6</sup> on the Native influence of the blues. Additionally, Bomberry brought Native blues to the opening festival of the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC in the summer of 2004. Additionally, since 2004, Bomberry has produced a TV series, *Rez Bluez*, which plays on the Canadian networks APTN, Bravo and Sun TV, featuring Native blues artists and comedians, further establishing the Rez Bluez genre across Canada (Bomberry April 1, 2007). Her contributions have cemented the importance of Rez Bluez in contemporary First Nations popular music. Bomberry believes that "truth is gaining momentum as part of the healing that is going on with the African American community accepting the fact that they have Native blood...We were very much part of the South" (Schweitzer 2003) and this truth will lead to recognition of the Native role in the blues.

After centuries of intermixing and cultural exchange, is there any way to know which came first, Native "pre-blues" or African-American blues? Obviously, we cannot travel back before the invention of the wax cylinder; cannot hear for ourselves when the blues formed; we do not know if the blues developed gradually or all at once, was the work of one woman or one man or generations of musicians. We cannot tell if its origins are African-American or Native or some combination. All statements about the origins of the blues, to one extent or another, are speculative. But speculation can be empowering and perhaps it is time for music scholars to expand our speculation to include the First Nations in the development of the blues. Rez Bluez performer Pura Fé says:

I've been trying to get people to hear these connections and recognize [Native] contributions to the blues for years....It's an important story and when its descendants tell it right, it will build a bridge between Native music and the mainstream. People will finally acknowledge our part in the creation of American roots music and culture. (poet 2005)

Just as the lack of attention to the Native contribution to blues and North American popular music tells us much about the field of ethnomusicology and popular music studies, to me the Indigenous reclamation of the blues speaks not just to the origins of the blues, but also to the use of the blues in establishing authenticity in the North American popular music canon. Recall that when British musicians like the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton performed rock and roll, they established their right to the music, to an African-American genre, by covering the urban blues of Muddy Waters. When these same performers worked to establish their place in the canon of American popular music, they lionized the urban bluesmen as their predecessors. Through the years, through facts

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<sup>6</sup> Participants included Janisse Browning, Sadie Buck, Celia Cain, Harrison Kennedy, Amos Key and Brian Wright McLeod, moderated by Elaine Bomberry.

and myths, the blues' aesthetic, sound, and seemingly "authentic" blackness have formed a fundamental part of popular music's foundation. We should not be surprised that Indigenous performers often play the blues or blues-rock, nor surprised when they claim it as their own.

Blues lies at the heart of North American popular culture, at the root of North American music. By staking a claim to the origin of the blues, Aboriginals demonstrate their contributions to North American contemporary culture to an ignorant and often deaf non-Native public and scholarly community. Regardless of the sustainability of a Native claim to the origins of the blues due to lack of "hard data," the very search for this claim, the assertion of this link in literature and music, over and over, forms a statement of faith in contemporary First Nations popular music, one that makes First Nations music a fundamental component of contemporary popular music, and incorporates artists and genres too easily dismissed as "ethnic" into the canon of popular music.

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