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David Treuer's Rez Life

In the introduction to Rez Life, David Treuer uses geographic accumulation, a deliberate reversal of American cultural iconography, and a calculated shift in pronoun address to argue that American ignorance of reservation life is not a matter of circumstance but of choice, and the historical record makes that choice impossible to justify.

Treuer opens by placing the familiar American landscape alongside reservation life and letting the reader register the difference slowly. The countryside on both sides of the reservation sign is the same: "the same pines, and the same swamps, hay fields, and jeweled lakes." The houses "don't look all that different." But then, in short, declarative sentences: "The children playing by the road do look different, though. Darker." The understatement is deliberate. Treuer does not accuse; he simply observes, in the flattest possible register, what a passing driver would notice and then forget. The technique implicates the reader without confronting them directly, making the reader a participant in the very inattention the essay is critiquing.

Having established that the inattention is habitual, Treuer then argues in paragraph three that it cannot be explained by ignorance of where reservations are. He catalogs their locations across the full geography of the United States: "in the middle of the desert, among the strewn rocks of the Badlands, in the suburbs of Green Bay, and within the misty spray of Niagara Falls." The accumulation of place-names, spanning desert, plains, suburbs, and tourist destinations, closes off any excuse that reservations are remote or inaccessible. Treuer reinforces this with scale: twelve reservations are larger than Rhode Island; some exist within

the spray of one of the most visited landmarks in the country. The implicit argument is that Americans do not overlook reservation life because reservations are hidden. They overlook it by choice.

The essay's most decisive rhetorical move comes in paragraph four, where Treuer uses a familiar cultural formula to set up a reversal. He opens with an appeal that invites rather than challenges: "Indian reservations, and those of us who live on them, are as American as apple pie, baseball, and muscle cars." The comparison is disarming: it uses the reader's own patriotic vocabulary to establish Native Americans as insiders rather than outsiders. Then Treuer pivots: "Unlike apple pie, however, Indians contributed to the birth of America itself." The contrast between a baked good and a foundational political act is not accidental. The Oneida fed Continental troops at Valley Forge. The Iroquois Confederacy was one of the structural models for the American Constitution. Marx and Engels, writing their theory of modern communism, drew on the Iroquois. By stacking these specifics against the apple pie comparison, Treuer argues that the dismissal of Native American life is not merely impolite but historically illiterate. Americans have been editing the people who helped build the country out of the country's own story.

The final paragraph completes the argument with a shift in address that makes the reader's position explicit. Throughout the essay, Treuer has used "you" to describe the American driver, the American observer. In paragraph five, he switches: "It is pretty easy to avoid us and our reservations." The move from "you" to "us" is a quiet but decisive reorientation. The reader, addressed as "you" from the first sentence, now finds themselves on the other side of a pronoun. Treuer has been Native American this whole time. The essay has been addressed to someone who can drive past a reservation without thinking twice, and Treuer names that person plainly: you, the reader, are the one doing the avoiding.

Treuer's argument succeeds because its structure mirrors its content. The essay begins where the American driver begins, on the road passing a sign, and moves steadily toward a historical and moral reckoning the reader cannot claim they were not warned about. The understatement of the opening makes the accusation of the closing land harder. By the time Treuer writes "It is pretty easy to avoid us," the reader has already been shown the geography, the history, and the choice. The argument does not ask for sympathy. It establishes that the ignorance was never unavoidable, only convenient.