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Not Exactly: Intertextual Identities and Risky Laughter in Sherman Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian

Adrienne Kertzer

Theories of reading, identity, and authenticity are central to scholarship on children’s literature by and about Native Americans. Such theories underlie Michelle Pagni Stewart’s view of Sharon Creech’s Walk Two Moons as a valuable introduction to “unique narrative traditions of Native American literature” (“Judging Authors” 180), and Clare Bradford’s objections to Stewart’s assessment as overly invested in a concept of authenticity as the surface imitation of a specific narrative style (Unsettling Narratives 91). Bradford observes that the discourse of authenticity too easily invokes concepts of “‘pure’ or ‘full-blood’ . . . and, in regard to cultural production . . . ‘traditional’ forms and practices” (85). Ambiguously turning away from this discourse, Bradford proposes that “Indigenous texts . . . require different kinds of reading from those appropriate to mainstream texts” (227). Whereas Stewart wonders whether stories by Native Americans that do “not deal with topics indigenous to his or her people” would be categorized as Native American (179), Bradford’s theory of reading postcolonial children’s literature implies that if a text benefits from the same kinds of reading that work with mainstream texts, in so doing, it takes on a mainstream identity.

In this article, I respond to Bradford’s assertion that “children’s texts . . . [that] afford diverse, self-conscious, and informed representations of Indigenous cultures comprise a crucial intervention in processes of decolonization across settler societies” (227). Is Sherman Alexie’s first young adult novel, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian, one of those texts? The range of answers to this question is grounded in how critics respond to the novel’s success, and how they perceive its impact upon child readers—the latter inseparable from how they identify those readers. Ever since Alexie received a rave review in the New York Times for his first book, The Business of Fancydancing (1992), his prolific career has been marked simultaneously by celebrity and controversy. The Absolutely True Diary, which also received a glowing review in the Times and has since won numerous awards, continues this pattern. As a result, The Absolutely True Diary may well make some children’s
literature scholars suspicious, just as some Native American scholars have been throughout Alexie’s career. Even Alexie is suspicious: “I’m not supposed to sell this much” (Nelson 40).

In keeping with this suspicion, Bradford categorizes *The Absolutely True Diary* as a mainstream novel that says little new. This is not surprising given her premise: “When books by minority authors find white audiences, this is generally because they are not *too* different” (“Race” 49; emphasis in original). Bradford acknowledges that *The Absolutely True Diary* possesses a degree of difference—that is, it is “not *too* different”—but while she refers to the novel as a postcolonial text, she also writes that it addresses “a conventional topic, the identity formation of its *adolescent* protagonist” (49; emphasis in original). Although Bradford states that Alexie’s novel “tracks [Junior’s] formation as an Indian subject who expresses his identity in unconventional ways” (46), she ultimately locates this “unconventional” expression of identity within a “conventional” topic. Given her premise that the novel’s “first person narration addresses white readers” (46), the fact that it is from a mainstream publisher (Little, Brown), and the fact that it is undeniably successful—both in the number of awards it has accumulated and its best-seller status—*The Absolutely True Diary* appears to support Bradford’s observation that conditions in the United States—“perhaps because of the long interval between British colonization and contemporary textual production, or perhaps because the assault on Native American populations was so successful” (*Unsettling Narratives* 226)—make it next to impossible to contest dominant “imaginings of Indigeneity” (226).

I am more optimistic than Clare Bradford about the possibility of contesting dominant imaginings in the United States. Heeding Donnarae MacCann’s recommendation that critics “follow closely, without stumbling, all the paths that writers and illustrators have mapped out” (“Editor’s Introduction” 343), and following the paths mapped out by Sherman Alexie and his illustrator Ellen Forney, I provide a justification for that optimism through the four parts of my article. I begin by considering the implications of examining *The Absolutely True Diary* through children’s literature scholarship that draws on Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s critique of Alexie’s earlier work. Then, I read the novel’s multiple intertextual identities as critiquing Ann Rinaldi’s *My Heart Is on the Ground: The Diary of Nannie Little Rose, a Sioux Girl*, revising Roberta Seelinger Trites’s theory of adolescent literature, and strategically ignoring the writing for children and young adults by Muscogee writer Cynthia Leitich Smith and Abenaki writer Joseph Bruchac.
Third, I analyze the risky laughter and radical potential of the novel’s comedy, in particular the way that Ellen Forney’s illustrations satirize stereotypes of the “real Indian,” the imaginary construct that Alexie challenges even as he acknowledges its power (Nygren 158–59). Finally, my conclusion juxtaposes Kimberley Reynolds’s thesis about the radical potential of children’s literature beside Cherokee writer Thomas King’s theory of reading.

Reynolds does not claim that writing for the young is automatically radical and transformative; instead, she refers to a “potential for subversion and resistance” (82). Readers, whether scholars of children’s literature or young adults, can recognize a potential, be oblivious to it, or consciously or unconsciously disregard it. King’s theory of reading clarifies that the radical potential of books makes very precise demands upon readers. Just as Bradford’s language of negotiation—“a text operates as a site where meaning is negotiated by readers who bring their own cultures and languages to the act of reading” (Unsettling Narratives 15)—allows for the possibility of a more complex reading than what is possible when reading as a white reader, King’s focus upon the relationship between the story that writers tell and the life that readers choose to live allows for the possibility of change.6

My essay does not claim that The Absolutely True Diary will always produce radical readings. This is evident, for example, when Allison Porzio recommends that English Language Arts teachers use popular books such as The Absolutely True Diary in order to “teach . . . critical literacy; a great skill to prepare students for standardized testing and for life” (31). Paraphrasing the novel by describing Junior as “the low man on the metaphorical totem pole” (32), Porzio erases the contextual irony that frames Junior’s use of these words (Absolutely True 180). Her essay repeatedly constructs race as an issue that concerns only nonwhites. Not only does Porzio imagine the novel’s readers as white, she also marginalizes Alexie’s Indian identity, writing that the book is by a “gifted American writer who also happens to be ‘Indian’” (35).7 But being an Indian is not a minor and accidental characteristic for either Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene) or Junior (Spokane); it is a primary tribal identity even when, at the novel’s conclusion, Junior has “the huge realization” that his survival is inseparable from his recognition of his multiple tribal identities. In the beginning of the novel, Junior longs to “escape the reservation” (6) but, as Alexie has noted about his own life, such escape is more physical than psychological.8 Even Junior’s physical escape is qualified by the novel’s ending, when on the reservation, he
remembers stories about Turtle Lake: “I didn’t exactly believe in the giant turtle myth... But I’m still an Indian” (223).9

Junior’s words about Turtle Lake repeat a strategy introduced in the novel’s second sentence when Junior qualifies what he has just said: “Okay, so that’s not exactly true” (1). Alexie gives Junior comparable words at least four other times (82, 109, 173, 181). Homi Bhabha’s description of colonial mimicry—“almost the same but not quite” (89; original emphasis)—is consistent with what the speaker in Alexie’s poem “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers” describes as a deliberately imperfect mimicry of white masters (Face 82). Bradford, doubtful whether colonial mimicry is “capable of undermining colonial authority” (Unsettling Narratives 20), cautions that the concept of hybridity “has historically been deployed as a way of situating Indigenous people and cultures in a neither/nor state, a chasm between cultures” (68). However, in her discussion of The Absolutely True Diary, she notes that the novel resists this notion of hybridity (“Race” 46). I agree; just as Alexie’s novel does not exactly fit her theory of postcolonial children’s literature, his concept of hybridity does not exactly fit what Bradford sees as the troublesome consequence of Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry. This not-exact fit also applies to reading The Absolutely True Diary through the lens of other theoretical approaches, such as children’s literature scholarship informed by the perspective of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s work.

The Key Issues in the Field: Children’s Literature Scholarship and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

Because The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian is Alexie’s first novel published for a young adult market, nearly all the scholarship on his work exists outside academic journals that focus on children’s literature. As a result, my project is necessarily speculative in two ways: first, by drawing on how children’s literature scholarship that does not address Alexie specifically theorizes writing by and about Native Americans; and second, by relating this scholarly perspective to Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s prior critique of Alexie’s adult work and speculating on how she might read his young adult novel. However, both of these speculations are preceded by a nonspeculative survey of the scholarly essays previously published by Children’s Literature, whose Web site declares that it “publishes theoretically based articles that address key issues in the field.”10 I am interested in how work by and about contemporary Native Americans might intersect with an academic journal’s under-
standing of what these key issues are—especially since the Web site also declares that *Children’s Literature* “has an international reputation as the preeminent publication in the field.” My search of this journal’s Web site for “Native Americans” and “American Indians” reveals that in its first thirty-eight volumes, Donnarae MacCann’s essay, “The Sturdy Fabric of Cultural Imperialism: Tracing Its Patterns in Contemporary Children’s Novels,” was one of the few scholarly essays to pay any attention to either Native Americans or American Indians. Hardly any other essays discussed, even in a minimal fashion, the representation of contemporary Native Americans.

In volume 39, *Children’s Literature* broke this pattern by publishing Michelle Pagni Stewart’s “The ‘Homing In’ of Howard Camp: Hidden Roots in Joseph Bruchac’s *Hidden Roots*.” However, the disruption was only partial, because while the novel Stewart discusses is written by an Abenaki author, it is set in the 1950s. Thus, while Stewart is right in saying that “the ‘All-White World’ of children’s literature has begun to open itself to texts that move beyond the stereotyped savage Indian seen in many children’s books of the past” (144), the fact remains that *Children’s Literature* has never published an article on how contemporary Native American writers write about contemporary Native American young people.11 It has published numerous reviews of scholarship about Native Americans, reported dissertations of note by and about Native Americans, and according to the *Project Muse* search engine, published in its first thirty-eight volumes eleven scholarly essays about Native Americans.12 These articles do not exactly support Melissa Kay Thompson’s claim that a “network of institutions . . . enable conventional stereotypes to crisscross White culture” (354), for they pay plentiful attention to stereotypes of Native Americans; what they do not pay attention to is contemporary representations, particularly by Native American authors.

One context for this lack of attention is frequently acknowledged in scholarship on Native American children’s books; Debbie Reese, Michelle Pagni Stewart, and Clare Bradford all remark upon how few young adult novels about contemporary Native Americans have been published, and all mention Cynthia Leitich Smith’s work as one of the rare exceptions to this pattern. Smith herself notes that contemporary fiction is “probably the most underrepresented type of Indian-themed book” (Seale and Slapin 19), and regards her creation of contemporary Indian characters as a necessary response to the absence of such characters in most children’s books. The solution in Doris Seale and
Beverly Slapin’s *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children*, and in the catalog of recommended books available on the Web site of *Oyate* (identified as a “Native organization working to see that our lives and histories are portrayed honestly”) is to recommend books by Native American writers—including many of Alexie’s other books—regardless of whether they were actually marketed in the first instance for child and adolescent readers.

Instead of the creation of novels with contemporary Indian characters, what we find, according to Donnarae MacCann, are “the new imperialistic stories [that] continue to pile up and receive surprisingly little attention” (“Sturdy Fabric” 204). As evidence for this assertion, MacCann examines interracial friendship narratives in contemporary literature, and concludes that Ann Rinaldi’s *The Second Bend in the River* is a novel “whose extreme misuse of history” is “perhaps unique in the pioneer genre” (193). In support of her analysis, MacCann, like Thomp- son, often invokes the scholarship of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Sioux), a scholar who has been highly critical of Alexie’s work. In a 1993 essay, “Who Gets to Tell the Stories?,” Cook-Lynn linked the *New York Times* enthusiasm for Alexie’s first book to mainstream America’s fondness for the “unhappy, deficit model” of Indian lives (60). A staunch proponent of tribal sovereignty and a critic of postcolonial discourse for ignoring the ongoing colonial circumstances in the United States, Cook-Lynn has always insisted that Native American writers need to produce work that is relevant to “tribal lives and communities” (61). Strongly critical of the “American Ideal of Self and Individualism” (62), she insists that questions of identity must be understood as tribal questions. She makes the same point about scholarship (*Why I Can’t Read* xiii).

Cook-Lynn’s perspective has been criticized by Alexie throughout his career. In a 1997 interview with John Purdy, he objected that “no one has figured out a new way to look at Indian literatures” and included Cook-Lynn in his negative assessment (7). Not only might *The Absolutely True Diary* be regarded as a product of Alexie’s continuing attempt to figure out new ways of “look[ing] at Indian literatures”—“We’ve been stuck in place since *House Made of Dawn*” (qtd. in Purdy 9)—the novel also continues his criticism of Cook-Lynn’s “fundamentalism” and inability to see “the ironic nature of her own existence” (qtd. in Nelson 40). The multiple tribal identities that Junior embraces at the end of the novel are clearly opposed to Cook-Lynn’s insistence upon a singular tribal perspective. So, too, in Alexie’s recent poem “Tuxedo with Eagle
Feathers," the speaker—who bears numerous similarities to the author himself, including his fondness for the first person—distinguishes his use of “sovereignty” from the way the term is normally used by Indians, mocks Cook-Lynn’s disapproval of autobiographical writing, and angrily credits dead white writers with teaching him how to be a fighter (80).

Using Cook-Lynn’s theoretical approach to understand *The Absolutely True Diary* would therefore likely demonstrate that the novel is just one more in which “the young [are taught] to colonize and marginalize themselves” (MacCann, “Sturdy Fabric” 185). One reason why I resist this reading is that *The Absolutely True Diary* clearly critiques the very same children’s novels that MacCann does. For example, its treatment of interracial romance hardly resembles Rinaldi’s. The romance novels that Junior’s sister Mary loves to read and wants to write are satirized not just by Alexie’s prose but also by Ellen Forney’s illustrations. Although, as I discuss later on, the cartoons that invoke Indian stereotypes leave uncertain whether viewers laugh at Forney’s deconstruction of the stereotype, or whether they laugh at the stereotype because it confirms that Indians are objects to be laughed at, the point is that Junior instructs the viewer how to read: “The covers were hilarious” (38). Forney’s illustration picks up on Junior’s words—drawing an arrow pointing to the stereotypical “huge half breed muscles” and another arrow emphasizing that the romance novels, no matter what their titles, are all the same.

Despite the satire of interracial romance novels, Junior recognizes why Mary reads them, and her elopement with an Indian from another tribe is presented as a new kind of romance novel, in which Mary replaces the “virginal white schoolteacher” (38) and the man she marries hardly resembles the romance stereotype: “He’s actually kind of ugly” (90). In Forney’s depiction of the new romance novel cover, Mary taunts her brother (91). Just as Junior concludes that his sister’s book and the life she is trying to live “is about hope,” readers are encouraged to read Alexie’s novel as itself a romance about searching for hope (153), even though this is complicated by how Junior later blames himself for Mary’s death.

Alexie similarly satirizes Junior’s desire for the white girl Penelope.\(^{15}\) Rowdy, Junior’s best friend on the reservation and regarded by Junior as the one who will always tell him the truth, responds to his request for romance advice with the succinct, “Hey Asshole. . . . I’m sick of Indian guys who treat white women like bowling trophies” (115). Gordy, Junior’s best friend at Reardan, the all-white high school he transfers to, and characterized as the smartest person Junior would ever know,
Adrienne Kertzer does a Web search whose results demonstrate that the media’s obsession with privileged white girls comes at the cost of ignoring everyone else. Gordy reaches a conclusion that parallels Rowdy’s. Yet even before Junior receives his friends’ advice, he qualifies his statement that he and Penelope “become the hot item at Reardan High School” with a characteristic retraction—“okay, we’re not exactly a romantic couple” (109)—and a recognition that Penelope is probably “semi-dating” him as a way of defying her racist father, Earl (110).14 He knows that she is using him, but he also knows that he is using her, not for sexual reasons only, but also as a way of enhancing his reputation at Reardan. At the end of the novel, Penelope, Junior’s “translucent semi-girlfriend,” has not answered any of his letters (227). Unlike Homer’s Penelope, the wife so faithful to Odysseus that she waits decades for her hero to return, Alexie presents Penelope as a character whose romantic interest in Junior will be short lived; even at the Winter Formal, Junior recognizes that Roger and Penelope will likely become a couple.

_The Absolutely True Diary_ also supports MacCann’s criticism of contemporary writers who use historical fiction to reinforce stereotypes of the “savage Indian” and the “vanishing Indian.” Thomas King, author of the Coyote Columbus picturebooks and several adult novels, believes that many contemporary Native writers set their novels in the present because the dominant culture’s version of the past is “too well populated, too well defended” (Truth 105). _The Absolutely True Diary_ supports King’s assertion, and this in itself serves as a blunt response to the “vanishing Indian” who has not vanished. _The Absolutely True Diary_ is so current that it takes place either in 2006–07, if we follow the date of Mary’s e-mail to Junior (16 November 2006); or 2007–08, if we interpret Junior’s birthdate of 5 November 1992 and the fact that he is fourteen when he starts grade nine as meaning that the novel actually takes place following its 2007 date of publication. In either case, the book’s contemporary setting is a very direct rejoinder to the stereotype of the vanishing Indian. Establishing this contemporary setting is also characteristic of how Alexie modifies details of his own life to fit the narrative requirements of Junior’s story; if the novel is to be so contemporary that it takes place the year that it is published, then Junior must discover his mother’s name in a math book at the beginning of grade nine, rather than as Alexie did at the beginning of seventh grade (Allam 162). Alexie imagines Junior as an Indian child born during the quincentenary of Columbus’s arrival; this birth contests the stereotype of the vanishing Indian in complex ways, since Junior not only serves
as a reminder of the lives damaged by the arrival of Columbus, but also functions as a triumphant rejoinder to that arrival.\textsuperscript{15}

Ironizing Alexie’s obvious resistance to Cook-Lynn’s perspective is what the two writers have in common. Both have said that their writing is driven by anger and defiance: “That anger is what started me writing” (Cook-Lynn, “You May Consider” 57); the speaker in an Alexie poem relates his career to his desire for revenge (“Independence Day,” \textit{Face} 133). Both have addressed the “great burdens” of speaking for others (“You May Consider” 58); Junior, in his joking response to Mr. P—“I was carrying the burden of my race, you know? I was going to get a bad back” (\textit{Absolutely True} 45)—but they disagree about how this burden affects writing autobiographically. A further irony is that Alexie pays considerable attention in \textit{The Absolutely True Diary} to questions of sovereignty and land. When Junior is furious at God because of the death of his father’s friend Eugene, he wants to understand why his family has so much grief. Not finding the dictionary definition of “grief” very helpful, he reads Euripides’s \textit{Medea}. In contrast to the speaker in “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers,” who is ambivalent about the work produced by dead white males, Junior finds in Medea’s language—“What greater grief than the loss of one’s native land?” (173)—words that exactly describe his family’s experience.\textsuperscript{16} The passage is preceded by the only time that Junior considers suicide: like the narrator of “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers,” he credits his survival to the work of those dead white males.

Cook-Lynn states that “there has been no dialogue [with the white government] on the return of stolen lands” (\textit{Why I Can’t Read} 59). I suspect that Alexie would agree; where they disagree is on the likelihood of that return.\textsuperscript{17} It is also clear that for Alexie, the return of lands negotiated through treaties is not enough: as Junior says, “We Indians have LOST EVERYTHING” (173). In another essay, Cook-Lynn criticizes Alexie’s first novel, \textit{Reservation Blues}, for being one of several 1990s novels suggesting “that a return to tribal sovereignty on Indian homelands seems to be a lost cause, and American individualism will out” (“American Indian Intellectualism” 126). This key disagreement is also evident in how Cook-Lynn and Junior use the word “realistic”: Cook-Lynn, in describing the Sioux defenders who insist that homelands be returned to the Sioux Nation as “intelligent, thoughtful, realistic people” (\textit{Why I Can’t Read} 25); Junior, when denying that he is “all goofy-eyed in love with white people,” says “I’m realistic, okay?” (154).

Further demonstrating his “realism,” in a chapter titled “Remembering,” Junior informs his readers that “Reservations were meant to be
prisons,” places where Indians would die and disappear (216). Alexie’s other work often explores the relationship between the Jewish Holocaust and the genocide of Native Americans, but in *The Absolutely True Diary* he provides only one such reference: “Indians have forgotten that reservations were meant to be death camps” (217).¹⁸ For once, Junior is not joking. At times, Alexie appears willing to joke about anything, exemplified in the way that Junior’s father explains that Indians celebrate Thanksgiving because they are “giv[ing] thanks that they didn’t kill all of us” (102), but the Jewish Holocaust is something about which Alexie does not exactly joke.¹⁹ To call the novel’s implied reader a white reader ignores Junior’s statement that not just whites have forgotten that reservations were meant to be death camps. The novel’s implied reader is not just white, but anyone, living on a reservation or not, who has forgotten—or, perhaps more accurately, has never known—that reservations were intended to be death camps. In the context of a genocidal history, the number of deaths that Junior experiences—“I’m fourteen years old and I’ve been to forty-two funerals” (199)—functions not only as his perception of “the biggest difference between Indians and white people” (199), but also serves to highlight the not-exact fit between Junior’s narrative and the patterns Roberta Seelinger Trites finds in adolescent literature.

**Deliberately Imperfect Mimicry:**
*Intertextual Identities and Young Adult Fiction*

In *The Modern Age: Turn-of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention of Adolescence*, Kent Baxter proposes that constructing adolescents as people who could still be “shaped and (re)formed” (37) links late nineteenth-century educational reform, the creation of juvenile courts, Richard Henry Pratt’s establishment of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879, and the transformation of Ernest Thompson Seton’s Woodcraft Indians into Lord Robert Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts. Showing in numerous ways how social evolutionary theories connected adolescence and Native Americans, even as they allowed only the white adolescent to “evolve” beyond “savagery” (50), he notes how this produced a “‘crisis of identity’ in the assimilated Native American” (74). Baxter’s analysis is useful in two ways: first, it foregrounds how Pratt and the history of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, as represented in children’s books such as Ann Rinaldi’s *My Heart Is on the Ground*, serve as an intertext to *The Absolutely True Diary*.²⁰ Second, it suggests why
Alexie’s young adult novel does not exactly fit the theory of adolescent literature proposed by Roberta Seelinger Trites. In numerous interviews, Alexie has stated that *The Absolutely True Diary*, which began as a story in a family memoir, is a fictionalization of his experiences in his first year at Reardan (“Interview”). Among the many benefits of shifting from memoir to novel is an enlargement of the narrative’s focus; the autobiographical story of one individual expands to become potentially the story of many. As Junior informs his readers, his name is common not on just his reservation, but any reservation in the United States: “Shout, ‘Hey, Junior!’ and seventeen guys will turn around. And three women” (60). In addition, what readers might regard as unbelievable in a memoir, they may be more willing to accept as a fictional premise. For example, Alexie’s former Web site ShermanAlexie.com indicated that he had read John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* by age five. I find this biographical detail astonishing, but when Junior includes *The Grapes of Wrath* at the top of his list of favorite books, I accept this information as a provocative intertext that functions as most of the other books in Junior’s list do—not so much as a list of favorite books, but as texts that speak to the novel’s deliberately imperfect mimicry.

*The Grapes of Wrath* intertext is provocative because it simultaneously highlights *The Absolutely True Diary’s* interest in poverty while ignoring Steinbeck’s indifference to Native American sovereignty: “Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away” (33). In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the banks that have driven poor people off the land are portrayed as “worse than Indians and snakes” (34). Many of the young adult novels that appear on Junior’s list are similarly nonchalant in using tribal names for sports teams and automobiles. In one such book, Edward Bloor’s *Tangerine*, the narrator mentions that one neighbor drives a Jeep Cherokee; and while upset that his brother mocks a boy who is electrocuted by saying that the dead boy was “Mohawked” (51), he never criticizes the name of his soccer team. Yet that team is called the War Eagles, and when they rush off the bus, they are “whooping [their] war cry” (165). Like Junior, the narrator in *Tangerine* transfers to a new school, which results in his driving past his home and seeing the development “through the hostile eyes of a War Eagle” (183). In contrast, when Junior transfers to become the only Indian at Reardan other than the mascot, he cannot remain oblivious.

The novel title’s insistence that it presents “absolute truth” also exemplifies Alexie’s deliberately imperfect mimicry. Certainly there
are Native American works that use “diary” in their titles: for example, Tiffany Midge’s *Outlaws, Renegades and Saints: Diary of a Mixed-Up Half-breed*, a collection of poetry and prose whose tone and style at times not only resembles Alexie’s, but which also includes a poem, “Night of the Living Dead,” that Midge (Hunkpapa) dedicates to him.23 Just as certainly, children’s literature has numerous examples of imaginary diaries, including *Tangerine*, in which the narrator insists that he is recording “the whole truth” (293). Yet in contrast to *Tangerine*, which incorporates diary date entries, *The Absolutely True Diary* appears quite indifferent to imitating diary format; its school year chronology could easily exist outside of its claims to be absolutely true. Why, then, this insistence on the novel’s absolute truth?

I propose that the answer to this question resides in how Alexie, whenever he explains that using fiction made his autobiographical story both more believable and more satisfying, always gives the example of how Junior throws the math book at Mr. P. Although Alexie admits to throwing a math book when he discovered his mother’s name in it—and the novel includes his real mother’s name—he has also said that the book did not hit the teacher. Having Junior hit Mr. P is presented as making the story more believable: “The truth, that a self-possessed thirteen-year-old came home from school and said, ‘I gotta get out of here’ just didn’t seem realistic” (qtd. in Blasingame 71). But that Mr. P would respond to Junior’s behavior by confessing to guilt for his own prior behavior is certainly not realistic either—and totally unlike the depiction of white teachers in any of Alexie’s other work, including his short story, “Indian Education,” in which a first-person narrator recounts numerous events that are similar to those in *The Absolutely True Diary*.

Central to Mr. P’s guilt is his confession that when he began teaching, “We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child” (35). With these words, Mr. P—who, Junior reports, some people suspect moved to the reservation because he had testified against the Mafia (30)—assumes the role of a reformed criminal of another sort, a satirical version of Richard Henry Pratt (another Mr. P). Having Mr. P confess to a version of Pratt’s goal to kill the Indian in order to save the man, Alexie has the satisfaction of imagining the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School apologizing to Junior: “I can’t apologize to everybody I hurt. . . . But I can apologize to you” (35). Junior is shocked by Mr. P’s words—“You *killed* Indians?” (35; original emphasis)—and Mr. P explains that such “killing” was intended to destroy Indian culture, a confession that
once again evokes a parallel between Mr. P and Pratt’s goal in educating Indian children. When Mr. P adds that teachers used to beat “the rowdy ones,” Alexie extends his criticism further, since Mr. P’s words suggest that when Rowdy’s father beats him, he has internalized behavior taught to him by white teachers. That Rowdy is “not going to be okay” (217) is the consequence of what whites have done to Indians.

Once we recognize the relationship between Mr. P and Pratt, Ellen Forney’s satirical cartoon of Junior split into two racialized halves—one side white and affluent; the other impoverished and Indian (Absolutely True Diary 57)—resonates differently, for it might be read as a contemporary version of Pratt’s “before” and “after” photographs, intended by Pratt as visual proof of the benefits to killing the Indian (Baxter 75). Although Alexie identifies this cartoon as “the one that ends up really getting the book” (“Interview” n. pag.), the cartoon has an ironic relationship to the story that Junior narrates; the positive role models Forney places on the “white” side of the image can also be found in Junior’s family (for example, his grandmother), and Junior’s insistence that he will always be Indian challenges the “vanishing past” that Forney places on the “Indian” side. As I discuss below, the uneasy fit between the cartoons and the narrative directly contributes to debates about the meaning of the novel’s success.

The relationship between Mr. P and Pratt suggests that the “absolute” truth of the novel’s title represents Alexie’s rebuttal of the claims of other novels that masquerade as autobiographical truth, such as those published in the Scholastic Dear America series, which are presented as “diaries of actual historical figures” (Molin 88). In referring to the absolute truth of his diary, Alexie criticizes the arrogance of white writers who claim the authority to write autobiographically of Indian children. Rinaldi concludes My Heart Is on the Ground by imagining that the dead Indian children whose names she used for her pretend diary “will forgive [her] artistic license, and even smile upon it” (196). The Dear America novels use diaries to disclose supposed historical truth; in contrast, Alexie invents a diary that draws on the experiences of his childhood but never claims, for instance, that General Sheridan must be pleased to find himself in a Native American’s novel. Alexie’s willingness to imagine Pratt seeking forgiveness does not extend to Sheridan, the man who fought in the Civil War and is reputed to be the source of the saying, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” Even deliberately imperfect mimicry has its limits. Yet the historical Sheridan is undoubtedly the inspiration for the name of the history teacher at Reardan, whose lesson on the Civil War Junior walks out on.
The young adult novels on Junior’s list of favorites also support his belief that the real differences between Wellpinit and Reardan can be reduced to the number of deaths he has witnessed, and the contrast between the support he receives from his family versus the behavior of parents that he observes at Reardan. In each of the young adult novels that Junior places on his list, parent–child relationships are dysfunctional. So, too, in each of them, characters are deeply affected by one, or at most, two deaths. Occasionally such deaths are suicides: in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden’s brother has died of leukemia, a student commits suicide, and Holden imagines his own suicide several times; in *Tangerine*, there are two deaths; in K. L. Going’s *Fat Kid Rules the World*, the novel begins with the narrator, whose mother died of cancer nine years earlier, about to commit suicide; and in Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Catalyst*, the heroine has never come to terms with her mother’s death and is traumatized by the accidental death of a little boy. One of the lessons Junior takes from Reardan is that despite his mother’s eccentricity and his father’s drinking, his parents are “pretty good”; in comparison with the many white parents who ignore their children, “Indians are screwed up, but we’re really close to each other” (153).

Although Junior’s generalization doesn’t exactly fit the relationship that Rowdy has with his abusive father, the emphasis upon Indian closeness—not just within Junior’s family, but in the way that the Spokane Indians support him after his grandmother dies—is strikingly different from how Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee/Irish) sees the representation of Indian family and community in Alexie’s earlier work (Owens 79). It also foregrounds one of the two major ways in which *The Absolutely True Diary* revises Roberta Seelinger Trites’s work on adolescent literature. Trites observes that repressive parental figures and Oedipal struggles are among “the most pervasive patterns in adolescent literature” (54). This pattern may fit Alexie’s *Flight*, in which the protagonist is furious with the father who abandoned him, but it does not apply to Junior, who explains that he cannot blame his parents “because my mother and father are the twin suns around which I orbit” (*Absolutely True* 11). Similarly, Trites’s analysis of how death in adolescent literature “is often depicted in terms of maturation when the protagonist accepts the permanence of mortality” (119) seems far removed from Alexie’s use of the deaths that Junior witnesses as part of an overall argument about the consequences of alcoholism.24 Here again, the differences between Alexie’s life and his protagonist’s are instructive of how he
adapts his own experiences to his deliberately imperfect mimicry of the conventions of a young adult novel. Junior encounters far more deaths than Trites indicates are the norm in adolescent fiction, yet significantly fewer than the seven deaths from alcohol-related causes in just one year that Alexie says contributed to his own decision to go to Reardan (YouTube).

Also noteworthy is the difference between Junior’s list of favorite books and the list that appears on Alexie’s former Web site. In contrast to Alexie’s list, Junior’s includes only one novel by a Native American: James Welch’s Fools Crow, which is set in 1870 and depicts how a band of Pikunis deals with the Napikwan (whites) who are determined to take over their land. The characters in this novel disagree about how to respond to the Napikwan; the father of Fools Crow concludes, “Either way, we will lose” (Welch 255). Fools Crow resists this conclusion, but after he has a vision of the fate of his people, he realizes that he is “powerless to change it” (358). His realization resembles Junior’s insistence that he does not love white people but is just being realistic. What is also significant is Fools Crow’s vision of marginalized Pikuni children at a school. After Fools Crow sees how the Napikan have massacred a group of Pikunis, his memory of the schoolchildren returns: “He saw the Napikwan children playing and laughing in a world that they possessed. And he saw the Pikuni children . . . alone and foreign in their own country” (386). Alexie invokes this vision as Junior’s state when he first attends Reardan: a “stranger in a strange land” (81). Junior does not need a Halloween costume to represent and “protest the treatment of homeless Native Americans” (78).

But other than Fools Crow—although Alexie says that he read “hundreds” of young adult novels in preparation for writing The Absolutely True Diary (Konigsberg)—no young adult fiction by Native Americans appears on Junior’s list. While this absence may be consistent with Alexie’s memory of his reading in his own childhood, since he says that he did not discover Native American writers until his college teacher loaned him Joseph Bruchac’s poetry collection, Songs from This Earth on Turtle’s Back, this autobiographical detail makes the omission of Bruchac’s children’s fiction even more puzzling. Not including Bruchac as well as Cynthia Leitich Smith’s Rain Is Not My Indian Name may be strategic, part of a marketing ploy that emphasizes the uniqueness of Alexie’s novel, consistent with Junior’s self-perception that he “was something different, something new” (181).
Whatever Alexie’s reasons for not including either Smith or Bruchac on Junior’s list, their work foregrounds two of the most controversial aspects of *The Absolutely True Diary*: its refusal to imagine that a novel about a contemporary Indian child could present that child as happy with his life on a reservation; and its related insistence that survival requires Junior to leave the reservation. The Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor has noted that “thousands of tribal people have moved from reservations to cities in the past century” (60); this movement is part of the background to the story told by Cassidy Rain Berghoff, the young adult protagonist of *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*. Admittedly, only one of the books on Junior’s list has a female protagonist, so Alexie may have excluded *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* for reasons of gender, but many of the questions that Rain has about Native American identity resemble Junior’s, and, like Junior, she records them in a journal. However, in comparison to *The Absolutely True Diary*, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* adheres far more faithfully to the narrative devices in Trites’s model, especially in the way that Rain comes to terms with her best friend’s accidental death, an event that causes her to question the silence that has followed her mother’s death.

The omission of Bruchac, a well-known Abenaki writer of children’s and young adult fiction, is also revealing. While the protagonists of Bruchac’s *Eagle Song* and *Heart of a Chief* are significantly younger than Junior, and the omission of these novels might be read as respecting the premise that young adults prefer to read about characters older than they are, there are significant points of comparison to Junior’s story in both books. The parallels are strongest in *Heart of a Chief*, whose protagonist attends a school off the reservation, where its sports team is named the Big Chiefs and the mascot is described as someone who “dresses in buckskin with a Plains Indian headdress and . . . lead[s] people in the tomahawk chop” (55). As in *Eagle Song*, the story has a happy ending; the protagonist leads a group that protests “[u]sing Indian names for sports teams” (97); the school board agrees to consider changing the name, and the novel ends with the child’s realization that one boy can make a difference (144). The novel is prefaced by a note in which Bruchac explains that while his book is “based on the realities of contemporary Indian America,” it is not set “on a real reservation,” because “Some of the issues in the book, such as casino gambling, leadership, and alcohol abuse, are too sensitive for me to do that” (n. pag.). In contrast, Alexie sets his novel on a real reservation, is ambiguous about whether one boy can make a difference, and takes on most of
the sensitive issues through a provocative use of comedy and satirical cartoons that risk depicting the very racial and other stereotypes that he acknowledges have caused such harm.

Risky Laughter: The Radical Potential of Ellen Forney’s Cartoons

Joseph L. Coulombe, noting the difficulties many critics have with Alexie’s “indefinite and shifting” (97) targets of satire, uses Louis Owens’s concept of the trickster zone “within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put into question” (Owens 26) to describe Alexie’s humor. Although other critics have also alluded to Alexie’s “trickster” humor, Owens regards Alexie’s writing as the opposite of Gerald Vizenor’s “trickster discourse” (Owens 81). Alexie shuns comparison with Vizenor, resists the trickster label—perhaps because it is too obvious a trope for Native American identity—and prefers to relate his comedy to the work of “political stand-up comedians like Richard Pryor and Lenny Bruce” (Nygren 160). Humor is his “green card” (Alexie, qtd. in Nelson 143), his way of getting people to pay attention, just as Junior says that drawing cartoons is his way of getting the world to pay attention. Unlike words, which he regards as both “unpredictable” and “limited” (5), Junior believes that “when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it” (5). Although Junior’s conviction that when he draws, he transcends cultural specificity is strongly at odds with the story that he tells, his belief that words are dangerous is supported by Thomas Crisp’s reading of The Absolutely True Diary. Crisp sees the novel as characteristic of how young adult novels use homophobia to generate a sense of realism (337–38). In demonstrating how the novel works against its queer possibilities, he gives the example of Gordy’s response when Junior says that people on the reservation call him an “apple.” Crisp reads Gordy’s response—“Do they think you’re a fruit or something?” (131)—as exemplifying Gordy’s belief that “people would avoid someone they suspected was gay” (Crisp 338). Crisp’s analysis reveals the impossibility of predicting reader response. When I initially read the conversation between Junior and Gordy, even though I am familiar with the use of “fruit” as a derogatory term, I was so focused upon Gordy’s ignorance of how “apple” is being used as an insult for Native Americans (i.e., as red on the outside but white on the inside), that I totally overlooked the meaning that Crisp sees.
Another example of Alexie’s risky comedy is the joke Junior tells as he remembers his grandmother. The joke occurs in the context of Junior’s praise of his grandmother’s gift of tolerance, and I admit that Junior’s language and my own could support Crisp’s reading: Junior categorizes gay people as “weird” and eccentric (155), and “tolerance” implies that those who are tolerated are the object of a contingent acceptance. However, the joke is clearly intended to demonstrate Junior’s admiration for his grandmother’s opposition to contemporary Indian intolerance, which he blames on Indian internalization of Euro-American cultural attitudes. I do not know if either this genealogy or generalization about Native American homophobia is true, but what concerns me here is how readers respond when Junior says, “Gay people could do anything. They were like Swiss Army knives!” (155). I find the comparison so incongruous that I laugh; I am not sure that I would find the comparison so funny if I were to replace the subject “Gay people” with either “White girls like Penelope,” or “White guys like Roger,” but I am not sure that I would not.

My response to Junior’s joke foregrounds the distinction Alexie draws between laughing at the object (such as the joke that Roger tells about Indians, black people, and buffalo) and communal laughter. It also foregrounds the danger of satire that is grounded in stereotypes. While I do not agree with Owens that Alexie’s early fiction “too often simply reinforces all the stereotypes desired by white readers” (79), I am also not convinced that we can confidently predict viewers’ response to the satirical cartoons in *The Absolutely True Diary*. Alexie and Forney have both described *The Absolutely True Diary* as the product of their close collaboration. In a process by which Alexie gives Junior his voice, Forney draws Junior’s cartoons that also include Junior’s commentary.27 The process is both collaborative and an ironic comment on authenticity debates; a Spokane Indian boy’s cartoons, in a novel based on a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene author’s childhood, are drawn by a white woman. As Alexie says, “Who knew that a thirty-something white woman could capture a teenage Indian boy?” (“Interview”). Another joke, but what is the object of its laughter?

Forney’s first cartoon depiction of Junior exemplifies both the naivete of Junior’s belief that everybody understands pictures in the same way, and the uncertainty regarding the nature of the laughter that accompanies many of the cartoons. Junior says that he cannot write his story the way he actually talks, because if he included his stuttering, readers would “wonder . . . why [they’re] reading a story written by
such a retard” (4; original emphasis). Forney not only includes words that inscribe the stuttering that Junior omits (5); she also contests his assumption about universal understanding through the words that she has him stutter. Readers familiar with Eliza Doolittle’s speech in *My Fair Lady* know that if the Cockney, working-class Eliza wants to pass as a lady she has to learn how to pronounce “The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.” Readers who do not know the allusion will understand Forney’s cartoon, in which Junior attempts and fails to repeat Eliza’s words properly, in a different manner from those who are familiar with the musical.28

To make his point that pictures are a way of communicating universally with the world, Junior gives the example of a drawing of a flower. The problems raised by this example—does every culture draw flowers in the same way?—are multiplied in the case of the cartoons of Indians. Forney’s first cartoon depiction of Junior demands attention in this context, too. Erik Himmelsbach reports that when Alexie attended Reardan, he not only abandoned his reservation accent (a process Junior alludes to when Penelope makes fun of his own accent); he also cut his hair in order to fit in. Although Forney depicts numerous Indians with long hair, Junior, even before he decides to transfer to Reardan, is never once drawn this way. The satirical representation of Mr. P as Pratt might encourage interpreting Junior’s short hair as a reminder of the haircuts imposed on children at Carlisle, but the fact that Junior never expresses any distress about his haircut undercuts this reading. Forney’s cartoon is titled “Me in all my glory” and stresses Junior’s comic appearance, evident in the size of his disproportionately big head and his physical awkwardness (5). Junior’s initial self-depiction is obviously satirical and self-mocking.

Junior’s haircut also distinguishes him from the drawings that invoke and mock Indian stereotypes. Forney’s drawings of Junior are for the most part unlike those drawings, but it is not at all certain that viewers will automatically share Junior’s perspective that such stereotypes are ridiculous. Forney may depict Junior with short hair, and therefore unlike Indian stereotypes, in order to encourage viewers to see the Indian cartoons in the way that he sees them. But if this is the case, surely this undercuts the belief that no viewers could possibly respond in a racist manner to the racism that Forney’s drawings satirize.

The illustrations propose a communal space governed by the hope that all viewers will share Junior’s perspective, and laugh with him. This space is not exactly like Alexie’s other work in which laughter is rarely
shared. Coulombe sees Alexie’s humor in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* “as a means of connection as well as an instrument of separation” (95). In a short story published in a later collection, a character observes that “Whites and Indians laughed at most of the same jokes, but they laughed for different reasons” (“Indian Country” 125–26). In contrast, in *The Absolutely True Diary* Junior distinguishes between communal laughter and laughter directed at the other, and is more hopeful about the possibility of the former: “Laughing WITH him” is very different from “laughing AT him” (93). Junior makes this distinction right after he observes that Gordy does not realize that Junior is laughing at him. Although Gordy does not fight Junior when he realizes the antagonistic nature of his laughter, he is the exception in a novel in which Rowdy gets mad because Junior laughs at him, and the only time that Junior fights a white classmate is after the classmate tells a racist joke.

The illustrations are thus simultaneously utopian and ironic: utopian in that they hope for communal laughter, ironic in that what Junior sees when he arrives at Reardan is not at all what his classmates see. Viewers presumably laugh with Junior and not at him as he/Forney mock racist depictions of Indians. The first cartoon that responds to Junior’s arrival at Reardan provides his perception of the school’s Indian mascot and includes his ironic comment—“Reardan’s inspiring mascot” (56). The cartoon is framed by Junior’s description of how the white students see him—“the Indian boy with the black eye and swollen nose”—but there is no guarantee that viewers will respond to the mascot drawing as Junior does (56).

The tone of the laughter raised by Forney’s cartoon depicting the resemblance between chicken dancers and chickens is equally uncertain (19). In his narrative, Junior does not say that chicken dancers look like chickens; he says that the dancers at the Spokane Powwow are “cool because . . . they dance like chickens” (19). In contrast, the words in the cartoon not only point to the many similarities between the body of the Indian dancer and the body of the chicken, but in comparison to the near-naked body of the dancer, the static body of the chicken looks dignified. Why exactly do viewers laugh, if indeed they do laugh, when they look at this cartoon?

Although we cannot know for certain why viewers laugh when they look at the cartoons, *The Absolutely True Diary* is far more comic than Alexie’s earlier autobiographical stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Partly this is the consequence of the more hopeful
story that Alexie tells here; unlike the self-destructive protagonists in
the author’s first two novels (Reservation Blues and Indian Killer), Junior
does not kill himself. But Forney’s illustrations also play a major role in
affecting the novel’s tone simply because they minimize the violence
and rage of Junior’s narrative. Junior draws cartoons to make Rowdy
laugh, but he also says that he draws them to express his anger (178).
The cartoon that supposedly depicts his anger at God after his father’s
friend Eugene is killed depicts a frowning Jesus standing on waves and
looking in disapproval while others point at him and laugh (171). Be-
neath the image is Junior’s commentary: “Jesus farteth and burpeth
in harmony! MIRACULOUS!!” followed by the satirical citation “John
11:35 am” (171). Like the previous comic panel titled “How to Get the
Last Sip of Wine from the Bottom of the Bottle,” such cartoons are
unusual in Forney’s direct depiction of violence and anger, but typical
in that without the words that Alexie writes, it would be difficult to rec-
ognize the majority of the cartoons as provoked by either the author’s
or his protagonist’s anger.

Forney does not draw a cartoon of Junior punching Roger or of the
racist joke that prompts the punch, nor of Rowdy knocking Junior un-
conscious. Of the sixty cartoons, the most blatant in their anger are the
cartoon of Junior throwing the textbook at Mr. P (31); of Rowdy when
he learns that Junior is transferring to Reardan (53); of the comparison
of the Reardan geology teacher, Mr. Dodge, to a volcano (85); and of
Penelope’s racist father (109). In contrast, when Junior writes that he
was “Volcano mad. Tsunami mad” at his father for shooting his very ill
dog, Forney does not depict Junior’s rage (11). I do not think that this
is because Junior’s grief and rage are unrepresentable; Junior is clearly
able to represent verbally the trauma of discovering his mother’s name
in a textbook. What seems more important is that the missing cartoon
respects the novel’s premise that Junior is unable to hate his parents.
Forney, respecting Junior’s conflict, does not depict his impotent rage;
instead she draws a cartoon of who Junior’s parents would have been,
“if somebody had paid attention to their dreams” (12). In paying atten-
tion to Junior’s dreams—his main reason for drawing—readers are
offered the possibility of living their lives differently.

“Seriously funny stuff”: The Radical Potential of Reading

This discussion began by highlighting different ways of reading Native
American writing. It concludes by returning to the question of how we
might read a writer who links comedy to survival: “Sometimes life can be so bad that humor is the only way you can talk about it. The only option to humor is silence” (Alexie, qtd. in Blasingame 70). Several of the poems in Alexie’s recent collection, *Face*, foreground his interest in comedy as a mode of addressing serious issues. One poem is titled “Comedy is a Funny Way of Being Serious”; another, called “Inappropriate,” is prompted by the speaker’s reaction to a listener dismissive of his reliance on humor (*Face* 28). Yet despite Junior’s generalizations about the difference between Indian and non-Indian laughter (166), and statements Alexie has made that support a theory of “humor as a means of coping” (Fagan 26), *The Absolutely True Diary* appears less interested in providing a theory of Native American humor than in using humor as a way to make “dialogue possible” between Native Americans and non-Native Americans (Nygren 161).

Thomas King, like Alexie a very funny writer and occasional public performer, has questioned whether “a valid definition of Native humour exists” (“Performing” 171). The two writers have much in common, including a skepticism about whether scholarly theories benefit Native peoples: King mocks postcolonial studies for improving the lives of postcolonial critics far more than the lives of Native peoples (*Truth* 59); Alexie dismisses the postmodernist discourse of Gerald Vizenor as inaccessible to young readers: “If Indian literature can’t be read by the average 12-year-old living on the reservation, what the hell good is it?” (Purdy 7). Yet despite their criticism of such theories, King’s work invites postcolonial readings; and Alexie, when pushed by Åse Nygren, admits that he may well be a postmodern writer (Nygren 163).

King may not write autobiographically as often as Alexie, but when he does, he is just as playful in invoking autobiographical authority. This is evident at the end of his 2003 CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Company] Massey Lectures, published as *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, when King provides a personal anecdote which he then points out may have been invented. In “The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me,” Alexie similarly describes reading a story about a father who abandons his family and then dies. After a woman in the audience expresses her sorrow for the death of his father, Alexie tells her that his father is sitting beside her (14). King is also wary of the dangers of authenticity, calling it a “racial reality game that contemporary Native people are forced to play” (*Truth* 55). Identity legislation, defining who is or is not Indian, whether it is through federally imposed definitions of blood quantum in the United States or the equivalent two-generation cut-off
clause in Canada, has “set . . . Native against Native. . . . [through] the creation of legal categories that have made us our own enemy” (Truth 149). As Pauline Turner Strong and Barrik Van Winkle observe, blood quantum discourse is a “discourse of oppression and exclusion” that is simultaneously also “a tragically necessary discourse of survival and solidarity” (554).

The two writers also share an ambivalence regarding non-Native readers. Like Alexie, who has said that his work contains Indian trapdoors—“Indians fall in, white people just walk right over them” (Purdy 15)—King stated earlier in his career that he didn’t really “care about the white audiences” (qtd. in Vizenor 174). Yet both writers allow the possibility of reading that makes dialogue possible, or more accurately, they imagine the possibility of non-Native readers shutting up long enough to pay attention. In *The Truth about Stories*, King observes that some Native writers, fed up with the mixed results when Native stories are shared with non-Natives, have decided to write only for Native readers. But ideally, “the fact of the matter is that we need to reach both [non-Native and Native]” (118).

In contrast to Alexie, who stated in 2005 that humor does not make change possible (Nygren 161), King is slightly more hopeful: “We [King and Louis Owens] wrote knowing that none of the stories we told would change the world. But we wrote in the hope that they would” (92). The possibility that a book might change the world also resonates in Gordy’s theory of reading. Teaching Junior that his cartoons are “seriously funny stuff” (95), Gordy tells him that he should approach reading, drawing, and life “with the real possibility that [he] might get a metaphorical boner at any point” (97). Junior is shocked, but Alexie’s poem “The Oral Tradition” explores the same premise (Face 89–91). In both novel and poem, sex can provide self-pleasure, but it can also serve as a bridge to others.

The Puffin paperback cover of Bruchac’s *The Heart of a Chief* asks, “Can one boy make a difference?” King’s theory of reading would shift the ongoing responsibility for making a difference away from the author and the fictional protagonist. Beginning every lecture in *The Truth about Stories* the same way—“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2)—King concludes every lecture with a directive to the audience: “don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (60). To assume that a popular book must necessarily be read as supportive of the dominant discourse implies that the dominant discourse
will never alter, and that the books most resistant to that discourse are least likely to have wide appeal. If the limitations of language make North American attempts to contest dominant imaginings of Native Americans “performative failures” (Crisp 343), perhaps such failures highlight problems that lie elsewhere: in our reading practices and what we do once we have read the story. One boy likely cannot make a difference, but a community of readers might be able to. If readers do not like the world that Alexie presents—either because they think that he misrepresents conditions on Native American reservations, or because they believe that his “conventional topic” will not serve the needs of young Native American readers—what will they do now that they have heard Junior’s story? As King advises, paying attention to the radical potential of The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian requires that readers not only listen to Junior’s story, but also choose to live their lives differently. To do otherwise, to remain exactly the same, means that we have not paid attention.

Notes

1Ellen Forney reports on her Web site that Alexie has a contract for a second young adult novel, The Magic and Tragic Year of My Broken Thumb, which will be a sequel to his first. Alexie’s new Web site, Sherman Alexie The Official Sherman Alexie Website, also refers to the sequel. The new site (as of November 2011) contains far less information, both biographical and bibliographical, than did the previous one, which had a slightly different title: ShermanAlexie.com The Official Site of Sherman Alexie. For example, while Alexie did not categorize his novel Flight as a young adult novel on his former Web site, it’s not even listed on the new one. Please note that pages from the original site, while extremely difficult to access, can still be found on other Web sites; see, for example, <http://arapaho.nsuok.edu/~strong01/ShermanAlexie.com%20%20The%20Official%20Site%20of%20Sherman%20Alexie.htm>.

2The dust jacket of the Collector’s Edition of The Absolutely True Diary quotes the New York Times review—“May be [Sherman Alexie’s] best work yet”—just as that of The Business of Fancydancing quotes from the Times review that called Alexie “one of the major lyric voices of our time.”

3The grounds for such suspicion lie in the history of how Native Americans are represented in the books that have won mainstream book prizes. In his study of the Newbery Medal, Kenneth B. Kidd notes that “The institutional racism of the ALA can be traced both within the Newbery tradition and within ALA prize culture at large” (178). Similarly, Native American scholars such as Gloria Bird, Louis Owens, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn have all regarded Alexie’s celebrity status early in his career as proof that his work “reinforces all the [Indian] stereotypes desired by white readers” (Owens 79).

4Bradford states that “Indigenous children’s authors generally focus on the production of texts modeling the identity formation of contemporary Indigenous subjects” (Unsettling Narratives 104). The tension between this statement and Bradford’s categorization of the narrator’s identity formation in The Absolutely True Diary as a “conventional topic” implies that the identity he forms is not the identity of a contemporary Indigenous subject.
The novel’s protagonist, Arnold Spirit Jr., explains that he is called both Arnold and Junior. Throughout this article I will refer to him as Junior, the name he is called on his reservation. Bradford refers to the protagonist as Arthur Spirit Jr.

I acknowledge the irony of making this claim given that I am white. It is impossible to read any of Alexie’s work and forget this identity, but as I learned from feminist criticism, being white does not fully determine my reading position. Alexie satirizes white readers even as he often acknowledges, with different degrees of resentment and acceptance, that the majority of his readers are not Indian (Purdy 15).

Alexie has often stated that he is “Indian,” and that “Native American” is a term that makes white liberals feel better even as it covers over American history, including federally imposed definitions of blood quantum that define who is and is not Indian. Recognizing that both “Indian” and “Native American” ignore the specificity of tribal identity, in this discussion I use them as “necessary fictions” (Schweninger 71). As Canadian historian Daniel Francis observes in explaining his own terminology, “part of the legacy of the Imaginary Indian [is] that we lack a vocabulary with which to speak about these issues clearly” (9).

Alexie often describes the impact of Adrian Louis’s words: “I’m in the reservation of my mind” (qtd. in Nygren 152). Joshua B. Nelson calls Alexie’s journey away from the reservation “a round-trip package” (47) and Eric Konigsberg quotes Alexie as “feeling so conflicted about having fled the rez as a kid that [he] created a whole literary career that left [him] there.”

“A striking difference between The Absolutely True Diary and Alexie’s earlier work is that Junior makes no reference to blood quantum issues, other than what might be implied from his living on a reservation. In contrast, in the story “One Little Indian Boy,” Alexie uses a fractional discourse that is informed and enraged by blood quantum regulations. Alexie’s decision to write a comic young adult novel appears linked to his book’s avoidance of this discourse.

The survey was based on the first thirty-eight volumes of Children’s Literature. Michelle Pagni Stewart’s “The Homing In’ of Howard Camp: Hidden Roots in Joseph Bruchac’s Hidden Roots” appeared after the completion of this article.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a similar analysis of the content of other scholarly journals.

These essays include an omnibus review that supports Bradford’s assertion that “A significant proportion of texts across settler cultures comprise retelling of traditional narratives, generally in the form of picture books or illustrated books” (Unsettling Narratives 48); an article on Lydia Maria Child’s nineteenth-century Juvenile Miscellany; and another on Orientalism in Louisa May Alcott’s Eight Cousins. The journal has also published an article comparing the ideology of the environment in an 1894 novel and David Klass’s California Blue (1994), the latter a novel in which the inhabitants of Kiowa, California, are “cast as modern-day ‘savages’” (Apol 91) and loggers have replaced Native Americans as silenced Others (103). It has published two articles on the work of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and a few others in which Native Americans are mentioned so briefly that only a search engine would regard them as saying anything about the representation of Native Americans.

This satire is supported by Forney’s illustration of the cover for Junior’s romance with Penelope, which also parodies the kind of glowing reviews Alexie has received from the New York Times. Beneath the image of Junior embracing a vomit-breath Penelope is an excerpt from an imaginary Times review: “A stunning portrait of one boy’s fantasy” (108).

Many of the characters’ names evoke American history. In naming Penelope’s racist father Earl, Alexie gives him a name associated with numerous racists, to name just two: James Earl Ray, the assassin of Martin Luther King; and Earl Butz, Nixon and Ford’s secretary of agriculture who resigned over a racist comment comparable to the racist joke that causes Junior to punch out Roger.
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Junior’s year of birth is also triumphant in a personal way, in that he is born the year that Alexie’s first two books were published. However, another consequence of the timeline is more sobering. Returning to Wellpinit to play basketball, Junior thinks of himself as “something different, something new” (181); he hopes that “twenty years in the future, they’d be comparing some kid to me” (182). By setting the story in the present, Alexie implies that Junior’s longing that future Indian children will have better experiences remains unfulfilled.

Elsewhere, Junior is perfectly willing to criticize the work of dead white males, including the “Russian dude named Tolstoy” who obviously “didn’t know Indians” (200). A chapter titled “Slouching Toward Thanksgiving” revises the final line of W. B. Yeats’s “The Second Coming,” in which a new “rough beast” slouches toward Bethlehem. Although Junior in this chapter uses popular culture to characterize himself as a “zombie” (82), he immediately qualifies this: “that’s not exactly the right description” (82). Junior’s familiarity with Charles Dickens—“we Indians were the worst of times and those Reardan kids were the best of times” (50)—is reminiscent of Holden Caulfield’s reference to “all that David Copperfield kind of crap” (Salinger 1). As noted below, The Catcher in the Rye appears on Junior’s list of favorite books.

 Asked in 2010 about Cook-Lynn’s views on tribal political sovereignty, Alexie begins, “Number one, we’re not getting it back” (Nelson 40).

Perhaps because the reference to the Jewish Holocaust is so limited in The Absolutely True Diary, Nancy J. Peterson does not include this novel in her exploration of Alexie’s “significant ethical engagement with issues attached to genocidal histories and our use of them” (65).

Jan Roush alludes to a perception that “humor helped Jews survive the Holocaust” (205). This grand generalization is not true to Jewish survival of the Holocaust, the dominant representations of that survival, or Alexie’s interest in examining the relationship between Indian humor and Jewish humor. It is also not true to the distinction Alexie draws between the fire that kills Junior’s sister, and Junior’s hysterical laughter after he hears of her death. Peterson reads Alexie’s observation that “the two funniest groups of people . . . are Native Americans and Jewish folks” and that therefore “there’s something inherently funny about genocide” (Allam 159) as characteristic of Alexie’s “provocative [and] risky” trickster humor (Peterson 78). On the controversy regarding comic representations of the Holocaust, see Kertzer 203–12.

My Heart Is on the Ground has received extensive scholarly attention. Melissa Kay Thompson notes how Native American reviewers were the first to raise objections, when the novel initially received good reviews elsewhere. She quotes from Marlene Atleo, et al., “Fiction Posing as Truth: A Critical Review of Ann Rinaldi’s My Heart Is on the Ground: The Diary of Nannie Little Rose, A Sioux Girl.” Atleo’s essay appears in an expanded version in Scale and Slapin 56–71. See also Paulette F. Molin, American Indian Themes in Young Adult Literature, and Stewart, “Judging Authors By the Color of Their Skin?”

Stewart similarly argues that Bruchac’s use of “homing in differs from Nodelman and Reimer’s home/away/home pattern in a number of ways” (“The ‘Homing In’” 146).

The narrator of Alexie’s novel Flight carries The Grapes of Wrath in his backpack. Alexie’s old Web site included various lists of favorite things; at the top of his favorite novel list was The Grapes of Wrath. The current site does not include a favorite novel list, nor does its brief biography mention Alexie’s childhood reading of The Grapes of Wrath.

The dust jacket to Midge’s collection includes praise by Alexie. However, in his interview with John Purdy, Alexie is less gracious, stating that “Tiffany Midge has a good future, once she stops copying me” (9).

Junior refers to the deaths of Eugene, his grandmother, his sister, and her husband, as well as to the death of his dog Oscar; only the dog’s death is not alcohol-related. In Alexie’s earlier work, suicide is frequent; in contrast, in The Absolutely True Diary, there are no suicides.
Alexie has said that “at any given point, somewhere around 70 percent of Natives live off-reservation” (Nelson 39).

In “Judging Authors By the Color of Their Skin?” Stewart similarly analyzes Rain Is Not My Indian Name in terms of her thesis about Native American narrative patterns.

In “Interview with Ellen Forney,” Forney guesses that in their collaborative process “about a third of the graphics were Sherman’s ideas, a third were real collaborations, and a third were [her] ideas” (n. pag.).

Similarly, readers who do not know the books on Junior’s list will be oblivious to the deliberately imperfect mimicry that I argue is characteristic of Alexie’s work.

King has also provisionally defined “Native literature [as] literature produced by Natives . . . providing we resist the temptation of trying to define a Native” (qtd. in Christie 180).

Works Cited

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