

Using *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* To Teach About Racial Formation

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SHERMAN ALEXIE'S RECENT NOVEL, the National Book Award winner *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), is told through the words and pictures of Arnold Spirit, Jr. of the Wellpinit reservation in Eastern Washington, which Junior (as he is known on the reservation) tells us "is located approximately one million miles north of Important and two billion miles west of Happy" (p. 30). Junior, who narrates this poignant story, is a fourteen-year-old boy struggling to make sense of his identity, which becomes increasingly challenging as he decides to leave his reservation school to attend the predominantly White school in nearby Reardan, where he notes sardonically that the only other Indian in town is the school's mascot. Junior said from that time on he "felt like two different people inside one body" (Alexie, 2007, p. 61).

As an instructor of an undergraduate course called *Sociocultural Studies in Education*, I see rich pedagogic value in Alexie's work. Part humanities course, part cultural studies course, this class places special emphasis on helping students learn to read and analyze texts critically. Three major premises of cultural studies inform students' analysis: cultural processes are innately intertwined with social relations (class, race, gender, etc.); culture involves asymmetries of power, that is in people's recognition and realization of their needs; culture is a site of social difference and struggle (Johnson, 1986/87, p. 39). The *Absolutely True Diary* is particularly useful for students to analyze and understand the politics of difference and struggle, especially when used in conjunction with more theoretical texts.

Being Fourteen Years Old Matters

Alexie's choice to narrate the story through the words of fourteen-year-old Junior allows him to carry the reader into what otherwise might be uncomfortable or incongruent spaces. Junior must deal with many common struggles of adolescence, such as how to talk to those he desires

sexually and/or romantically, control hormones, and manage relationships with parents, friends, and teachers. The familiarity of these struggles helps the reader empathize with Junior. Alexie's quality as a writer amplifies this empathy, and he seamlessly layers class and racial identities on top of these more familiar adolescent struggles.

Alexie's book is classified as young adult (YA) literature, which should not be decried as merely an issue of marketing and should not limit who reads the book. On the contrary, YA literature is a rich genre that, while specifically targeted toward young adults, has appeal and relevance to a broader audience too. Stevens (2007) asserts that the genre of young adult literature is classified by five main criteria: the book is written about teens; it is written in a distinctly teen voice; it is characterized by the journey toward identity; it tackles adult issues in teenage lives; and, it has the same potential for literary value as grown-up novels. *The Absolutely True Diary* exemplifies all of these criteria. Additionally, Arviso (2008) notes that Alexie's book fills a gap in the genre of young adult literature, particularly because of the issues of race and class raised by the book. For example, Arviso (2008) notes that while the book holds important lessons for Native American and young adult readers, the book's topics are important for non-native and adult readers as well. Daniels (2006) argues for the validity of the genre for serious literary study, noting that many of the novels can be critiqued as one would critique adult literature. "For example, the genre of YA literature can be examined as a way to analyze the underlying class ideology of a work, without the text being specifically 'about' class conflict" (p. 80).

Extending the argument that the novel can be read by both YA and non-YA readers, Phillion and He (2004) suggest the term *life-based literary narratives* for "memoirs, autobiographies, and novels that focus on the intimate, daily experiences of diverse families, parents, students, and teachers" (p. 6). *The Absolutely True Diary* is a pedagogically important and useful exemplar of life-based literary narrative; it foregrounds the daily experiences of Junior and his friends and classmates as they all struggle to make sense of each other together.

Phillion and He (2004) argue, echoed by Parker and Howard (2009), that these life-based literary narratives can be important tools to use with pre-service teachers, many of whom will work with adolescent students. Parker and Howard further argue that these life-based literary narratives can imbue a sense of empathetic understanding and perspective-taking into courses that foreground multiculturalism. In particular, such narratives can help with self-examination, "the ability to critically examine one's traditions, beliefs, and values" (p. 5), and can help these pre-service teachers move toward a deeper understanding of how their students experience the world. Using excerpts from *The Absolutely True Diary* in my class, which includes a number of pre-service teachers, exposes students to the very genre of literature and tools of analysis that some of them— especially English teachers and other teachers committed to multiculturally relevant curriculum— will use in their future classrooms.

Perhaps the most important implication of Junior's narration is that it sends the crucial cultural message that adolescents have important things to say, that being fourteen years old matters. As Junior puts it in the story, "I draw because I want to talk to the world. And I want the world to pay attention to me"¹ (Alexie, 2007, p. 6). Alexie (2009), reflecting on his own work, says,

I write children's literature for kids who aren't having childhoods, who are forced into adulthood really early. Those are the kids nobody's looking out for. Those are the kids nobody's trying to talk to in large numbers. Those are the kids that get ignored. (p. 28)

Consistent with the spirit of cultural studies, my use of *The Absolutely True Diary* is an intentional act to disrupt asymmetries of power that circulate within the academy that privilege certain types of knowledge (i.e. empirical or “theoretical”) over others, as well as those that circulate in the larger society that validate the opinions and experiences of adults while negating those of young people.

Using the Novel in Class

The chapters I assign from *The Absolutely True Diary* revolve around Junior’s first few days at the new school off the reservation. Junior becomes acutely aware of his identity when he gets the opportunity to attend the predominantly White school (Reardan) off of the reservation where, for the first time, he spends a great deal of time around White people. Junior later reflects, “I woke up on the reservation as an Indian, and somewhere on the road to Reardan, I became something less than Indian” (Alexie, 2007, p. 83). Feeling the legacy of the historical project whereby schools sought to “kill the Indian, save the man,”² Junior’s experience in reservation schools is hopeless. Encouraged by his math teacher on the reservation, Mr. P³, Junior leaves the reservation to attend the White school because he and his parents “don’t know if hope is white” (Alexie, 2007, p. 51), but they recognize the possibility for him to have more academic opportunities. Entering the new school, Junior is forced to come to terms with the other students’ Whiteness and his own not-Whiteness. Like many persons from historically marginalized populations, Junior feels the “burden of his race” and that “he [is] going to get a bad back from it” (Alexie, 2007, p. 43). He also experiences resentment from his Indian neighbors on the reservation. “The people at home...A lot of them call me an apple...they call me an apple because they think I’m red on the outside and white on the inside” (pp. 131-132). Arviso (2008) notes that Junior, like all people, “has several identities that develop within different communities and contexts and can be negotiated and utilized to different ends” (p. 52). By the end of the book, Junior finds a way to negotiate a racial identity that is more comfortable to him, both at school and on the reservation.

Junior understands himself as an Indian, but he struggles to make sense of being an Indian in a White world when he enters a predominantly White space for the first time and he learns that being White has different rules from being Red. For example, Junior responds to the taunting and teasing of one of his classmates by punching him in the face. The boy gets to his feet and walks away, as his friends glare in shock. Junior notes:

I was absolutely confused. I had followed the rules of fighting. I had behaved exactly the way I was supposed to behave. But these white boys had ignored the rules. In fact, they followed a whole other set of mysterious rules where people apparently DID NOT GET INTO FISTFIGHTS. (original emphasis) (Alexie, 2007, pp. 55-56)

Junior learns the rules of fighting growing up on the reservation, where an Indian is expected to prove himself by not backing down from a fight (he notes that his record is “five wins and one hundred twelve losses,” [p. 62]). This is not socially acceptable behavior in a White school, and Junior’s adherence to Indian rules in White space demarcates a distinction between White and not-White that Junior struggles to navigate.

Readers may not fully understand Junior's struggle without a way to think about the ways social rules are organized and acted out. Parker and Howard (2009) elaborate on the connection between the use of theoretical and narrative literature in the classroom: "Theoretical as well as empirical works play an important role in helping [students] understand and therefore further connect with narratives, just as narratives promote deeper understandings of theory" (p. 6). To use the novel in a way that illuminates theory (and vice versa), I assign the excerpts from the book concurrently with an excerpt from Omi and Winant's (1994) work *Racial Formation in the United States*. Omi and Winant argue that race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation wherein particular cultural representations reify hegemonic social relations. Race is both an interpretation or explanation of social relations, but also a way of allocating resources according to racialized meanings (p. 56). Consequently, Racial Formation Theory becomes the lens through which I ask students to analyze the texts we read regarding race, including *The Absolutely True Diary*. Traditionally, I use excerpts from Ladson-Billings' (2004) *Landing on the Wrong Note*, McIntosh's (1989) *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, and Noguera's (2003) *City Schools and the American Dream* to address the topic of race. I find the use of *The Absolutely True Diary* to be even stronger when it is juxtaposed within the context of these other readings.

Students generally express that they like the excerpt and might even read the whole book. Some students have also mentioned the benefit of having a concrete exemplar to contrast against the theoretical readings and welcome the novel's accessibility, in comparison to the theoretical readings that dominate the course and which they generally find more difficult.

After adding the book excerpt to my syllabus, I have found, in discussing the reading with my students, that their understanding of racial formation theory is deepened by the excerpt's use. I have also found that they have a deeper understanding of the book because of their application of racial formation theory to reading it. In previous semesters, when I did not include the novel alongside the theoretical readings, students' understanding of racial formation theory seemed less concrete because they had trouble seeing "how it worked."

Junior's experiences help the theoretical become more tangible for students, providing evidence of the "link between structure and representation" noted by Omi and Winant (p. 56). For example, when Junior asserts, "hope is White," I ask my students what he means and how something like "hope" can have a racial designation. Some of the students are able to articulate why "hope is White," explaining that those things that represent hope for Junior, such as access to a quality school, are socially dispersed along racial lines. That is, they understand that hope is not "White" in itself but rather expresses a social (i.e. economic) relationship characterized by having access to things that have generally meant social status and mobility for White people. Having previously learned about hegemony, they are generally able to understand, then, that this specific social relationship, "White as hope," is normalized. It positions "White" as the desired and the norm and "Red" as undesirable and without hope.

Interestingly, after reading excerpts from *The Absolutely True Diary*, some of my students (who typically resemble the White, middle class demographic of the university as a whole) seem more easily able to see "the reconstruction of Whiteness as the ultimate property" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58), and show an initial willingness to understand and critique *their own* Whiteness. I heard them begin to understand racialization on a more personal, rather than merely conceptual level, though this was not true for all students. One student responded to the question about why White means hope by saying, "Just because it is." I pressed her for elaboration, and she referenced the fact that Junior and his parents, even people on the

reservation considered White people to have more hope. She continued, “Why else would they all get so mad at Junior for leaving? They were jealous.” She had unwittingly illustrated the point, though, by articulating Whiteness as the ultimately desired category. She was partly correct. In many cases, being White *is* better; there are clear and tangible benefits to Whiteness. We began, then, to use both the novel and the *Racial Formation* excerpt to understand why and how White had become the most desired category, pointing to moments and situations even in Junior’s own life that illustrate how Whiteness became constructed as “better.”

Of course, my use of the book is not meant to be exhaustive; I use it to help students understand what can be otherwise elusive concepts, but this is only part of a larger pedagogical plan for the course. My goal is that through the novel, students will begin to recognize how race is hegemonically constructed and will begin to understand “how a system of unequal power in society is maintained, and partly recreated, by means of the ‘transmission’ of culture” (Apple, 2004, p. 30). This charge also requires that we ask students to reflect on the received message of the book as a larger text, separate from the narrative, and how it either perpetuates or alters their understandings of race, particularly Native Americans, and of their own privilege.

Admittedly, this last charge—to help students more directly confront their own privilege—is one to which I devote less time in my class than I would like and feel is needed. As a White, heterosexual, middle-class teacher, I am conscious of modeling for my students a critique of the cultural power and privilege of dominant identities like my own; works like *The Absolutely True Diary* are important tools for these kinds of critiques. Unfortunately, the purpose of the class, as outlined by the department in which I teach and by its fulfilling liberal education requirements, renders the class more about theoretical analysis than about engaging in personal reflection. I have struggled to find a balance between covering all the material required by the department and my own desire to devote more time to having students reflect in personal ways about the implications of their own identity positions. As I continue to use the novel, I hope to more deliberately find ways to engage the personal with students, finding opportunities for them to understand and critique their own identity position in addition to their ability to analyze and/or synthesize social theory. True to the spirit of cultural studies, I hope to continue to help students critique how their identities are implicated in the politics of difference and struggle.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian has strong pedagogic value in the cultural studies classroom. Alexie’s poignant, witty, elegant writing is powerful in its cultural insight. At its heart, it is a story fundamentally about culture as a site of struggle, which makes it an invaluable resource.

Notes

1. Ellen Forney elegantly illustrates the novel, though we are told that they are Junior’s drawings, which reinforces the power of both Junior’s narration of the story as well as the meaning that can be gleaned from the drawings themselves.
2. David Wallace Adams, in *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (1995, University Press of Kansas), details the effort to Americanize Indians, which meant removing all vestiges of their “savagery” and “civilizing” them. Of course, the “civilization” that was privileged was White, English-speaking, and Christian.
3. In the scene immediately prior to the excerpt I give students, Junior hurls his geometry book toward the front of the classroom and hits Mr. P, which results in Junior’s suspension. Junior threw the book in anger after seeing his mother’s maiden name written among those who had previously used the same book, illustrating the extreme lack of resources of the reservation school, luridly contrasting the conditions of Reardan.

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