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## Cultures and Identities

Cultures do not define identity. By using self narration as a tool, the protagonist successfully seeks and creates his identity as an adolescent relatable to both the Native-American and Anglo-European community.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a novel which is being celebrated for its combination of literary traditions and various thematic and formal features. It is written by Sherman Alexie, one of the most iconic voices in contemporary indigenous literature. Alexie is acknowledged for the fact that he effectively manages to deconstruct the myths and stereotypes about the Native-American people. He has a controversial way of writing, not only questioning the colonizer's definition of what it means to be an Indian but also questioning the traditions long held by Native themselves. His use of a sardonic and urban humour, has made him *enfant terrible* in the modern Native-American society (Haertling & Sulzer, 2015).

While silence reinforces stereotypes, Alexie is using his loud voice to dig into the myths. By deliberately combining features from both sides, the colonizers and the colonized, he explores new potentials and looks into the possibility of existing within the myths, while he simultaneously is looking for the actualization of the Native-American identity.

This novel is featuring a protagonist, Junior, who's fictional diary enlightens us about how it is to grow up as an Native-American today. By having a part-time identity as Arnold, his alias in the white community, he is being the bridge between the two cultures in the novel.

Firstly, I will examine Garić's article who writes about the implications of self narration. I will have a look at the concepts she uses, and try to put them to use in a different excerpt from the novel.

Secondly, by introducing Haertling and Sulzer's concept, who deals with the literary concept of the narrator, narratee and the implied reader. I will put this concept in the same excerpt, together with concept one, and investigate if the text would send a different message. Simultaneously I will investigate how Alexie is able to link the Native-American and Anglo-European cultures together, by adding a perspective from the Native-Americans? And for whom is Alexie attending this novel?

In “*Part-Time identities and Full-Time Narration as an Absolution in Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*” Vanja V. Garić takes aim at the implications that can occur when writing self narration, when the protagonist is having a rather painful search for a unified and solid identity in a fragmented and stereotype-troubled society. The focus of this paper is not only on the protagonist’s actions and thoughts, which is generally inherent to genre itself, but also how this narrative combines the pluralistic cultures of Native-American and Anglo-European traditions. Garić further claims that by using this intensely autobiographical writing, it effectively displays its multiple therapeutic forces. When addressing the importance of self-expression in artistic, political and existential terms, Garić states: “... as the words are, once again, seen as an agent of a world’s transformation”. Garić believes that by the power of writing, you, as a writer, are in prospect to change the world.

In this article, Garić is addressing the question: “Is the part-time identity causing fragmentation or is it in the power of pluralism?” She argues that the very title of Alexie Sherman’s novel invokes the fragmentariness of ethnic and racial identity in the modern conditions. The protagonist in this story, known as Junior in his Spokane reservation and Arnold Spirit in his white high-school in Reardan - his “white” part of life - is a teenage boy whose childhood and adolescence are marked by poor health, poverty, bullying, personal losses, family tragedies and the general hopelessness of his tribe. In the early stages of the book, the context of the protagonist’s childhood is presented by such situations as when his dog dies because his family does not have enough money to pay for medicine (Alexie, 2007, p. 10), or a situation where he has to pull ten of his teeth in a single day, because the Indian Health Service funded major dental service only once a year, and that even that is done by a white dentist who only gives him half the Novacaine because he “believed that Indians only felt half as much pain as white people did” (Alexie, 2007, p. 2).

Garić argues that these illustrations made by the author in the start of the novel are done by purpose and have the motive to create some sort of space between the two cultures. When Junior is looking at the elders at the reservation, he decides to make an impact on his own future. He wants to escape this community of poverty, loss and humiliation - by pursuing his love for arts and education - and doing so by transferring schools. He leaves the school in Wellpinit to attend a prestigious and racist high school called Reardan. Reardan’s mascot was in fact an Indian, which “made him the only *other* Indian in town” (Alexie, 2007, p. 56).

“Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. It was the opposite of me. I didn’t deserve to be there. I knew it; all those kids knew it Indians don’t deserve shit” (Alexie, 2007, p.56).

After Junior’s transfer to Reardan he ends up at the very bottom of the society. Not yet accepted in the new school, but the hardest battle turned out to be the one at his home field. Everyone thought of Junior as a traitor back at the reservation, even his best friend Rowdy treated Junior as his worst enemy. Garić argues that this is the point in the novel where the protagonist is starting on his journey for the right answers. She argues that this is a recognizable pattern of the literary form called *Bildungsroman*, which is a genre which follows the protagonist’s journey from childhood to adulthood (or immaturity to maturity). The focus of this genre is on the trials and misfortunes that affect the protagonist's growth, and Garić states that it is a recognizable pattern of a complex and unique young boy who sets along on a lonely path in search of self-realization and self-definition, dealing with numerous challenges on his quest for a unified and solid identity that could bridge the gaps in the fragmented and “halved” styles of living. Garić states that the dealings of Junior through the novel can have a dual status: They can be seen as particularly indigenious, only effected by ethnic and social background, but also universally adolescent, applicable to the majority of teenagers around the world. Making the novel a very powerful hybrid which not only focuses on Junior’s psychological duality, but also how it successfully connects the Native-American and Anglo-European traditions.

Junior has a passion for arts and loves to draw cartoons. He draws to clarify things for himself and to the people around him. “Since pictures are understood, he reflects that words can cause confusion and impose limits to communication” (Alexie, 2007, p.5). Words can be misunderstood, and are only known to those who understand the language. He thinks of his drawings as a sense of self healing; they channel his fears and obsessions, making caricatures of them is reducing their strength, their reality. As the protagonist says in the novel to symbolize what his drawings mean to him: “I think of the world as a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats” (Alexie, 2007, p. 6).

Junior transforms his losses and grieves into almost a joyful liberation. He kept creating a list of the things that made him feel joy, and made cartoons of the things that made him angry. Garić argues that using diary as a form has multiple therapeutic forces. Words can

be used as an agent of a world's transformation, states Garić. By treating issues of ethnicity and cultural prejudice on the one hand, and more universal issues of personal growth on the other, Garić claims that the text is simultaneously showing the power of narration to transform reality and to heal the broken identity. Finally, after a while, Junior's "list of joy" grew into powerful procreative textual items that helped him unify his fragmented identity. Fragmented by ethical, racial and social constructs, as well as establishing bonds with his new friends at Reardan, and reestablishing the ones back at home with his old Indian friends. Garić argues that this is a symbol of two cultures coming together, as well as an adolescent in touch with his place in this world when Junior at the final scene is playing basketball with his childhood friend. At this moment he recognizes that he is both Junior *and* Arnold Spirit, and at this specific moment he plays basketball with his childhood friend, and there is no longer a need to keep score. As the protagonist states at page 176, when he's arguing with his teacher: "I used to think the world was broken down by tribes, by blacks and whites. But I know now that isn't true. The world is only broken into two tribes: the people who are assholes and those who are not" (Alexie, 2007).

With this concept in mind, of looking at the consequences of self narration in the search for identity, I'm going to have a look at how it is possible to clarify assumptions about youth in the study of first-person narration. This is a concept presented by Haertling and Sulzer, who are on the path to understanding youth as more than just a development phase marked by raging hormones. Firstly, both of these concepts are trying to create an identity or to find the true identity of youth. Not the identity affected by culture, environment or religion, but the true identity of youth. The desires and needs of the universal adolescent, relatable to youths all around the world.

Secondly, both of the concepts are trying to create competing perspectives to the story. The challenge with first-person narration and a self-narrative is that it only offers one perspective of a situation or story. The viewer, or reader, is only given the protagonist's perspective, based on his or her experience and interpretation of the story. This means that the story may have a different substance based on the context, experience or age of the author.

Finally, they are both examining how words, in the form of self-narration or first person narratives, may combine cultures and connect humans. While Garić on the one hand is arguing how the use of basic features of a diary, gives the reader an opportunity to connect the cultural backgrounds of the story, Haertling and Sulzer argue how teachers and adults

may better understand the needs and desires of the universal adolescent by looking past the presumptions.

Haertling and Sulzer are trying to understand what motivates the actions of adolescents. The universal youth behind all the assumptions. In their article “*Illuminating Discourses of Youth through the Study of First-Person Narration in Young Adult Literature*” they are trying to give adults and teachers the heuristic to understand why adolescents do what they do, instead of conceptualizing it as a development phase. They are doing so by introducing a three-tool literary part of a *narrator*, *narratee* and *implied reader*. They claim that this will give them the means to uncover and attend to adolescents in need, in a challenging part of life.

Haertling and Sulzer argue that by using first person narration, the credibility generated by using first-person narration creates a bond between the reader and the actions of adolescents. This gives them a chance to look at adolescents as complete, complex people with a range of interests, needs, desires, experiences and ways of participating in school. Rather than just looking at them as a socially constructed category, which conceptualize adolescents as a universal, developmental phase marked by raging hormones, rebellion, impulsiv and myopic behavior and prototypical identity crises related to sex, drug and alcohol use, bullying and suicide. By using personal pronouns as “I”, “me”, “we” and “us” it gives the narrator the opportunity to create a relation with the reader by telling his or her personal story. This effectively gives the narrator an occasion to subtly tell a story with a bias and to create intrigue, as the narrator is given a chance to limit the reader’s access to information. Even though this novel could be regarded as a bridge between adults and adolescents, Haertling and Sulzer nudges the reader that this *Young Adult Literature (YAL)* is written *by* adults *for* adolescents. This novel will, first and foremost, be what adults think adolescents want, need and desire and who adults think adolescents are.

Furthermore, Haertling and Sulzer, argue first-person narratives predominantly offer a singular perspective on a situation and are not presenting a competing perspective, which is often available in other narrative forms. Despite that fact, this article focuses on something Haertling and Sulzer presents as “double voicedness” or multiple voices within first person narration. This idea is that for every word the author writes, he or she is not only sharing her voice or perspective, but also responding to and anticipating the potential needs and desires

of the readers. This response and anticipation creates an additional voice, and double voiced textual quality. Haertling and Sulzer is looking at this double voicedness by using the three-part literary concept of the *narrator*, *narratee* and *the implied reader* to better understand the first person narration and provide competing perspectives and dialogue about what it means to actually be an adolescent.

The *narrator*, in this three-part literary concept, is a familiar concept. This is the person telling the story, using his or her own voice to tell about his or her own experiences and thoughts. The *narratee* can be a clearly marked person in a story, for instance the person the narrator is directing letters to in an epistolary novel, but often, however, the narratee is in the kinds of knowledge, beliefs, cultural perspectives, and language practises that are needed to understand the narrator, and if there are specific cases where the narrator is asking questions of someone nonspecific.

Finally, *the implied reader* is a textually constructed reader who observes, understands, appreciates and is compelled by the interaction between the narrator and the narratee. Haertling and Sulzer states that the *implied reader* may have much in common with the real reader, but is not to be mixed up with. The real reader is different, he or she more or less decides, unconsciously, to which extent he or she is willing to affiliate with a textually constructed reader.

Haertling and Sulzer use this concept in an excerpt from the start of the novel where the protagonist is introducing himself to the reader to present an example:

“You wouldn’t think there is anything life threatening about speech impediments, but let me tell you, there is nothing more dangerous than being a kid with a stutter and a lisp” (Alexie, 2007, p. 4).

In this excerpt, the narrator, Junior, explains his experiences with disability and bullying. Haertling and Sulzer argue that the narrator evokes dominant discourses of youth when he is explaining how other teenagers are treating him. They argue that the narrator's need to explain certain details to the narratee, like: “... And if you’re fourteen years old, like me, and you’re still stuttering and lisping, then you become the biggest retard in the world” (Alexie, 2007, p. 4) positions the narratee as the typical teenager - someone who the narrator feels the need to teach about his experiences. This indicates that the narratee would not

understand what it's like to have a speech impediment and why it would be life threatening for an adolescent.

Haertling and Sulzer argue that by examining the first person narration, it offers competing perspectives and supports exploration of unresolved questions about adolescent's abilities, desires and needs. Furthermore they argue that this tool for examining the double voicedness behind first person narration will open up spaces for genuine interpretation and discussion about what it means to be a young person today and how insights (and assumptions) about adolescence might be challenged or redefined.

Even though there are many similarities, there are also some major differences between the two concepts. Firstly, Garić's focus in the article "*Part-time identities...*" (2017) are on the protagonist's quest to find a unified and solid identity and how he successfully uses a diary as a tool on the path. One may argue that the focus in this article is how this would be a great tool for adolescents who are struggling to find their identity or place in the world. While Haerling and Sulzer, on the other hand, the focus is on a literary tool that may help adults to better understand the needs and desires of youth and hence be better suited to guide them in the right direction. Therefore, the argument would be that Garić's concept is addressing adolescents and Haertling and Sulzer's concept is addressing adults.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, one of the main challenges with self narration is that it doesn't offer a competing perspective. The personal narrative always deals with the stories from the perspective of the narrator, which means that it may have different substance based on context. Hence, one may argue that Garić's concept is focussed on the narrator's perspective, his or her actions and his or her perceptions, while Haertling and Sulzer's concept is primarily focussed on the "double-voicedness". To put Haertling and Sulzer's literary tool into use, then Garić's focus would be on the perspective of narrator and Haertling and Sulzer's focus would be on the perspective of the narratee, the story that is not put to paper - but is up for discussion and interpretation.

Finally, both of the concepts are generally focussing on objectifying the protagonist, to create a solid and unified identity. However, in contrast, Haertling and Sulzer's concept is regarding the universal adolescent, while Garić's concept concerns a Native-American adolescent influenced by culture and environment. Furthermore, they are both doing as Nokia ("connecting people"), when Haertling and Sulzer are trying to create a tool for adults to

connect with adolescents, and Garić is exploring how this narrative connects the Native-American- with the Anglo-European culture.

With the two concepts from Garić and Haertling and Sulzer in mind, both their similarities and differences, I'm going to put them into use while looking at an excerpt from the novel. As mentioned, this novel is featuring a protagonist who is endeavouring to find his unified identity within all the stereotypes and myths about the Native-American people. In the excerpt the protagonist is taking us through the challenges of his childhood, giving the reader a perspective of how it is to grow up as a poor Native-American with a number of disabilities. Junior is living in an Indian reservation in Wellpinit in Spokane, Washington. He was born with too much water on the brain - which causes brain damage, he has poor eyesight, an anomalous big head, a speech impediment and ten more teeth than normal humans. Garić argues that there may be implications when addressing identity and culture in a self-narration, with this concept in mind I'm going to have a look at this excerpt:

“First of all, I ended up having forty-two teeth. The typical human has thirty-two right? But I had forty-two.

Ten more than usual.

Ten more than normal.

Ten teeth past humans.

My teeth got so crowded that I could barely close my mouth. I went to Indian Health Service to get some pulled so I could eat normally, not like some slobbering vulture. “

When writing a self narration you are, as Garić mentioned, the author of your own experience. You balance on the line between various modes of living and narrating the living, trying to make them coincide and maybe relate them to a subject or theme. The author is in this book both searching for the unified and solid Native-American identity, as well as trying to combine the Native-American and Anglo-European cultures. The stories from the novel are a selective reconstruction of the experiences of the protagonist, as well as the narrative anticipation of what his future holds. The author is choosing what stories to tell to underline his point, and what stories not to tell. It is important to remember that the stories from the novel are based on memories of a child, or are constructed from the stories told by the parents



to the child. It is also important to understand that the author is, by telling a particular story, trying to make a point.

In this particular instance, in the scene of the young boy who pulls ten teeth in one day, one can make the assumption that the stories are a bit exaggerated. Firstly, ten more teeth than normal is more than 30 % more than average. This would make it a very unusual instance, and having them pulled all at the same day does sound inhumane. There is a chance that the memories of a child makes room for a magnified truth. That there actually just was a couple of extra teeth, but stories told, and retold, makes them ten when the story is being told. The scene continues when the protagonist is letting us know what happened at the dentist:

“But the Indian Health Service funded major dental work only once a year, so I had to have all ten extra teeth pulled in one day.

And what’s more, our white dentist believed that Indians only felt half as much pain as white people did, so he only gave me half the Novocain. What a bastard, huh?” (Alexie, 2007, p. 2)

There might be a rationale for why he only was given half the Novacaine. Maybe children only are given half the dose as grownups, maybe he has a condition which makes it dangerous with the normal amount of Novacaine, or maybe even the stories are fallacious. They might be myths told by the Native-American community that they are only given half the dose, but the factual is that they are given the same amount as the whites.

Secondly, by choosing to tell this particular story, the author is most likely having an ulterior motive. He is trying to create some sort of space between the protagonist and the white community. The white dentist, who is coming to the reservation once a year and doing this horrific thing to a Native-American child. One could argue that this particular scene would be regarded differently if Junior visited the white dentist in the white community. Then he would not be viewed as the unfair dentist, who only gives them one major treatment a year. The major issue would instead be their own Health Service and what it involves.

Finally, one could argue that the author is, by using extreme metaphors like “slobbering vulture” and curse words like “what a bastard, huh?”, hiding behind the innocence of a child's remarks and imagination to make a point about how the Native-American’s were suppressed by the white community. If the same exact words were to come from an adult, they might be interpreted as hostile, or even aggressive. But coming from the innocence of a child, it gives the remarks a light, diverting sound to it. This is an

effective way to make the reader loosen his/her guard and be open to different perspectives of a story.

But who is the story created for? Haerling and Sulzer argue, as mentioned, that by using the three-tool part literary system of a narrator, narratee and implied reader, it is easier for adults to understand adolescents. Even though it is a narration of the self featuring only one protagonist, they argue that it is possible to create an additional voice by looking at the writing of the narrator. How the narrator is responding to and anticipating the potential needs and desires of the reader.

Using this particular concept in the scene about Junior and the white dentist, one may argue that by looking at the first sentence:

“... I ended up having forty-two teeth, the typical has thirty-too, right?”

The narrator in the story is addressing someone who is most likely older than himself. Someone who the narrator is expecting to know what amount of teeth is normal for the average human being. The narrator is also using a “slobbering vulture” as an analogy for the way he ate when having ten additional teeth. In this particular instance the narrator might not be expecting that the narratee is an expert about the birds of prey and the likes, but he’s using an unorthodox analogy to give a perspective of the unorthodox way he has of eating.

Secondly, by looking at the way the narrator is feeling the urge to explain to the narratee how the Indian Health Service is set up, one may assume that the narrator is expecting that his story is being told to someone who is not aware of this. And what’s more, by explaining to the narratee that Indians only were given half the dose of Novocaine as the whites, you could argue that the narrator is intending this story to be for someone who is not of the Native-American community.

Finally, by attending to the final line in the excerpt: “What a bastard, huh?” one could argue that the narratee would not be of a younger age than the narrator himself. When the narrator is fourteen years old, one may assume that these sorts of words were not created for someone of a younger age than that. They also might not be intended for certain adults as well, typical parents and elderly people who do not appreciate the use of swear words as a remedy to create a point.

I argue that, despite what many people think, cultures do not define identity. By using self narration as a tool, the protagonist successfully seeks and creates his identity as an adolescent relatable to both the Native-American and Anglo-European community.

Junior's diary becomes an absolution from injustice and oppression. In his own writing, he is the author of his own experience. He is the "hero" of his own narrative. The "underdog", starting from the bottom and experiencing a cathartic transformation. By using self narration, the protagonist is able to continuously modify his own identity, into becoming the person the protagonist chooses to be. As mentioned in the novell: "Junior's arts helps him navigate the rivers of the world" (Alexie, 2007, p. 95), but also, inevitably, it helps him navigate the self and the relationship between the self and the rest of the world.

By adding both concepts into this excerpt from the novel, I argue that this is an exaggerated narration that effectively combines the Native-American and Anglo-European culture. I argue that by combining the two concepts and examining this particular excerpt from the novel, it is possible that the stories told by the narrator are overstated, or maybe not even true, with an ulterior motive to simply create space between the narrator and the narratee. The narratee who, by looking into Haertling and Sulzer's concept, is a white male about the same age as the narrator. By doing this in the start of the novel, the narrator is playing into the hands of the narratee, and letting him know that all of the assumptions he has about the Native-American's are in fact true. That all Native-American's are in fact alcoholics, they are all lazy and failing out at school. Even the smart Native-American's (as Junior's sister) drop out of school because she has a lack of "work-ethic". The narrator is also implying that all of the Native-Americans are living in reservations which are being paid by the government. By doing so the narrator creates a familiar character for the narratee, one who he is not afraid of or feels threatened by. This is an effective way for the narrator to get the reader hooked. He is now interested in this particular Native-American adolescent and feels intrigued to carry on reading about his endeavour.

Furthermore, the protagonist arrives in a crossroads experience in the narrative, he has to choose between staying in the reservation or transferring to a whitedominant high school. This is very intriguing for the white middle aged narratee, who is now urging to know how this Native-American adolescent will do at "his homefield ". At this point, the narrator is using the same literary method again. All of the pre assumptions from the narratee are being confirmed, the protagonist ends up being an outcast.

This is the point of the story where there is a change of emotion. While being an outcast in the white community he meets a person called Gordy, who becomes his only friend there. Although Gordy is in many ways completely different from the protagonist's friend in the reservation, Rowdy, "Gordy was the smartest person in the high school" (Alexie, 2007, p.

98) and “Rowdy was the toughest person in the rez” (Alexie, 2007, p. 15), and they were both equally socially inept. At this point in the novel, the protagonist is starting to make friends in the white community. After a while he even makes the basketball team and starts dating the prettiest girl in the school. He even becomes popular at the school. The Native-American is being accepted by the white community.

My conclusion is that by addressing the average white male, this narration effectively combines the Native-American and Anglo-European culture. The narrator is, by using effective literary tools to get the narratee hooked, easing in that there is not a culturally significant difference between a Native-American and an Anglo-European adolescent. All youth are more or less the same and they have the same desires and needs. As basketball is important in the reservation, it is equally important at Reardon to achieve social status. The protagonist expresses at page 176, when he’s not being treated gently by a female teacher at Reardon:

“I used to think the world was broken down by tribes, by blacks and whites. But I know now that isn’t true. The world is only broken into two tribes: the people who are assholes and those who are not” (Alexie, 2007).

I argue that the final scene in the novel is a perfect analogy that contributes to my conclusion. It’s starting to get late, it’s dark outside and the protagonist is at the basketballfield playing “one-on-one” with Rowdy, his reunited best friend from the reservation. In this situation, Rowdy represents the reservation and the Native-American community. The protagonist, on the other hand, represents Reardon and the Anglo-European community. He’s been to the other side and seen what it’s like. There weren’t any differences between the Native-American and Anglo-European community. They played until it was dark. “Until the moon was huge and golden and perfect in the dark sky. We didn’t keep a score” (Alexie, 2007, p. 230).

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