



LANGUAGE ISSUES

Volume 1, No. 2, November 2020

Breaking the Constructs Like a Trickster: Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

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To cite this article:

Türker Demir, Defne. (2020). Breaking the Constructs Like a Trickster: Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. *Language Issues*, 1(2), 14-42. Retrieved from <http://language-issues.com/>

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Abstract

This article proposes that initially using the tools of visual representation, and later literature, photography, ethnography and media, the white society has posited the American Indian as the Other and through this mirror image consolidated its own identity, while the representation of the Native American by the white world has continuously been compromised by an ideology of dominance and hegemony. This bifurcated view in its turn has resulted in the creation of a multiplicity of stereotypes and fake/ false representations of the indigenous population, which have no bearing on the realities of the Native Americans living today in the United States.

The dire necessity of upsetting these fixed categories and the disruption of these unreal markers of identity inform the work of one “post Indian warrior” adamant in procuring change in the fields of both politics and representation; Gerald Vizenor. According to Vizenor, the solution to the ongoing dilemma of politically loaded false representations is by means of trickster stories -which he renames tricky stories- that is by way of corrective humor, since only through the corrective acts of re-naming and re-representing, the false representations and simulations will be disrupted and Native American peoples will gain sovereignty over their own representations and selfhoods.

Sherman Alexie on the other hand, in his attempts to disrupt the stereotypical mainstream representations, ironically becomes a figure of controversy as the communal motive behind his work of deconstruction is commonly misconstrued and misunderstood. Yet, read in the light of Gerald Vizenor’s theories, it can be argued that Sherman Alexie intentionally plays with recent stereotypes of Native Americans, bringing them to the fore, only to subvert these false representations, and in the process recreates authentic subjectivity positions that are communally informed. Consequently, what Alexie exemplifies is closely related to what

Vizenor elucidates textually, that is the deconstruction of the stereotypical Indians that are still current in contemporary literature, as well as films and various media. Then, Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* becomes a prime example of such deconstruction, which can be read according to Vizenor's theories, especially his trickster discourse. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by means of the depiction of extremes, the two dimensional nature of the stereotypes are clearly underlined, and Alexie through the re-employment and employment of the stereotypes with subversive intent underscores the fixity of the constructs and thus contests their validity.

Consequently, the narrator in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* never falls prey to despair, or melancholy or nostalgia, nor allows himself to be victimized by either the white or Native American community. Neither does he give in to inner colonization, accepting and assuming the artificial pose of the victim. The hardships and pain he maneuvers by way of drawing cartoons and laughter. Then this positive outcome can be attributed to creativity, humor, adaptation, and flexibility, all of which are the qualities of the traditional trickster. As Vizenor puts it; "The shimmers of imagination are reason and the simulations are survivance, not dominance; an aesthetic restoration of trickster hermeneutics, the stories of liberation and survivance without the dominance of closure" (*Manifest Manners* 14). Hence the narrator in Alexie's text disrupts the manifest manners plaguing both the white and the Indian worlds, breaking the constructed notions of Indianness current in both communities, and never lets himself be confined by artificial categories in his path towards success and survivance, which he achieves through humor and creativity.

Breaking the Constructs Like a Trickster: Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

The land where time has stopped and people never age, Neverland constitutes the setting for J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, a work whose popularity has not waned in the space of a century that has elapsed since its publication. However, aside from the protagonist and his wild boys, it is the fairy and the mermaid –mythical beings- and the pirate and the Indian -the creatures of the past- that populate this impossible geography beyond time. Written in early twentieth century, *Peter Pan* clearly relegates the Indian presence to the realm of the past, if not the mythical. The Indian is an anachronism and is no longer allowed to co-exist in the real world or co-inhabit the same time frame alongside the civilised beings. The Indian has become a monstrosity, an evil safely existing in the world of the impossible, side by side with the mermaid and the fairy. Removed in terms of both geography and temporality, the Indian can now be romanticised, as he/she no longer poses a threat to civilisation.

Among other popular works, Barrie's *Peter Pan* illustrates an ideology of dominance and hegemony, ongoing since the first encounter between the white and the indigenous cultures, by which the representation of the Native American has continuously been compromised². Initially using the tools of visual representation, and later literature, photography, ethnography and media, the white society has posited the American Indian as the Other and through this mirror image consolidated its own identity. This bifurcated view in its turn has resulted in the creation of a multiplicity of stereotypes and fake/ false representations of the indigenous population, which have no bearing on the realities of the Native Americans living today in North America.

² Throughout this text, the terms Native American, Indian American and indigenous have been used interchangeably to denote the tribal peoples of the North American continent.

While the white world has for the last century opted to depict the “Indian” as an absence, or construct the “Indian” as an artefact of the past, whereby deny him/her contemporaneity, this ongoing culture of misrepresentation has been countered by the American Indian authors especially in the second half of the twentieth century. The response of the Native American authors exhibited itself in the form of writing back to the mainstream representations, and the result was the profusion of literary texts whose main theme is indigenous identity, be them formative of communal selfhoods or deconstructive of the white construct. Accordingly, Gerald Vizenor posits in *Bearheart*: “Indians are an invention.... You tell me that the invention is different than the rest of the world when it was the rest of the world that invented the Indian?” (qtd in Owens *Other Destinies* 233). Invented Indians are stereotypical presences, static and dead, yet tempting models for inner colonisation. Since the representation of the Native American by the Anglomericans has always been an act of dominance, then the only politically correct action on the part of the Native American today is to disrupt these false signs and signifiers that pander to the dehumanisation and artefactualisation of the Native American for the express purpose of satisfying mainstream fantasies. Only then, and through such subversion would the Native American accomplish the politically motivated act of identity reclamation, and communal self-construction.

Consequently, the dire necessity of upsetting these fixed categories and the disruption of these unreal markers of identity inform the work of one “postindian warrior” adamant in procuring change in the fields of both politics and representation; Gerald Vizenor. According to Vizenor, the solution to the ongoing dilemma of politically loaded false representations is by means of trickster stories -which he renames tricky stories- that is by way of corrective humour. However, the stakes are very high, since the false representations are historically determined, and the white noise of the Post-modern world and the politics of hegemony are

deterrents in the way of corrective action. Yet, on the necessity for the Native Americans to write, and to claim a voice and presence, Vizenor writes:

You know, we must write tricky stories too, because the names have been so abused in translation and the course of dominance. The tragic rights of discovery continue to be heard in common names and native stories. The reader has entered into the wages of dominance in most stories about natives. Most, but not in our stories. How is a reader to hear our tricky stories over the crush of advertisements, the curse of envy, the abuse of cultural representations, the history of revolutions, and over the misconstrued missions of a constitutional democracy? (*Hotline Healers* 7)

Vizenor's insistence on writing tricky stories underscores a history of dominance, which had perpetually produced misappropriations, misrepresentations and misconceptions of Native American cultures. Vizenor hence draws attention to the fact that the commodification and artefactualisation of the tribal cultures starts with the processes of naming and defining the Other. In case of the Native Americans, the initial naming, which suggested that the people being named were the inhabitants of an entirely different continent, clearly missed its referent. On this misnomer Vizenor writes: "*indian* ... insinuates the obvious simulation and ruse of colonial dominance. Manifestly, the *indian* is an occidental misnomer, an overseas enactment that has no referent to real native cultures or communities" (*Manifest Manners* vii). Then, the signifier "*indian*" has lost none of its falsity in time, since even today it signifies a complex of stereotypical presences, constructed by the white world at large and still with no material or physical bearing upon the reality of the Native American peoples, who have survived the white hegemony, and now are adamant in claiming their rightful place in the cultural rubric of the United States.

Vizenor furthermore underlines the relationship between identity politics and the power of creativity, particularly in terms of the Native American universe. Subjectivities are created in words, just like the rest of the living and non-living things in the Native American episteme and presences are perpetuated again by way of stories. And the tribal traditions and stories not only underscore the creativity of the peoples, but as Vizenor points out, the stories are the ultimate means of identity construction and at that the stories become agents of survival/ survivance. We read:

Personal and historical names are the sources and manner of distinctive identities. Native traditions are created and endure in stories. Nature is a union, not a separation, and personal identities are visionary. Fiction, dreams, imitations, and the politics of names are at once partitioned and not separable. The name “Indian,” for instance, is a simulation with no actual reference. The American Indian, likewise, is the tricky trace of an absence. Natives are a presence, and the stories that arise in singular native languages are an absolute reference in time, place, and memory. Names are both burdens and literary sovereignty. (*Word Arrows* x-xi)

Vizenor then, like Scott Momaday, emphasises the import of names in identity formation, and calls personal identities visionary – not illusory, utopian, unreal- but fluid, fully performative and open to revision and reconstruction. This kind of identity formation is in line with both the syncretic tradition in Native American lore, and the Post-modern theories of identity. On the other hand, historically “*indian*” has become an empty signifier; a simulation with no referent, and consequently, the American Indian is represented by his/her absence in the mainstream tradition. However, members of the tribal cultures who have survived domination and cultural decimation are now determined in proclaiming their presence. Through deconstruction, firstly names, and then presences should be re-claimed since such acts would subvert dominance and signify sovereignty.

Therefore, Vizenor's contentions mark the necessity for self-definition, and self-representation, since through the corrective acts of re-naming and re-representing, the false representations and simulations will be disrupted and Native American peoples will gain sovereignty over their own representations and selfhoods. Hence, the domination and hegemony of the white world can be subverted only when the Native Americans craft their own representations, because only then the burden of simulated names, traces of absences and artefactualised presences will be lifted off their shoulders. Vizenor argues that the sole path to disrupting these absolutely fake representations, and the way to self-representation is the trickster stories, which he names tricky stories. Thus, for Vizenor, the ultimate deconstruction of the simulated Indianness can be achieved through subversion made possible with another traditional Native American literary device, the trickster discourse.

On the significance and function of the trickster, Louis Owens posits; "...the traditional trickster ... embodies contradictions, challenges authority, mocks and tricks us into self-knowledge" (*Other Destinies* 110). Kathleen Danker on the other hand, writing on Felix White Sr.'s interpretations of the Winnebago trickster tales, argues that for the traditional storyteller, the main value of the stories would lie in "...their humor, their moral and intellectual instruction, and their religious context" (507). Danker further elaborates:

... [Trickster] stories teach moral lessons about the proper behavior of individuals in society. These lessons are taught primarily through the negative example of the stories' main character, and their value lies not only in what listeners learn, but how they learn it. In the process of figuring out the significance of stories, listeners learn how to solve problems and reach conclusions through conscious thought. This is one reason traditional storytellers would not usually explain the deeper meanings of stories to children or to adults. It was only through working out the meanings of stories themselves, individually and in peer-group discussions, that listeners would learn how to think and to control their behavior (522).

Then, it is through humour that the didactic function of the story will be revealed. The narrator will not elaborate on the significance of the stories, but it is the audience who should through contemplation understand the meaning hidden in the stories, and in the process adopt their own behaviour accordingly. Therefore, the aim of the stories is to initiate a process of questioning, through which the individuals should derive the moral of the story, and affect change in themselves, and their actions. Hence, the trickster discourse brings about change not only in the realm of representation, but also it propagates a process of unlearning to be followed by relearning, and in this way bring about transformation within the community.

In like vein, Owens argues that Vizenor's trickster discourse embraces "an intense didacticism and insistence upon certain immutable values" a fact which encompasses the aim of the trickster discourse fully (*Other Destinies* 20). One imminent aspect of contemporary Native American literary practices is its concern with identity politics, and the traditional trickster stories not only bring about change but are crucial in identity construction. To quote Danker, trickster stories "...revolve around always remembering who one is, one's powers, and one's responsibilities" (524). Owens further comments, "... the traditional trickster's role is not only to upset and challenge us but also to remind us –obversely- of who we are and where we belong..." (*Other Destinies* 196). Moreover, according to Owens, "[i]t is trickster's role to challenge identities, to trick and probe and question, and above all, shatter stasis and stagnation" (144). Finally it is Owens' contention that the definition Bakhtin provides for the function of humour perfectly overlaps with that of the trickster discourse, and as a result; "[t]he liberation of language and consciousness is Vizenor/ trickster's aim, particularly the liberation of the signifier "Indian" from the entropic myth surrounding it" (226).

Evidently Vizenor's focus is communal in that his work and theories are deeply suffused with concerns about the endurance, survival, and finally the survivance of the Native peoples. Vizenor defines survivance as "... an active sense of presence, the continuance of

native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name” (*Manifest Manners* vii). Thus, identities can be continuously created and re-created and the false representations disrupted and contested by the humour and creativity imminent to tricky stories. Consequently, it follows that Vizenor is enraged by the assuming of identities built on a sense of victimhood, which he names victimry. Victimry not only perpetuates the domination and hegemony of the colonised through inner colonisation, but the identity of the victim also becomes compromised, since the subjectivity of the victim had become a fixed and static construct, and at that an artificial pose, again with no bearing on the “real”(ities). Therefore, the solution lays in creativity, because only through the creative force of words, survival/ survivance and sovereignty will prevail.

In *Wordarrows*, Vizenor relates the story of a couple he had met some 40 years ago, which clearly elucidates his stance on the issue of victimhood. He had come across them while working at the American Indian Employment Center in Minneapolis. Both were drunk and disheveled, and Vizenor describes the first individual by the following words: “The man blamed racialism and the dominant culture for his problems, and that included alcoholism, the moment, motive and mark of poverty. Adversely, he seemed to be secure in the tragic summons of victimry” (xi). Since the man appeared to be snug in the role of the victim, to him Vizenor retorts: ““You need white people, more than they need you now to blame for your problems, your personal problems”” (xi). However, it is the woman accompanying the man who answers, and does so by singing a traditional song. Vizenor is awed: “That song was a survivance story. She had, by her visionary presence, turned the burdens of racialism and poverty into a moment of literary sovereignty” (xii). Then, Vizenor’s story clearly highlights the strength of creativity in the face of adversity, and the necessity to refuse and refute the role of the victim assigned by the mainstream society, since as he puts it; “Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (*Manifest Manners* vii).

“postindian” Warrior versus the Stereotypical Warrior

When Native American critics approach works by fellow Native American authors, the privileging of the communal against the individual comes to the fore in the assessment of the literary merits of these texts. In this respect, Sherman Alexie becomes a figurehead of poignant criticism, since numerous Native American critics claim the stereotypes Alexie forefronts in his fiction, like the “drunken Indian” panders to the white racist assumptions already strong in the mainstream perception. Louis Owens and Gloria Bird among others problematise Alexie’s work for not opting for communality and presenting no positive representations of Native Americans. Owens furthermore argues that Alexie’s characters show “no signs of being a product of any coherent community, Indian or otherwise” (*Mixedblood Messages* 79), since it is this sense of connectedness, and the shift of focus from the individual self to the communal that constitutes the very core of American Indian writing. In this respect, Sherman Alexie ironically becomes the locus of controversy in his attempts to disrupt the stereotypical mainstream representations, and the communal motive behind his work of deconstruction is commonly misconstrued and misunderstood.

Yet, read in the light of Gerald Vizenor’s theories, it becomes clear that Sherman Alexie intentionally plays with contemporary stereotypes of Native Americans, bringing them to the fore, only to subvert these false representations, and in the process Alexie recreates authentic subjectivity positions that are communally informed. Consequently, what Alexie exemplifies is closely related to what Vizenor elucidates textually, that is the deconstruction of the stereotypical Indians that are still current in contemporary literature, as well as films and various media. Then, Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* becomes a prime example of such deconstruction, which can be read according to Vizenor’s theories, especially his trickster discourse. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by means of the depiction of extremes the two dimensional nature of the stereotypes are clearly

underlined, and Alexie through the re-employment and employment of the stereotypes with subversive intent underscores the fixity of the constructs and thus contests their validity.

In discussing Sherman Alexie and his treatment of stereotypes however, not all criticism is discouraging. As a case in point, Joseph Coulombe comments on Alexie's work in the following words: "Always writing with a keen historical awareness, Alexie transforms ... traditions... to fit a new world reality. He states plainly that his fiction does not seek to resurrect a bygone heritage, but instead focuses on the truth that he sees in the present" (102). In discussing Alexie's usage of stereotypes, John Newton on the other hand suggests that the term coined by Mary Louise Pratt, autoethnography, could be useful:

'If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations, [through which the] colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms' (qtd in Newton 416).

Then, according to Newton, Alexie forefronts stereotypes to counter racist assumptions, and consequently he is reclaiming "the Native American's own alienated image – the Indian viewed by the white Other" (427). Alexie is admittedly political in his writing and moreover fully aware of the ongoing colonisation and exploitation of the American Indian communities and thus posits: "I'm a colonized man.... The United States is a colony, and I'm always going to write like one who is colonized" (qtd in Newton 414).

In the Native American cultures, the tribe or community to which the individual belongs is fundamental in subject formation, and although Alexie isn't a traditionalist, he is fundamentally concerned with the plight of the Native American community, and this has its

reflection in Alexie's fiction. Situated between the Western episteme and the communal impulse, Alexie's texts reveal a slippage between Post-modern techniques and the traditionally informed trickster concerns. According to Coulombe in Alexie's works, we come to recognise "... complex individuals trying to cope with a racist society" (98). Consequently, what Alexie portrays in his fiction is not the solitary individuals or their interiorities, since in narrating the experiences of the individuals a larger picture of the communal emerges. In like vein, in the Juliette Torrez interview Alexie reflects on his communal vision by the following words:

'I think most artists, whatever their color, practice the Western civilization idea of the artist: that the individual is responsible to his or her personal vision. Certainly, yeah. But you have to be a member of a tribe. You have to be a member of a family. You have to be responsible and held accountable' (qtd in Torrez 3).

Hence, Alexie's is another outcry against victimisation, and it is up to the victimised to take the measures necessary to break the vicious circle. Likewise, the method Alexie's protagonist Junior takes up in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is action and creativity inherent in art, a path the author himself had also trod. Alexie is well aware that this is indeed a challenge, and both communities pressure his American Indian protagonist –the white and Native alike- into an interstitial existence. Yet the protagonist Junior does not give up, but instead takes up the challenge literally and figuratively although he is extremely afraid and agitated. Thus Junior fights on both fronts, counters the challenges posed by both communities, and evidently succeeds, since he carves himself a niche in both societies, and survives. In Alexie's work and world, survival by itself means success, since it is success which undercuts the counterfeited and simulated image of the defeated members of a defunct community, and contests the validity of the construct.

Therefore, it can be argued that Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a text, which fully engages with Native American stereotypes to deconstruct them. In this work, the utilisation of the Post-modern tools of cartoons and pulp fiction function to subvert and parody the stereotypes further. Consequently, the text of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is enriched with art by Ellen Forney, while each chapter contains a number of cartoons that illustrate the most vivid images from the narrative. This weaving of the visual into the texture of the novel highlights humour as a striking technique in both Alexie's work and in Native American tradition at large.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian relates the significant -and not that significant- events from the point of view of a young Native American living in the Spokane Indian reservation. The text can be read as a thinly veiled autobiographical work, since we know from the Juliette Torrez interview that Alexie was abused in the reservation school, picked on and beaten up, and was considered a geek, whereas in the Euro-American high school he later attended, he was a jock, a basketball star, an academically successful teen, and all these real-life experiences of the author have their counterpart in the life of the "fictional" protagonist Junior/ Arnold. In this respect, the text exhibits what Brian McHale calls "[a]n element of *roman-a-clef* or lightly camouflaged autobiography [that] characterises much Modernist writing – Proust, D.H. Lawrence, Joyce's *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man*, and *Ulysses*" (206). To quote McHale further:

There is, however, a form of autobiographical fiction which preserves much of the ontological force of transworld identity but *without* reproducing real-world proper names – namely *roman-a-clef*. Here, proper names have been suppressed or "changed to protect the innocent" (actually, of course, to protect the guilty, that is, the potentially libelous author) (206).

This Modernist literary convention, that is, “the ontological potential of *roman-a-clef*” (206) as McHale dubs it, is frequently exploited by Post-modernist authors, too. Likewise, Alexie, thinly veiling his own subjectivity and autobiographical intentions, and by insisting on the absolute truth-value of diary become novel, subverts and blurs the distinctions between novel and autobiography further. Also, instead of the serious tone one is expected to find in autobiographical works; the sincerity, the exposing of the soul, and the confession, Alexie gives this work a very Post-modern twist with the sardonic attitude, sarcastic tone, and black humor, all incompatible with the revealing of the secret recesses of the soul as one would expect in self-writing, but all in line with the traditional trickster discourse.

Yet this portrait of the American Indian artist as a young man is weighed down by the white inscribed definitions of Indianness. The first person narrator, whose reservation name is Junior, and white school name Arnold, is a kid who is picked on because of his physical appearance, who also happens to have had a serious brain surgery at a very early age, and consequently whose actual survival is nothing short of a miracle. Through the mundane events of his life we have insight into the challenges met by a teenager, whose life is marked by poverty and inattentive/ incompetent parents. Junior/ Arnold is intelligent, and a kid with a dream, pouring his creative energy into the drawing of cartoons. In the novel, we see the protagonist going through a very difficult initiation into the white high school, since his decision to attend a white school causes much consternation in the Indian community, creating a challenge all by itself. Yet, the white school’s name is “Reardan”, a name which suggests that the school is only at the very rear end of the wide white world.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* Alexie uses the disruptive potential inherent in Post-modernist techniques to subvert the expectations of the reader, and to underscore the redundancy of fixed categories in literature as well as in identity construction. Building upon the Post-modernist premise that all genres of writing are

equidistant from claims at ontology and have hence come to occupy the same ontological plane, Alexie's naming of the text nevertheless deserves attention. Although in Post-modern literature fiction and life-writing is equated in their ontological claim, yet it is possible to posit that in terms of Native American literary practices, autobiographical writing can be called the utmost act of creativity, because it is not only the text that is in creation, but it is the subjectivity of the writing self that is in the process of construction. However, the truth claim which used to be the main marker of self-writing no longer holds in the Post-modern world, since the knowing self that narrates/ re-narrates has itself become a fiction. Subjectivity is no longer a knowable or fixed entity, and the result is the plethora of selves to choose from.

The name of Sherman Alexie's text on the other hand clearly underlines the truth-value perceived intrinsic to life-writing, and thus the title inevitably forces the reader to question the validity of the statement it makes. The adjective "true" and the adverb "absolutely", by way of a double emphasis make us doubt the truth-value, if we had assigned the sub-genre of diary any truth-value at all. Consequently the name of the text evidently subverts the truth claim it upholds, since as readers, we no longer believe in the possibility of the sub-genre of diary to give us the truth, absolute or any truth at all, but at best many partial un-truths to choose from. Then the true effect of the name of the text functions to efface the fictional quality of the text, which purports to be a diary, and marks it as an absolute fake. Thus, Alexie plays with the idea of the conventional truth-claim, fore fronting it, only to subvert it.

The fact of part-time Indianness is another statement that appears problematic. The title brings to mind the possibility of part-time identities, which would have been impossible in the Modernist sense, unless they were fractured subjectivities. However, the Post-modern self can pick up or discard identities at will, since coherence of a fixed identity is just another myth, and thus the possibility of a part-time identity becomes more than a possibility.

Furthermore, if this assumed identity is providing the persona with the flexibility of fitting in with the expectations of more than one community, then it might be the best identity option, not a binary opposition of either-or, but both; one or the other as it needs be. Hence in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, on the issues of alienation, belonging, and the difficulty of identity configuration the narratorial voice posits:

Traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger.

It was half Indian in one place and half white in the other.

It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job. And it didn't pay well at all (118).

The identity crises is brought about by the protagonist's decision to inhabit an interstitial space, trying to exist on the fringes of a white world to which he does not belong. On the other hand, because of this life choice, -attending a white school- he is perceived and even persecuted as a liminal character by the Indian society. The situation requires on the part of the protagonist flexibility, adaptation, and the ability to flicker in and out of identities, neither of which are fully formed/ formulated, which indeed is an intrinsic quality of the trickster who frequently performs and assumes various identities. The trickster is marked by his fluidity of subjectivities to the extent that he frequently engages in shape shifting, not only changing his identity configuration, but also his physical shape. Furthermore, the trickster from time to time switches gender or transforms into a completely different being by becoming one of the four-leggeds. Then it can be argued that the constantly flexibility and adaptation required by the narrator of the novel is in line with the traditional trickster, in that he is always in transition and translation. Moreover, the narrator in his attempts to straddle two societies eventually brings about a change in both communities, the white and the Native

American alike. Thus, the protagonist of the novel exhibits another quality imminent to the trickster, which is not only to resist staticity, and disrupt any fixed and normative construct, but also to actively transform the self, and affect change in the community.

Junior's decision to study at a white school means that he moves away from his own community, and the reservation. This choice proves to be crucial for Junior, since it does not only entitle the establishment of a purely physical distance between himself and his community, but as a result of this resolve he is taken by his peers to be moving mentally and spiritually away from the Indian world. His resolution on the other hand is prompted by a white teacher whose consciousness is suffering from the unfair treatment of the "Indian" by the white society, to which he had been a part in his youth. Echoing Pratt's words, the teacher confesses to having tried to kill the Indian to save the man³. We read:

"...When I first started teaching here, that's what we did to the rowdy ones, you know? We beat them. That is how we were taught to teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child".

"You *killed* Indians?"

"No, no, it's just a saying. I didn't literally kill Indians. We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren't trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture" (35).

According to the white teacher Mr. P, the result of the cultural genocide was the defeat of both parties, the Native and the white alike on the reservation. Yet, in Mr. P's words, what separated the narrator from the rest of his peers on the reservation was his refusal to give up. We read: "If you stay on this rez," Mr. P said, "they're going to kill you. I'm going to kill

³ The prototype of the late nineteenth century boarding schools was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in 1879 by Richard Henry Pratt, a former army official, whose aim was to "kill the Indian to save the man" (qtd. in Katanski 3).

you. We're all going to kill you. You can't fight us forever" (43). Thus, the teacher bids the narrator to leave for a place where he can find hope. Mr. P reasons: "And now, you have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope" (43). Consequently, for the protagonist leaving the reservation becomes the only way to survive, the sole path for survivance.

The pervasiveness of the stereotyping of the "Indian" exhibits itself in numerous instances in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. One express outcome of stereotyping is the creation of static, preconceived notions of Indianness. Then the fixed, stereotypical qualities attributed to Indians are posited as markers and exhibitions of the essence of Indianness, while the dominant society perceives such definitions of Indianness to be the "real" and utilises them in the making of summary statements, categorising the peoples, perpetuating white dominance further. However, as Vizenor elaborates, and Alexie explicates, the currency of these stereotypes is so strong that the Natives as well as the whites fall prey to these unreal mannerisms. Vizenor calls such behaviour "Manifest Manners" and accordingly while Alexie deconstructs these poses in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, in the process Alexie himself becomes a postindian warrior that detracts from "Manifest Manners" as Vizenor would put it. Vizenor explicates a postindian warrior in the following words:

Manifest manners are the simulations of dominance; the notions and misnomers that are read as the authentic and sustained as representations of Native American Indians. The postindian warriors are new indications of a narrative recreation, the simulations that overcome the manifest manners of dominance (*Manifest Manners* 5-6).

Going back to *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, we see early on in the text that the protagonist's white peers who have no notion of Indianness other than the

stereotypes, keep attacking him at Reardan, and the name calling is vividly illustrated in a cartoon. We see the protagonist small, scared, trembling, surrounded by gigantic white indefinite shapes, who are calling out the words “chief”, “sitting bull”, “tonto”, “red-skin”, “chief”, “chief”, “squaw boy”, and “chief” again (*The Absolutely True* 63), listing the misnomers the protagonist needs to operate against.

Junior is the only other Indian at the white school, save the school mascot, the unreal, the simulated Indian, the true artefact. The school mascot Indian is also depicted vividly in a cartoon. The mascot’s face is frozen in a menacing grimace, and his hooked huge nose is almost touching the big open mouth. The mascot further possesses the definitive markers of Indianness, the war paint and the feathers. The commentary on the cartoon reads “bright red” and “Reardan’s inspiring mascot” (56). The school mascot – the caricatured warrior- provides us with a clear picture of the Indian as seen and represented by the white society, constituting a very disturbing image of the Indian Other as visualised and constructed by the mainstream society.

The narrator is weighed down, and crippled by all these constructs of Indianness, and further voices the contention that the whites fear the actual presence of the Native American, since the stereotypical Indian embedded in the white psyche is savage, mean and deadly. As a result Junior is constantly stared at in the white school, because “a reservation Indian, and no matter how geeky and weak... was still a potential killer” from the point of view of the white world (63). Thus, after Junior punches a racist bully who had provoked him in the first place by the words “... Indians are living proof that niggers fuck buffalo” (64), the bully’s gang would stare at the narrator “like [he] was a serial killer” (65). This speaks of the fact that the appraisal of the Indian by the white community is still that of not only the Other, but of the epitomic wild and hostile savage, or as Paula Gunn Allan would have it “the howling savage” (4).

Yet the same resolution to try and interact with the whites by attending Reardan is taken to be “brave” and “warrior”-like, especially by the elderly folk on the reservation. On the first day of school, while his father drives him thither and says: “[y]ou’re so brave. You’re a warrior”, the narrator argues “[i]t was the best thing he could have said” (*The Absolutely True* 55). Thus, the role of the warrior is to be added to the list of a whole set of preconceived notions of Indianness the narrator has to operate within, the result of one more manifest mannerism.

On his first day at Reardan the narrator arrives early and waiting for the school door to open, “feeling worthless and stupid”, he considers if he should drop out of school completely and “go live in the woods like a hermit. Like a real Indian” (58). This speaks of the expectations of the white public from the Native American that it would be okay, even romantic if he were to achieve nothing, and then shun the society in favour of disappearing from the face of the earth. Such an act would pander nicely to the constructed image of the disappearing “Indian” and by absenting himself from the world at large the Native would thus benefit in the role of the normative Indian as fashioned by the whites as dead or dying out. Then by actually ceasing to be visible, the Indian American would become a physical absence, and hence tie up with the image of the embodiment of defeat, and imminent death, opening up physical and mental space for the Anglomerican to replace the defunct Indian.

However, it is also possible to posit that these fixed markers of subjectivity eventually end up strengthening the narrator since Junior ultimately disrupts these false categories. The supreme method of subversion proves to be his creativity, initially the key to his resistance which becomes his survival/ survivance in the form of his personal success. Nevertheless, in the attempts of the protagonist towards survivance, first he must face and master the necessary art of mediation between the two cultures, the white and Indian. The decision of attending the white school confirms his status of the outsider in both societies, and consequently, he is at

first victimised by both. Junior was formerly targeted in the reservation because of his physical weakness and difference, however at Reardan because of the constructed signifier “Indian” he is discriminated against by the whites. His decision to mingle with the whites on the other hand continues getting mixed reactions from his own community. While he is dubbed brave by grandmothers, his peers call him a white-lover. Thus, the physical distance that is being established between Junior and the reservation marks him as a sell-out, and a red apple by his own community, complicating things further. Now he is not only bullied, but also spit at by his own people back in the reservation.

A conversation the narrator has with his new friend at the white school, the nerd Gordy, revolves around his ex-best friend from the reservation, Rowdy, who was shunning him ever since he left the reservation school. In trying to explain the conflicting attitudes against him, Junior/ Arnold explains: “... some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you *become* white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful” (emphasis in original) (131). Then the narrator tells Gordy the meaning of an apple. We read: “They call me an apple because they think I’m red on the outside and white on the inside” (132). To which Gordy replies “Ah, so they think you’re a traitor” (132).

Survival = Anger x Imagination or Humour + Survivance = Triumph

In explicating the interstiality experienced by the narrator Junior, basketball provides the perfect metaphor. Basketball field becomes the battlefield in his fight for acceptance by the white world, while the Indians perceive him as joining the enemy camp, because as the member of the white basketball team, he will have to play against the Indian team. On the extent of the difficulty he feels, Junior posits: “...I felt like one of those Indian scouts who led the U.S. Cavalry against other Indians” (182). When he is chosen to the basketball team of

Reardan, as fate would have it, his first match will be against his former school, Wellpinit High, and the reaction of the Indian community will get truly hurtful while he physically faces them as a member of the opposing white team. As soon as he approaches the gym, Junior/Arnold hears himself not only derailed, but addressed by his “white school name”:

The rez basketball fans were chanting, “Ar-nold sucks! Ar-nold sucks! Ar-nold sucks!”

They weren’t calling me by my rez name, Junior. Nope, they were calling me by my Reardan name (143).

Thus the protagonist is clearly cast out by the Indian community. And the moment he steps onto the basketball court, their reaction becomes chilly:

My fellow tribal members saw me and they all stopped cheering, talking, and moving.

I think they stopped breathing.

And, then, as one, they all turned their backs on me.

It was a fricking awesome display of contempt (143-144).

Following his initial greeting of silent contempt by his tribe, the protagonist is hit on the forehead by a coin, to be remedied by nothing short of three stitches. What is more, his former best friend Rowdy knocks him unconscious on the court. Yet, the anger that surfaces in such distressing episodes is undercut by Alexie’s pervasive humour when Junior argues:

If these dang Indians had been this organized when I went to school here, maybe I would have more reasons to stay.

That thought made me laugh.

So, I laughed (143).

Consequently, humour allows the narrator to survive the physical and psychological pain of rejection by his own community. Both the trickster discourse and humour are survival strategies, since humour is also corrective in that it provides the much needed relief in a world made difficult not only by cultural decimation, but by ongoing dominance brought about by white hegemony. Junior in his particular predicament tries to deal with his ousting from the Indian community through humour, too.

On the strength the narrator derives from laughter, we may look at the episodes in which Junior loses one family member after the other, and his sole strategy for survival/survivance becomes humour and creativity. The first loved one to go is Junior's grandmother, the one person whom he admires most, and who was always supportive of him. According to the narrator, his grandmother's "greatest gift was tolerance" (155), and it is not the fact of her death, but its circumstances that enrages the narrator. We read:

Grandparents are supposed to die first, but they are supposed to die of old age. They are supposed to die of a heart attack, or a stroke, or of cancer, or of Alzheimer's.

THEY ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO GET RUN OVER AND KILLED BY A DRUNK DRIVER! (capitalization in the original) (158).

Yet, even such pain is to be dealt with laughter. During his grandmother's wake, a white billionaire who is professedly an Indian lover appears. This white man, whose protestations of love and solidarity inadvertently promote the artefactualisation of the Indian, however provides the much-required humorous incident during the funeral. Billionaire Ted who is in the habit of spending his fortune on "Indian artefacts" shows up, with a stolen powwow dress he had purchased. Ted had hired an anthropologist to determine the history of the dress, and the anthropologist after much field research had come up with the scientific

conclusion that the dress belonged to the Spokanes. The said anthropologist we learn had “visited [their] reservation undercover and learned that this stolen outfit once belonged to a woman named Grandmother Spirit” (164).

Thus, Ted returns the dress to the narrator’s mother with profound apologies, as the dress of her recently deceased mother, Grandmother Spirit. Yet the narrator’s mother readily admits that Grandmother Spirit never danced at powwows and consequently could not have owned a dance outfit, adding that the beadwork did not resemble Spokane anyway. We read: “‘It looks more Sioux to me,’ my mother said. ‘Maybe Oglala. Maybe. I’m not an expert. Your anthropologist wasn’t much of an expert, either. He got this *way* wrong’” (emphasis in original) (165). While Billionaire Ted leaves humiliated in what was supposed to be a grand gesture of solidarity, Junior’s mother starts laughing, to be accompanied by the two thousand Indians attending the wake in laughter:

We kept laughing.

It was the most glorious noise I’d ever heard.

And I realized that, sure, Indians were drunk, and sad, and displaced and crazy and mean, but dang, we knew how to laugh.

When it comes to death, we know that laughter and tears are pretty much the same thing.

And so, laughing and crying, we said good-bye to my grandmother. And when we said good-bye to one grandmother, we said good-bye to all of them.

Each funeral was a funeral for all of us.

We lived and died together (166).

In like vein, on the import and function of laughter for Native American peoples, Alexie in his novel *Indian Killer* writes that the alienated protagonist John watches a basketball game, and is intrigued by the constant joking and laughing that was going on

amongst the Indian audience. The narrator intercepts, arguing what John did not realise was that "...their laughter was a ceremony used to drive away personal and collective demons" (21).

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* we keep seeing humour and laughter as correctives to the pain of death. What is more, in the face of death, the petty differences are left aside, and the solidarity of the Indian community makes itself explicit after Junior's grandmother's death. Although Junior "was still the kid who had betrayed the tribe.... they all waved the white flag" (159) to allow him to grieve in peace. The narrator explains that he was not suddenly popular or anything, but he "wasn't a villain anymore", since the people who had ignored him, called him names, or pushed him around had stopped (180). Then, it can be argued that in the reservation, when the going gets really rough, the communal spirit is awakened, and the people would look out for each other, while putting differences aside.

Shortly afterwards, the narrator's life spins out of focus by another alcohol related death. His father's best friend, Eugene "...was shot and killed by one of his good friends, Bobby, who was too drunk to even remember pulling the trigger" (169). In the aftermath of the murder, Bobby hangs himself in jail. Reactions of the family members to the news vary. While Junior's father goes on a "legendary drinking binge", his mother goes to the church every day (171). Grief stricken, Junior blames himself:

... I thought about dropping out of Reardan.

I thought about going back to Wellpinit.

I blamed myself for all of the deaths.

I had cursed my family. I had left the tribe, and had broken something inside all of us, and I was now being punished for that (173).

Eventually healing comes in the form of creativity as he "...drew and drew and drew and drew cartoons" (171) during this desperate episode of his life. Creativity becomes not only Junior's means of survival, but also helps him in dealing with his grief. We read: "I kept drawing cartoons of the things that made me angry. I keep writing and rewriting, drawing and redrawing, and rethinking and revising and reediting. It became my grieving ceremony" (178). In like vein Vizenor elaborates on the nature of the relationship between creativity and survivance in the following words:

Natives are created in words, their sacred names are derived in nature, and their presence is forever related in stories. Natives create the earth, animals, birds, tricksters, shadows and seasons in their personal visions, memories, names and stories. Clearly, native traditions arise as a creative practice and are sustained by a crucial sense of presence and survivance in stories (*Word Arrows*, vii).

Then, according to Vizenor presence is equated to creativity, and the result is survivance. Thus, if creativity is one solution to the pain and path for survival, laughter is the main tool to deal with the pain of death and survive the losses. Laughter is at the heart of the strategy of parody, and Alexie's protagonist resorts to laughter when he cannot cope with the realities of life. Hence, through humour Junior survives one tragedy after the other, while laughter is equated to survival.

The third tragedy in the text comes in the form of the death of her elder sister, and at that the third drunken death. On a snowy day, Junior receives the news at school, and is almost paralysed by fear, knowing that his father must be driving drunk too, on the icy roads, coming to pick him up. In full expectation of the fourth drunken death –this time of his father-

, when Junior sees his father safe and sound, he falls into a fit of unstoppable laughter. We read:

And just when I thought I'd start screaming, and run around like a crazy man, my father drove up.

I started laughing. I was so relieved, so happy, that I LAUGHED. And I couldn't stop laughing.

I ran down the hill, jumped into the car, and hugged my dad. I laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed.

"Junior," he said. "What's wrong with you?"

"You're alive!" I shouted. "You're alive!"

"But your sister -," he said.

"I know, I know," I said. "She's dead. But you're alive. You're still alive."

I laughed and laughed. I couldn't stop laughing. I felt like I might die of laughing (*The Absolutely True* 204).

Then the unstoppable laughter that takes over Junior after her sister's death is a reaction to both the explicit pain at her demise, and also the imminent relief at his father's survival. Thus aided by laughter Junior survives yet another impossible situation.

Going back to the term survivance coined by Vizenor, which according to Rebecca Tillet "...describes contemporary Indian existence as a complex combination of both survival and endurance/ resistance" (122), we can ask if Alexie's protagonist aims at or achieves survivance. On the one hand, the biting and wry humor, the constant employment of irony and parody, and the satirical treatment of the subject matter are traits that stand out most in Alexie's fiction. Yet on closer analysis we infer that the wit and humour that appear on the surface of the text is informed by anger. In the story entitled "Imagining the Reservation" in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie formulates his take on the

relationship between survival, anger and imagination in the following manner: “Survival = Anger x Imagination” (150). Consequently, when asked by Ase Nygren in an interview if his formulation of survival has any affinities with Vizenor’s “survivance”, Alexie replies:

“Survival is a low hope. I don’t want just survival, or ‘survivance’. I want triumph!” (6).

Therefore, whereas for Alexie survival is anger multiplied by imagination, for Vizenor the formula reads somewhat different but similar, since for Vizenor survivance is equated to creativity plus humour. Thus, for both authors, the contemporary Native American existence builds upon resisting and surviving the hardships through creativity inherent in literature, and in the process both are informed by the humour and laughter imminent to Native American cultures. Yet for Alexie, anger not only surfaces in his work, but also is acknowledged by him as one founding block of his path to success.

In like vein, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the protagonist Junior not only survives his first year at the white school, but is eventually able to patch things up with his own community. At the white Reardan, he gets acceptance from his peers, gaining success as both a basketball player and a student. Moreover, he becomes a member of the in-group, starts dating the pretty white girl of his dreams, and has a new and intelligent best friend. Back at the reservation, his peers come to accept him as who he is, and most importantly for him, he re-forges his relationship with his former best friend, Rowdy, whose shunning and abuse had hurt him to the core.

Then, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, hope that is represented by the white world brings first interstitiality, but then success in both communities. Therefore, the text depicts not a victimisation, but a success story, and in this respect is in line with Vizenor’s contention that it is possible to survive all hardships of the contemporary Native American existence through creativity. Consequently, the survivance of the protagonist in the

novel is enabled by personal success, which is achieved by creativity. As Vizenor argues, “[t]he postindian ousts the inventions with humour, new stories, and the simulations of survivance” (*Manifest Manners* 5). In this respect, both his protagonist Junior and Alexie do become “postindian warriors”, creating stories full of humour that disrupt the static construct of manifest manners with the result of survival through creativity.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is not only about survival, but survivance and triumph. Accordingly, Junior never falls prey to despair, or melancholy or nostalgia, nor allows himself be victimized by either the white or Native American communities. Neither does Junior give in to inner colonisation, accepting and assuming the artificial pose of the victim. The hardships and pain he manoeuvres by way of drawing cartoons and laughter. Then Junior’s triumph is achieved through creativity, humour, adaptation, and flexibility, all of which are the qualities of the traditional trickster. As Vizenor puts it; “The shimmers of imagination are reason and the simulations are survivance, not dominance; an aesthetic restoration of trickster hermeneutics, the stories of liberation and survivance without the dominance of closure” (*Manifest Manners* 14). Hence the narrator Junior disrupts the manifest manners plaguing both the white and the Indian worlds, breaking the constructed notions of Indianness current in both communities, and never lets himself be confined by artificial categories in his path towards success and survivance, which he achieves through humour and creativity.

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