

FINDING A VOICE: VISIBILITY, IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART TIME INDIAN

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Abstract: To look at the subaltern voice is to look and listen to a voice that has for centuries, been silenced, glossed over, erased or violently suppressed. The American Indian community is no stranger to any of these issues. A voice that was silenced with the arrival of the European colonisers was slowly reclaimed towards the end of the 20th century, with native writers exploring what their identity and issues meant to them in a new age. Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is a key work in what critics call the "Native American Renaissance", who's writing, as David L. Moore in the *Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* sums up, "invariably circulates the grave themes of ongoing colonial history and its personal effects in Indian country,". (Moore 297) Partly autobiographical, unbarred in every sense, and set on the Spokane Indian Reservation, it encapsulates the struggle that Native Americans face today; the fight to be heard and the fight to claim an identity that bridges two warring worlds.

Introduction: Visibility is a key factor in gaining a voice, and something that the novel's teenage protagonist, Arnold Spirit, aka, Junior, has lacked, metaphorically and literally, right from the start. Born with an excess amount of cerebral spinal fluid in his brain, he suffers from seizures and a stutter, the constant target of mockery on his reservation. Slowly, he retreats into a solitude where only his grandmother and best friend Rowdy are allowed to enter, and takes to expressing himself within the confines of his diary, which becomes a means to document his thoughts coherently, with no impediments in his way. "Everybody on the rez calls me a retard about twice a day... I'm not even writing this story down the way I actually talk, because I'd have to fill it with stutters and lisps, and then you'd be wondering why you're reading a story written by *such a retard*," (4). While Junior is able to comment on the world around him in his diary with startling clarity and acerbic wit, his voice out loud is largely ignored, both by his fellow Indians on the reservation and at his white school, Reardan, that he eventually transfers to. Junior is not alone in suffering from a lack of agency, this fight for visibility can be applied to the reservation as a whole. Alexie's reservation is one that Moore's envisions as one filled with, "of pain and humor, hunger and survival, love and anger, broken treaties, manifest destiny, basketball, car wrecks, commodity food," (Moore 297). The high rates of alcohol, drug abuse and poverty, issues ignored by the government and the American public, has crippled the community from going out into the "urban" world to find better lives, a rhetoric fuelled by the Relocation Programs implemented in the 1950's. In a world that "assured Indians that urban life would be much better than life on their reservations" (Fixico 3), it would seem that the only way for a native person to be truly seen was to live in the white man's world, leaving behind traditional values and ways of life. In the novel, Junior contemplates how

his parents' poverty held them back from doing great things. If they'd had the means, he believes, his mother could've been a much loved college professor and his father a renowned jazz artists, both well-off members of the community who could've affected change if they'd been able to afford to leave the reservation. The reservation acts as a shackle to those who want to change their lives, a dark space where they can never truly be seen, as seen in the example of Junior's older sister, Mary, "She hadn't given up. This reservation tried to suffocate her, had kept her trapped in a basement, and now she was roaming the huge grassy fields of Montana," (91).

Leaving as a way to gain some kind of agency is reiterated in an exchange between Junior and his teacher, Mr. P. It is Mr. P that incites the idea of Junior leaving the reservation school in favour of the nearly all-white Reardan, telling him that everyone on the reservation has given up. "All your friends. All your bullies... We're all defeated," (42). To Mr. P, if Junior wants any chance at a better life and to do great things with it, the cost of that comes at leaving an invisible, shunned place like the reservation behind for a place "where other people have hope... You're going to find more and more hope the farther and farther you walk away from this sad, sad reservation." (43)

Shifting schools brands Junior a traitor to his people, and this new found turmoil of navigating through a world of cultural duality adds even more confusion to his voice. On the reservation, he is outcast who left them for the white world, to the white characters in the book, he is the first Indian many of them have met, and a subject of much scrutiny and discrimination. Reardan, his promise at a different, empowered life alienates him from the start, he is called out for his "funny" reservation accent, literally silencing him. "And yes, I had that stutter and lisp, but I also had that sing song reservation accent that made everything I said sound like a bad poem. Man, I

was freaked. I didn't say another word for six days." (61) Junior spends most of first weeks shunted off to a corner, ignored or barely spoken to by his classmates. On the reservation, he is attacked by three boys and beaten for his presumed abandonment. However, instead of resisting the chaotic dichotomy of both his worlds, he learns to embrace it, and finds a middle ground both can celebrate; basketball. It is on the court that he is finally seen and appreciated for his talents, with his skills appreciated by both the Indian and white communities. Junior's vocalisation of an identity also comes in the form of Mikhail Bakhtin's narrative technique of polyphony, which employs a diverse number of views and presented multiple visions instead of a single one. "...containing many different voices, unmerged into a single perspective, and not subordinated to the voice of the author... The author does not place his own narrative voice between the character and the reader," (Robinson). This technique can be most clearly seen in the example of the drawings that are scattered around the novel, all done by Junior. It is here that the most genuine, authentic voice of the protagonist shines through, we see Junior not as extension of Alexie's imagination, but as a person in his own right. His

drawings vary, and depict various portrayals of himself and those around him, a way to process his world, as well as bringing in multiple perspectives to the story. Through his drawings, he is able to give a voice to the other characters; there is a comic of his father denying his alcoholism, several sketches of the books his sister dreamed of writing, with exactly how'd they'd look and what they'd say and another sketch that is a sarcastic dissection of a white Indian "wannabe" who comes to the reservation. And perhaps the most hard hitting of these illustrations is one where Junior illustrates a boy split in two; one half white and the other, Indian, with arrows pointing to clothes, shoes, hair and family background, pin pointing the exact differences between the two. Though the voice of the American Indian is too diverse to be captured in one character, Junior is an excellent starting point in recognising the complex lives and issues the community faces. Alexie's notion that the fight to be heard and the path to a better life will come with visibility and recognition comes through clearly in the novel, and can be summed up with a line from his other short story, the Sin Eaters, "With my voice, I believed, I could explode the walls of that room and escape." (Sin Eaters 8)

References:

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