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The Possibilities and Pitfalls in Teaching Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

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What really gets me angry is that I write about [alcoholism], a lot, and people assume it's a stereotype. When anybody uses that word to describe alcoholism among Native Americans, as a stereotype, that's what really gets me angry. It's a disavowal of the truth. Alcoholism is *epidemic* among Native Americans and anybody who says otherwise is either drunk or they're lying or they're romantic fools, and so it's not the alcoholism itself that gets me angry, it's the denial that surrounds it.—Sherman Alexie, interview with Enrique Cerna, July 11, 2008

In March of 2007 Sherman Alexie addressed attendees of the Native American Literature Symposium at the Saginaw Chippewa Community Center in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. Whereas other audiences I have seen him address included members of the local community, high school and college students, and a smattering of academics, this audience was comprised primarily of academic critics of American Indian literature. The first words Alexie spoke, as he gripped the podium, suggested that he had prepared a response to some of the dominant strains of negative criticism he has received from scholars and that he felt this was his moment to speak directly to his accusers. "I do *not* speak in stereotypes," Alexie asserted, with a hint of the anger referenced in the epigraph. He repeated this statement several times in staccato, each iteration separated by biographical details—memories of such traumas as the loss of family members to alcoholism, house fires, car accidents, and disease. In short, he performed the rejoinder he has offered frequently in interviews when confronted with the accusation that he harms American Indians by perpetuating stereotypes about them. Alexie has responded time and again by noting that his life experiences are not stereo-

types; they are realities. The audience experienced Alexie's preface to his reading in stunned, or at least forbearing, silence.

In characteristic fashion, Alexie shifted smoothly into humor and moved back and forth between content regarding stark realities of colonization and American Indian life in the United States and comedic aspects of the same. He announced that he would be reading from his not yet released novel, *Flight*, and grabbed the book from the shelf within the podium. When the audience caught sight of the coveted book, they let out a collective gasp of anticipation—something Alexie clearly enjoyed and used as an occasion for another of his characteristic maneuvers: making fun of his audience. He hid and re-presented the book a couple more times, looking expectantly at the crowd for another audible response.

These two aspects of the reading, Alexie's refutation to charges of stereotyping and his relishing of his audience's hungry appreciation of his work, provide a snapshot of the critical conversation that has surrounded Alexie for over two decades. This conversation has been defined by praise for his formal skill—and, more specifically, his deftness in using and subverting literary conventions to communicate aspects of American Indian experience to a broad audience—alongside biting criticism regarding his representations of American Indians. It also points to the ambivalence many educators feel about assigning Alexie's books.

Students may not express their enthusiasm about Alexie's writing, humor, and worldview with a collective gasp upon spotting one of his novels, but instead do so with the disproportionate pace of their consumption of his pages and their animation during discussions of his work. Every time I assign Alexie's writing, whether in a first-year composition course, an American Indian literature course, or a survey of American Literature, students, on the whole, finish it well in advance of the deadline and arrive to class with more questions and discussion topics than time allows. As Tammy Wahpeconiah observes, such enthusiasm for Alexie's writing is no insignificant factor, particularly when you teach non-English majors (36). Further, I would add, the appeal Alexie's work has for students provokes them (with some nudging) to grapple with—rather than dismiss or otherwise gloss over—the complex issues he addresses regarding contemporary American Indian experiences as they are shaped by colonization and its legacies. Moreover, because Alexie is such a skilled writer, his work provides ample opportunities for developing essential analytical and critical thinking skills, along with other conceptual proficiencies.

The sketch I have just provided may sound like an English instructor's dream: a classroom full of prepared and enthusiastic students eager to look

more closely at a text's formal features, thematic concerns, social justice interventions, etc. These are, indeed, some of the merits of assigning Alexie, and certainly among the reasons he frequents high school and university syllabi. However, this sketch would be neither complete nor accurate were I to conclude it here. The pedagogical challenges involved with teaching Alexie's work tend to surface once discussion ensues, as non-American Indian students are inclined to make sweeping claims about the hopelessness and alcoholism that plague Indian reservations—and about American Indians in general. Students from or heavily influenced by the dominant Euroamerican culture tend to lack exposure to American Indians outside of distortions perpetuated in Hollywood films and popular conceptions of the noble savage that saturate established U.S. mythologies.¹ Many students have internalized the myth of the Vanishing Indian and assume that American Indians died out with the horse and buggy. A smaller number of students, usually those who have lived in close proximity to or vacationed at or near a lucrative tribally owned casino, think that all American Indians are wealthy due to an influx of casino revenue. This backdrop of ignorance and misperception does not allow them a frame of reference against which to weigh or critically evaluate Alexie's representations of American Indians and their experiences. Moreover, because students generally love Alexie's writing and literary voice—his wit, his worldview, his invocations of popular culture, and his utilization of various formal literary techniques—they are quick to internalize his words and to do so uncritically. Particularly when teaching freshman, it is important to bear in mind that they tend to defer to external authorities and only gradually develop internal standards for evaluating information presented to them.²

My post-graduate school experiences with teaching Sherman Alexie's work have been at schools in which the Euroamerican student population comprises 83 percent to 86 percent of the whole and the American Indian population less than 1 percent. Consequently, the recommendations I offer in this essay and the statements I make regarding students' responses should be understood as particular to this teaching scenario.³ I have found it useful, early in students' reading of American Indian literature, to ask them to complete an anonymous survey (see Appendix A) regarding their cultural backgrounds, prior exposure to and ideas about American Indian peoples and cultures, and their impressions of the novel thus far. The results of my most recent survey (a prior version of the appended version, administered in a honors composition course) are representative of student groups to whom I have assigned Alexie's work and illuminating in terms of the degree to which their prior expectations aligned with their impressions of the portrait of reservation life his 2007 graphic young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* offers.⁴

All of the students in this class identified as "Caucasian" (though one co-identified as Cherokee). Most claimed little knowledge of American Indian cultures, and attributed the majority of what they did know to grade school or high school courses in which they learned of the mistreatment of American Indians—with Hollywood films serving as the second largest source of information and only a few students reporting any direct contact with American Indians. In the context of reading a novel that plays with the conception of being a "part-time Indian," it was particularly relevant and pedagogically useful to ask about their understanding of what it means to be an American Indian. A majority of students thought that having American Indian blood (many specified a 50 percent minimum) is necessary to identify as American Indian, while some cited living on a reservation as a necessary condition for self-identification, either in addition to or instead of blood quantum.

A recurrent theme in students' characterization of American Indian life today was connection to the land, arguably a function of the pervasive myth of the Ecological Indian. Many differentiated between reservation Indians (whom students associated with traditional dress and customs, poverty, and alcoholism) and assimilated Indians (those "catching up with modern society" who occupy a socioeconomic status between Euroamericans and reservation Indians). As to reservations themselves, students' impressions were mixed. Over half characterized reservations as land set aside for American Indians by the U.S. government, and about a quarter described the land as a space for commune-style living. A couple students emphasized that reservations are places where American Indians were forced to live in poor conditions, and only one described the reservation as land owned by a tribe, family, or individual of American Indian heritage. Students' prevailing conceptions of reservations from their reading of *Diary* likewise included descriptions of poverty, helplessness, alcoholism, inequality, and discrimination. One student wrote, "They are lazy because they believe nothing will ever go their way," while another remarked, "The people are like barbarians getting drunk and fighting all the time." However, all but one student, who was undecided and found the narrator biased, reported enjoying reading *Diary*.

These responses indicate that, on the whole, students in this class had little prior exposure to American Indian history, culture, and experience, and even less direct contact with American Indians. What ideas most of them had formed prior to reading *Diary* reflected common misunderstandings and generalizations about American Indians, perpetuated within many elementary and secondary educational settings and within popular culture. The survey results thus alerted me to the need both to provide important contextual information that would help students read *Diary* critically—rather than sim-

ply deferring to its portrait as representative, due to a combined deference to authority and a predisposition to see their prior impressions validated within the novel's pages—and to supplement the novel with multiple and divergent American Indian perspectives, as I detail below.

My interest in this article is not to litigate Sherman Alexie's guilt or innocence with respect to allegations of stereotyping but to address the responsibilities and opportunities educators have when assigning his work. This article takes as given Alexie's talent and the right of any author to draw from his/her own experience, as well as the fact that literature is more prone to be (mis)taken as representative of the author's entire cultural group by readers unfamiliar with that culture. I also take as given that, as educators, we have an enormous responsibility when it comes to the texts we assign. We not only must enable students to engage with them meaningfully relative to such common course outcomes as development of critical thinking, analytical, and writing skills; we also have a responsibility to assign a diverse range of readings to ensure, to our best ability, that students walk away from our courses with a better understanding of the cultures and perspectives such readings communicate.

My concern here is with the pedagogical possibilities and pitfalls *Diary* provides. With the aim of offering tools for teaching *Diary* responsibly (vis-à-vis American Indian communities and our students as citizens and ethical agents) and to maximum effect (vis-à-vis course outcomes) I will: identify the specific aspects of *Diary* that tend to provoke generalizations from students in order to assist educators in addressing and accounting for them; outline the potential gains of teaching the novel; offer classroom strategies for realizing these gains; and conclude with a brief discussion of how the pedagogical approach I offer for *Diary* pertains to the teaching of American Indian and multiethnic U.S. literature more generally, as well as to current pedagogical trends.

I have selected *Diary* as my focus because, since winning the National Book Award in Young Adult Literature in 2007, it has become a mainstay in high school and university classrooms across the country.⁵ Further, this novel effectively showcases characteristic features of Alexie's oeuvre and thus provides occasions both for assessing what about Alexie's writing prompts students to make sweeping generalizations about American Indians and identifying why it is nonetheless valuable to assign it. I have taught *Diary* to groups of predominately Euroamerican students in first year college composition classes that I designed with the themes "coming of age across cultures" and "global perspectives on human rights." The novel is based on Alexie's own experiences growing up on the Spokane reservation and choosing to go to the primarily Euroamerican school just beyond the reservation borders.

Arnold or "Junior" Spirit, the novel's narrator and protagonist, discusses the impact of poverty, alcoholism, and internalized racism on the Spokane community and on his own identity. *Diary's* humor, statements about the tensions between individual and collective identity, comments on the legacies of colonization (including multiple human rights violations on the Spokane reservation), and references to the awkwardness of emotion between teenage boys, led me to believe that the book would be ideal for these courses. Its hybrid form as a graphic novel that blends prose and cartoon illustrations also offers opportunities for developing students' abilities to analyze texts in multiple media as each uniquely and collaboratively creates meaning—which also can provide a relatively seamless transition to incorporating digital media for further context. Moreover, as a young adult novel, it is written in a manner that resonates particularly well with high school students, as well as students in their freshman and sophomore years. I therefore thought it would appeal to students in my composition classes while providing them insight into certain aspects of contemporary American Indian life. Though largely correct in my preliminary assessments of the novel's possibilities, I was disturbed by the generalizations and stereotypes about American Indians students articulated during discussions of *Diary*—derived through what I came to understand was a powerful alignment of their own preconceptions and the authority they located in the novel.

Confronting Alexie's Reservation as Prison

Junior is just one of Alexie's characters who articulates the view that "Reservations were meant to be prisons, you know? Indians were supposed to disappear. But somehow or another, Indians have forgotten that reservations were meant to be death camps. I wept because I was the only one who was brave and crazy enough to leave the rez. I was the only one with enough arrogance" (216–217). Reading *Diary* does, indeed, expose students to stark reservation realities, the truth of which are born out in data aggregated over the past several decades. For instance, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's assessment of data from 2001 to 2005, American Indians' age adjusted alcoholism mortality rate is twice that of the general U.S. population. Further, 65.9 percent of American Indians whose deaths were alcohol related were less than fifty years of age.⁶

Likewise, a Navajo prison inmate and poet characterizes his experience of reservation life thusly: "There is a battle going on behind the wall with the Native community. It's a battle against alcohol and drug abuse, against phys-

ical and mental abuse, against poverty and ignorance, against racism and anger. It is a battle for dignity, independence, freedom, justice, health, and happiness" (qtd. in Teuton 118). As this quote and the CDC report indicate, the traumas Alexie dramatizes are not particular to his own childhood experience of the Spokane reservation.

Notably, even fellow Spokane writer Gloria Bird, whose critique of Alexie's representations of the reservation as overly negative is now well known, decided never to return for many of the same reasons as Alexie himself. She writes,

There is a subdued depression that manifests itself in high suicide rates, alcoholism, drug- and alcohol-related violence, and death, the effects of which are compounded by higher rates of cancer and economic instability. It is not the kind of place I would raise my children. In my heart, I carry many good memories of growing up in that place, but there are very real concerns that have led me to the decision never to return to the reservation [43].

The issue for Bird is not with Alexie's accuracy but, arguably, his disproportionate focus on negative features of reservation life at the expense of those features she recalls fondly and which Alexie himself has described as beautiful and magical (see his interview with Cerna).

Alexie's alleged failure to address the more positive aspects of Spokane reservation life—including community, tradition, and tribally specific culture—drew Bird's fire in her 1995 essay "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*." Three years later Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish critic Louis Owens issued a similar critique of Alexie and other American Indian writers who, in his view, achieve the greatest commercial success because they provide a "deficit model of Indian reservation life" (75). Owens concedes that poverty, alcoholism, and the generalized despair that accompany each are "unavoidable realities" of American Indian life and thus to avoid them would be a falsification. "However," he writes, "such portraits not only present just one side of Indian existence, but more unfortunately conform readily to Euroamerican readers' expectations that American Indians are all doomed by firewater; white readers find their stereotypes comfortably reinforced by sensationalized alcoholism and cultural impotence" (72). As Owens indicates, the reason why readers may walk away from an Alexie novel with an utterly despairing sense of reservation life is not only a consequence of the author's own views but also of their prior expectations.

Had Louis Owens lived to read *Diary* he would have found that Alexie has written a book that provides clear hope for American Indian survival. However, that hope resides decidedly outside the reservation boundaries and thus, I suspect, would cause Owens to double down on—rather than revise—his view that Alexie reinforces Euroamerican readers' assumptions about

American Indian life. In *Diary*, Junior must privilege his individual interests over his community's expectations. He must leave the Spokane reservation if he is to gain access to the resources, opportunities, and stability he needs. His daily efforts, from his long commute to Reardan High School to his scholastic and athletic commitments and his efforts to win friends among his new Euroamerican classmates, are painfully documented and well rewarded. Indeed, here we see evidence that the Ameritocracy works: if you work hard, you will succeed. Further, Junior's experience can be read as validation of assimilationist policies directed toward American Indians for centuries—which ostensibly were justified by the view that American Indians would be served best by assimilating into the mainstream and dismantling tribal structures alleged to mire them in a "backward" collectivist social order.

Junior's view of his daily commute as a routine loss and reacquisition of Indianness may represent to the informed reader the ongoing legacy of colonization (i.e., as a manifestation of internalized racism rooted in the assimilationist logic of early Indian schools that presumed to be able to erase Indian identity through education). However, students raised within an educational system that retains binary, colonialist conceptions of American Indians—and who themselves tend to think in binary terms—are prone to reading such a scene uncritically and to seeing Junior sacrificing his Indian self to survive as a logical, if lamentable, necessity. Many students equate reservation life with poverty and alcoholism, and many commented during class discussions on their difficulty understanding why some Spokane resent Junior for leaving and/or why anyone stays on a reservation. Further, students acculturated to the individualist ethos of mainstream U.S. culture can have difficulty appreciating the communitarian values present in much American Indian literature, including *Diary*. Teaching *Diary* to young college students in a fashion that exposes Alexie's subversive invocation of colonialist discourse (even as he ultimately validates leaving the reservation as being in the best interest of all Spokane people) requires educators not simply to work against the grain of centuries of U.S. cultural production, but also to find strategic ways of encouraging students to shift from binary to more syncretic levels of cognition.

Assessing and Unraveling Stereotypes Through Close Reading and Critical Context

Concerns about confirming stereotypes are shared by many who teach American Indian literature, and not just Alexie's work. For example, Helen Eikstadt and Francine Falk-Ross caution educators not to assign texts that

contain stereotypes of American Indian peoples. However, as Bird and Owens indicate, part of the reason Alexie runs the risk of perpetuating stereotypes is because mainstream readers *expect* to encounter images of American Indians like those they have encountered previously. It would be easy, moreover, for writers like Alexie to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and for educators to disabuse students of them if they had absolutely no basis in reality. If alcoholism, for example, were not a real challenge in many reservation communities, the stereotype of the drunken Indian would have less force.

Another powerful convergence between students' presuppositions and Alexie's writing style pertains to his generalized language about American Indians and reservations. *Diary's* language offers little tribal specificity, much less qualification regarding the subjectivity or limitations of individual experiences or perspectives. Junior frames his crossing of cultural boundaries and formulation of identity in terms that can confirm students' generalized and monolithic perceptions of what it means to be an American Indian. For example, one illustration depicts Junior standing beside a sign; the arrows pointing left read "Rez" and "Home," whereas the arrows pointing right read "Hope" and contain three question marks. Junior stands facing right toward a space of presumed promise, along with the unknown. This is just one place in the novel where Junior's dreams are located outside the reservation's borders. It is thus unsurprising that one student in my composition course themed "coming of age across cultures" gave a presentation that centered on the claim that the word "Indian," as defined in the novel, means hopelessness and crushed ambition, whereas "Part-Time Indian" signifies the realization of dreams.

Students in this composition course were tasked with developing their ability to craft and defend argumentative claims about texts through short presentations that functioned as oral performances of their literary analysis papers. Afterwards their peers were charged with raising viable counterarguments, requesting additional textual evidence, and asking any other questions they had. I then extended these conversations—as part of my effort to guide them in refining their arguments and carefully analyzing key textual moments—by identifying claims we might explore further and raising critical questions that might prompt students to revisit interpretations that rested on faulty or underdeveloped assumptions. Following the presentation on *Diary's* definition of "Indian," I asked students how cultural identity is achieved and experienced in general—not just for American Indians. We then discussed the irony and logic embedded in the notion of being a "part-time Indian" and thereby engaged Alexie's portrayal of American Indian identity from the perspective of critics like Stephen Evans, who argues that Alexie uses irony to craft realistic survival literature. Evans writes, "much of Alexie's

work to date comprises a modern survival document from which his readers gain strength by actively participating in the reflection of reality as viewed through Alexie's satiric lens" (52). Although Evan's essay predates *Diary*, his words apply to this novel as well and can help illuminate the ways in which Alexie presents unrealistic conceptions of American Indian identity as hurdles in the process of Junior's coming of age experience.

Like many high school and early college students, Junior begins the novel with broad, binary conceptions of racial identity. For example, he conflates whiteness and wealth, as illustrated by a cartoon split-screen of a white and Indian boy (57). The white boy's Ralph Lauren shirt and Timex watch are juxtaposed with the Indian boy's K-mart t-shirt and no watch at all. The non-material contrasts in the illustration include "A Bright Future" versus "A Vanishing Past" and "Positive Role Models" versus "A Family History of Diabetes and Cancer." Thus the material conditions of Junior's life are thinly contextualized and sharply distinguished from those of his Euroamerican peers. The reference to the Indian boy's "vanishing past" is representative of the challenges teaching this novel can pose. Students who presume that American Indian cultures have already disappeared are likely to overlook Alexie's satirical invocation of the myth of the Vanishing Indian. I have found it effective simply to ask students what it means to have a vanishing past, as part of the ongoing practice with close reading I pursue in composition classes. Students typically free associate with these words and often suggest that the phrase implies a personal disconnection with one's own history or a history that is irrelevant or even destructive in the present moment. I then explain that there is another possible reference point at work here that we might consider, and give them a brief encapsulation of the myth of the Vanishing Indian. Discussion of the myth and its role in Euroamerican-American Indian relations does help students to more critically assess the novel—and American Indian authored texts generally—but can sometimes be counterbalanced by the rhetorical force of *Diary* as they experience and interpret it firsthand.

One obstacle is what Bird characterizes as mainstream readers' trust of the American Indian-authored novel and their inclination to read any one text as representative of American Indian experience (49). When teaching first and second year college students, such trust converges with their tendency to defer uncritically to external authorities (as mentioned above). Because Alexie relies on generalizations—for instance, Junior's frequent statements about American Indians as a whole rather than more specific comments about the Spokane—students seem particularly prone to broad conclusions upon reading *Diary*. When I invited students in a composition course to weigh in on the allegation that Alexie perpetuates negative stereo-

types about American Indian life, they observed that Junior's sister dying in a trailer fire after passing out drunk on another reservation solidifies the notion that Junior's experience of the Spokane reservation is representative of reservation life generally (205).

While Alexie's disinterest in romantic portraits of American Indian life, in addition to his own experiences on the Spokane reservation, may contribute to an overemphasis on reservation ills, it also yields a body of work that subverts some of the most abiding positive stereotypes about American Indians (e.g., stoic, mystical, noble/savage, nature-loving). In this way his writing offers occasions for critically examining the origins of such stereotypes and the aspects of Euroamerican culture that explain their perpetuation. In *Diary*, Ted the Millionaire is the go-to character for such analysis. Junior introduces Ted as a representative of a category of Euroamericans fixated on American Indians: "We'd expected this white guy to be original. But he was yet another white guy who showed up on the rez because he loved Indian people SOOOOOOOO much. Do you know how many white strangers show up on Indian reservations every year and start telling Indians how much they love them? Thousands. It's sickening. And boring" (162). This particular white guy appears at Junior's grandmother's funeral to return what he believes to be her beaded dance outfit, which he purchased and held onto for years, despite alleged feelings of guilt, because of its beauty. Ted claims to be devastated that he is too late to return it to Grandmother Spirit. Ultimately, what this scene underscores is the disconnect between romantic collectors like Ted—who, as Junior's cartoon illustration of him highlights, spends exorbitant amounts of money on alleged American Indian cultural artifacts, including "fringed buckskin pants purportedly worn by Geronimo (\$150,000, from a private collector)"—and the material conditions faced by many American Indians today (including those on the reservation he claims to love), any actual tribal knowledge, or any direct ties to American Indian peoples (162–163).

When Junior's mother rises to accept the dance outfit on her mother's behalf, her comportment indicates her familiarity with the role a man like Ted expects her to play. Junior observes, "My mother's voice had gotten all formal. Indians are good at that. We'll be talking and laughing and carrying on like normal, and then, BOOM, we get all serious and sacred and start talking like some English royalty" (165). She goes on to inform Ted that the outfit cannot be Grandmother Spirit's because her mother was not a dancer and because, as the other Spokane present verify, the beadwork most likely is Sioux. Ted responds by rapidly placing the dress back in his car and speeding away. In response, first Junior's mother and then "Two thousand Indians laughed at the same time. 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" (166). In the end, *Diary* invites readers to grapple with the realities Junior faces: e.g., the idea that a community can be sad and joyous simultaneously, or his father's offer of the five dollars he managed to save as a Christmas gift for Junior, after spending a week drinking the rest of the gift money away, being "a beautiful and ugly thing" (151). Confronting these seeming contradictions and seeing the truth of such a moment as drawing upon both beauty and ugliness, however, requires careful work to redirect students' desire to offer an up or down judgment on Junior's father—a desire arguably symptomatic of binary modes of thinking—and to help them develop the syncretic cognitive capacities most students achieve by the time they are seniors.⁷ Asking students how they understand Junior's diagnosis of his father's gift as "beautiful and ugly" is one point of entry into an analysis that requires them to move beyond the binary and identify the meaning implied by this seeming contradiction.

Educators can further contextualize characters like Ted the Millionaire, along with other Euroamerican stereotypes about American Indians represented in the novel, by incorporating brief video clips accessible online. For a range of courses in which I assign American Indian literature, I organize and share short film, television, and advertisement clips through a course management system to increase students' familiarity with influential and persistent non-Native representations of American Indians alongside American Indians' own self-representations. My standard practice is to select a clip to show at the beginning of class as a means of drawing students into the work of the day, presenting information relevant to the assigned text, and framing the ensuing analysis we will perform of that text. Before offering any direction or context, I solicit students' impressions of the clip's core ideas and assumptions, rhetorical strategies, etc. I then build on these initial impressions by raising critical questions and offering relevant context. Finally, I ask them to identify connections with the assigned text, which moves us into our analysis of it. One video I use often is the 1971 Keep America Beautiful commercial featuring Iron Eyes Cody crying a single tear at the site of litter by the highway, which serves as a condensed representation of the idea that American Indians are born conservationists and that they live outside of contemporary time—as indicated by Cody's buckskin outfit, arrival by canoe to a busy highway congested with cars, and, as students observed, the fact that he seems never to have seen such littering before (given that he is moved to cry). Addressing the rhetorical context for this commercial also sets the stage for discussing why the makers of the commercial thought such an image would be so pow-

erful to consumers, along with what this allows us to understand about just how ingrained and powerful the Ecological Indian stereotype had become by 1971. This commercial pairs nicely with Sherman Alexie's 2008 appearance on the *Colbert Report*, in which he makes fun of this same stereotype.

Showing Graham Greene's satiric commercial for "Dr. Greene's: The Ab-Original Pain Reliever," in which he mocks and calls attention to white Canadian actors who appropriate indigenous cultures, illustrates just how representative a character like Ted actually is. More importantly, the commercial represents indigenous humor and activism in the face of cultural appropriation, and thus *active agency* in an ongoing conversation about the relationship between indigenous and Euroamerican peoples. To further contextualize assigned texts and demonstrate their broader relevance, I find it useful to incorporate regularly into class discussions references to relevant current events in popular and political culture, whether it is the Fall 2012 scandal regarding Victoria's Secret dressing their models in headdresses, or supporters of then Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown's campaign staff mocking Elizabeth Warren's claims to American Indian ancestry by making war-whooping noises and tomahawk-chop gestures outside one of her campaign events. The blog "Native Appropriations: Examining Representations of Indigenous Peoples," maintained by Adrienne K. (Cherokee), is a good resource for such recent information and a forum where students can engage with American Indians addressing appropriation issues.⁸

Of course, several critics argue that Alexie's use of stereotypes validates, rather than transgresses, negative preconceptions of American Indians. Bird, for example, contends that historical tidbits are sprinkled into *Reservation Blues* for effect, not to function as substantive moments in and of themselves. Bird writes, "This is the dilemma for not only Alexie, but native writers in general: to accurately represent our communities without exploiting them. The buffer in *Reservation Blues* is to sugarcoat the picture with enough side-tracks and comic scenes to tone down the real issues" (51). Bird's concern is not just that historical and cultural context be provided but that such context be adequately emphasized. She expresses concern about colonialist influences on the novel, which she sees as reproducing—not subverting or critiquing—colonialist stereotypes. However, Alexie sees the boundary between exploitation and representation differently. In a 2001 interview, he noted, "My tribe drew that line for me a long time ago. It's not written down, but I know it [...] I feel a heavy personal responsibility, and I accept it, and I honor it" (Fraser). Alexie operates with an unspoken understanding of and commitment to his tribe's expectations regarding appropriate textual content—though one that clearly is different from Bird's. These statements regarding tribal accounta-

bility thus illustrate that there is not a single agreed upon ethical standard within any one tribe and that the issue of appropriate representation is complex, contested, and significant.

In a 2009 debate about *Diary* on the listserv of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literature, one point of contention pertained to whether or not the novel confronts non-Native readers with the persistence and consequences of colonization. Jane Haladay argued,

By not contextualizing the historical circumstances of colonization that have created much of the brutal reality of Spokane Reservation life that Junior and his sister try to flee, Alexie doesn't push readers who are unaware of these histories far enough to feel any role in it, any responsibility. I think a non-Native reader could easily put down "Diary" without feeling the slightest bit implicated by the reservation dysfunctions as Alexie outlines them, with the added "bonus" of believing that white teachers and white schools are the only way out for "smart" Indians⁹ [ASAIL Listserv].

Haladay's point resonates with Bird's earlier claim regarding *Reservation Blues* that, "Despite the verisimilitude of Alexie's portrayal of alcoholism and its impact upon individual lives, he does not attempt to put the social problems of economic instability, poverty, or cultural oppression into perspective" (51). I see throughout *Diary* references to the context Bird and Haladay require—regarding land loss, forced assimilation, external and internalized racism—but concede that these references are fleeting enough that readers unaware of the referents may gloss over them easily and thus see the reservation simply as a hopeless space from which American Indians must flee for survival. Again, this is the view that Alexie himself has espoused, and one that accords with his own experience. However, it is not a view shared by all American Indians and thus students should not be left with the impression that it is. For example, a statement like "reservations are where Indians were sent to die" indicates that *someone* sent Indians to these spaces. Although, as others have charged, Alexie does little to contextualize this reference, as educators we can do this work—and help students develop their close reading and contextualization skills in the process. Below I detail some strategies I have used to draw out the context to which *Diary* alludes productively.

Developing Multidimensional Readings Through Rhetorical Analysis

Junior's repeated, sweeping, and totalizing assertions equating the reservation with despair often overshadow the more positive dimensions of reser-

vation life also referenced in *Diary*—as a discussion in one of my composition courses demonstrates. Recall that this was the class whose survey results I summarized above; the survey results indicated that the combination of a general lack of background knowledge and students' primarily negative view of reservation life played a clear role in shaping their interpretations. We read *Diary* in preparation for their rhetorical analysis papers, and were analyzing it accordingly—with an eye toward explicating the relationships between the novel's formal features, meaning, and its audience/s. A rhetorical analysis of the novel helps students to appreciate that what they bring as readers to the text shapes their interpretations and that the text likely will read differently for another group of readers. Moreover, this mode of analysis raises the possibility that they may not be the target audience for any particular text.¹⁰ For instance, I asked the students to assess how different audiences might interpret the following passage and why.

The Spokane Tribe holds their annual powwow celebration over the Labor Day weekend. This was the 127th annual one, and there would be singing, war dancing, gambling, storytelling, laughter, fry bread, hamburgers, hot dogs, arts and crafts, and plenty of alcoholic brawling.

I wanted no part of it.

Oh, the dancing and singing are great. Beautiful, in fact, but I'm afraid of all the Indians who aren't dancers and singers. Those rhythmless, talentless, tuneless Indians are most likely going to get drunk and beat the shit out of any available loser.

And I am always the most available loser.

"Come on," Rowdy said. "I'll protect you" [17].

I directed students to identify key phrasing, imagery, and other literary devices that might have significant and perhaps distinctive meaning to one or more audiences. It was in the course of this analysis that we discussed the passage's representation of reservation life as multiple audiences might interpret it. One student commented that his eye was drawn most to the negative statements about the powwow, in part because they speak to the "fall of a once great people," whereas other students said that, lacking direct experiences of powwows, they were reminded of similar aspects of their own experience (BBQs, State Fairs) in which most of the features of the powwow were also present, both positive and negative. This observation of similarity served as an effective mechanism for helping the class as a whole consider just how common such a blend of traditional events and poor behavior are at such large gatherings—across cultures—rather than seeing this moment as wholly culturally specific or, worse yet, as an indicator of a culture in irrevocable and pitiable decline. Another student said that when she first read the list of things that happen at the Spokane powwow, she did not focus on the nega-

tives, but once Junior claimed that he wanted none of it, she redirected her attention to them. Several students agreed and commented that they followed Junior's lead in noting but then dismissing what was beautiful about the powwow and concluding that, on balance, it is a negative experience (and not just for Junior).

As we moved into a consideration of audience interpretation students observed that American Indian readers and others familiar with powwows might better understand the significance of the powwow's positive features (e.g., singing, storytelling, and war dancing). This observation provided opportunities for discussing each of these practices and what, with reflection on each, students without prior knowledge might now understand about what it might be like to attend the powwow. Taking each item on the list one by one and discussing their implications also is a method of training students to read closely and critically. Once more, the fact that we were practicing rhetorical analysis also offered opportunities for paying more attention to how Junior's specific subject position shapes his representation of the powwow and what else the passage might communicate relative to the novel's larger themes. For example, students noted that *Diary's* large youth readership could relate to Junior's attachment to Rowdy given that most youth experience vulnerability of some sort and can connect emotionally to the feeling of being helped by a peer. This is just one example of how teachers and students can read against the grain of the novel by recovering and attending to the positive aspects of reservation life that can be overshadowed by the combination of Junior's emphasis on and students' presuppositions about the reservation's social ills.

Such a consideration of *Diary's* multiple audiences can be developed effectively by incorporating into class discussion Alexie's own comments about his readership and a variety of responses the novel has received to date. Alexie stated that he aimed to reach young American Indian kids on reservations. Later he conceded, seeing they are the largest reading demographic, that Euroamerican women are his core audience. Still, he more recently measured his success by observing, "My audience is getting browner—that's great. And the age group from kids to old people. That's great, so I'm obviously doing something right" (Torrez). Deborah Miranda (Esselen and Chumash), in turn, weighed-in on the debate about *Diary* on the ASAIL listserv as follows:

I loved *Diary* precisely because it didn't pretend to any cultural knowledge or experiences that a kid that age at that time, in that situation, would have had access to or would care about. It reminds me of Alexie saying "You know you're really an Indian when you suddenly wish you weren't."¹¹

Miranda's comment calls attention to the young adult aspects of the novel—not just that Alexie writes it for young adults, but that his protagonist's worldview and understanding is limited by his own youth. Thus Miranda's words, when presented in the classroom, can function as an effective springboard for critically evaluating the scope and limitations of Junior's point of view while alerting students to a stock literary device and its implications. Indeed, the novel's statements about alcoholism are charged with pathos that results from the narrative perspective of a fourteen-year-old boy who suffers, in rapid succession, the alcohol-related deaths of his grandmother, close family friend, and sister. Once more a stark divide appears before Junior between the Euroamerican and American Indian worlds as he notes that most of his Euroamerican peers have never attended a single funeral. He repeatedly laments the barrier alcohol places between him, his community, and his cultural heritage. Yet, he also notes that many American Indians, including his grandmother, do not drink. Part of coming of age for Junior is learning to negotiate relationships strained by alcohol. Junior comes to appreciate that his father “may have loved me imperfectly, but he loved me as well as he could” (189). Again, Junior's coming of age is marked by the eventual achievement of a syncretic mindset that reconciles the suffering inflicted by his father's drinking along with his father's displays of love.

Transcending Cultural and Cognitive Binaries Through Analysis of Junior's Coming of Age

One of the most significant aspects of Alexie's writing is that it provokes students to confront the simple fact that American Indians did not vanish and are, in fact, participants in modern U.S. society with identities that draw upon a variety of cultural influences. Here *Diary* undoubtedly succeeds. Junior reads and draws comics, plays basketball, and envies his Euroamerican classmates' iPods; he also attends the Spokane powwow, measures risks he takes against the standard of past warriors, and ultimately conceptualizes multiple tribal identities for himself—from being a member of the Spokane tribe to a member of the tribes of “chronic masturbators,” “small-town kids,” “bookworms,” and “tortilla chips-and-salsa lovers” (217). Living on the reservation while attending Reardan, in hopes of attaining a quality education, Junior's coming of age culminates in the realization of a multifaceted, hybrid identity that defies the colonial, binary logic of Euroamerican versus American Indian, civilized versus savage—but, importantly, without collapsing material and historically-rooted differences between groups to which the novel testifies.

Indeed, *Diary* contains numerous explorations of racialized, binary logic—frequently rendered absurd through a young boy's overly literal conception of it—which educators can highlight through analysis of key textual moments and, in the process, work with students to develop their analytical skills. For example, returning briefly to Junior's sense of daily loss and restoration of American Indian identity, of his daily migrations from the reservation to Reardan he reflects: “I woke up on the reservation as an Indian, and somewhere on the road to Reardan, I became something less than Indian. And once I arrived at Reardan, I became something less than less than Indian” (83). Junior hereby offers an extremely narrow, geographically based conception of Indian identity that arguably attaches to colonialist oppositional discourse of Euroamerican versus American Indian and reinforces the association students can have between American Indian identity and living on a reservation (see the survey responses outlined above). However, the idea that an individual might daily lose and regain his cultural identity in this fashion invites readers to interrogate the assumptions behind such thinking, rather than take Junior's assertion at face value. Educators can draw students into such an interrogation by asking them what we can infer, based on this passage and other relevant moments in *Diary*, about Junior's understanding of what it means to be “Indian” and how his understanding compares with their own sense of cultural identity requirements.

Highlighting and Contextualizing the Legacies of Colonization

Diary subtly undercuts the idea—which many students take as the novel's overarching message—that success requires Junior to assimilate into the Euroamerican world outside of the reservation. Significantly, Junior is strongly connected to a close-knit family. Although other members of the community see Junior as a traitor for leaving the reservation, Junior's extended family supports and aids him in achieving this goal. Further, when his grandmother dies, Junior comes to appreciate anew the bonds of his community—which I referenced in part above: “I realized that, sure, Indians were drunk and sad and displaced and crazy and mean, but, dang, we knew how to laugh[...]. Each funeral was a funeral for all of us. We lived and died together” (166). This portrayal of community cohesion, particularly the emphasis on living whole lives together, is in tension with Junior's view—which he continues to articulate after this point—of the reservation as a place where people go only to die. It is Junior's estranged friend Rowdy who comments that Junior is like

nomadic Indians of old and thereby locates an indigenous precedent for Junior's response to his contemporary life as a Spokane boy.

I have found that students often are prone to overlooking the anti-assimilationist aspects of the story, but discussion of them—in conjunction with Junior's previous ideas about geographically rooted or partial American Indian identity—can prompt students to assess how/if the novel ultimately asserts a more syncretic understanding of cultural identity as a part of Junior's coming of age experience. To this end I provide students with a list of questions to consider as they read *Diary* and in preparation for class discussion, including: What is Junior's conception of Indian identity and culture? Does his conception change over the course of the novel and, if so, how and why? These questions set-up an interpretive arc that calls attention to key aspects of Junior's coming of age experience, inclusive of his development of a more nuanced and flexible understanding of his cultural identity. When I ask students to account for some of the shifts in Junior's thinking about American Indian identity, they frequently note that it develops in tandem with his ability to view the Euroamerican world in a more three-dimensional fashion upon firsthand experience. They note, for instance, the literal and figurative absence of fathers in Reardan in comparison to his own father's flawed but genuine efforts to raise him well (153–154).

Of course, fundamentally, *Diary* is a story about growing up in poverty. In our efforts as educators to steer students away from generalized thinking about American Indians, it is equally important that we not misrepresent or gloss over the stark realities of reservation life for many American Indians. As Deborah Miranda commented in an email to the ASAIL listserv, "There is so much negativity in his book because there was so much negativity in the reality of the life he is describing. The brutal truth is that when you are living with severe alcoholism, depression, poverty and racism, you don't have time for or give a damn about your 'cultural heritage.' You care about staying alive, getting out, and just trying to let the scars heal!" Indeed, one might argue that Junior's primary concern is survival—particularly finding a way to escape poverty. Junior observes, "Almost all of the rich and famous brown people are artists[...]. So I draw because I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation"¹² (6). Poverty is the lens through which he sees the world, a lens that generates sweeping and potentially dangerous conclusions, including Junior's repeated assertions that hope resides in the Euroamerican world. However, Alexie does make reference to significant, albeit rarely tribally specific, periods in American Indian history to which we can call students' attention and thereby shift their thinking about social ills on reservations—from a sort of impotent pity to phenomena with specific

historical causes and thus the possibility of being redressed. We can consider identification and explication of these socio-historical traces as another method of reading against the dominant grain of the novel.

One such reference to a critical era in American Indian history occurs in the context of a conversation Junior has with a Euroamerican teacher from the reservation, Mr. P, who recalls being charged as a young teacher with killing the Indian in order to save the child: "We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything" (35). Mr. P attempts to compensate for the generations of children he wounded by marking Junior as an exceptional Indian, deserving of a life apart from the poverty and despair of the reservation. He says, "You're going to find more and more hope the farther and farther you walk away from this sad, sad, sad, reservation" (43). Here students can gain insight into the state of the educational system on the reservation and the original assimilationist aim of reservation schools. With a small amount of historical context regarding American Indian educational history,¹³ students quickly make connections to Mr. P and shift from reading him as an exemplar of white redemption to seeing his presence in the story as a more complex trace of a colonial legacy that explains many of the challenges Junior faces (challenges for which many students in my composition class wanted more context). Further, the exchange between Mr. P and Junior culminates in a moment of cross-cultural understanding and a celebration of individual opportunity—both elements of United States' mythos that mainstream students tend to embrace.

One way that educators can draw students' attention to the socio-historical traces present within *Diary* and, in the process, help students appreciate that Alexie's voice is just one of many American Indian voices is by pairing it with other American Indian authored texts. Most articles on teaching American Indian literature rightly suggest that we assign multiple American Indian-authored texts to disrupt students' conceptions of a homogenous, singular, or static American Indian culture. Indeed, it is safe to say that any time students encounter only one American Indian-authored text there is a tendency for them to read it as representative of all American Indian cultures and experiences.¹⁴ Given that there are 566 federally recognized tribes within the U.S. today, in addition to many unrecognized tribes, such a reading of one text invariably will be a distortion of the complexity and heterogeneity of American Indian life. Although reading two or three texts will not necessarily avoid such distortions—particularly given that students' presuppositions about American Indian life can lead to a disproportionate focus on social ills in many American Indian texts (not just Alexie's)—strategic combinations can do a great deal to help students dispense with monolithic thinking about

American Indians and to read each text in a more nuanced fashion than they might otherwise.

For instance, whereas the context for alcoholism on reservations is not forefronted in *Diary*, and thus can be read by students as a function of a biological predisposition rather than a social ill with specific, historically rooted causes, both N. Scott Momaday's 1969 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) feature protagonists, Abel and Tayo, respectively, who struggle with alcoholism clearly associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and various colonial legacies (e.g., forced assimilation, mixedblood identity, and land loss).¹⁵ These novels also feature strong American Indian characters who are not alcoholics and who, through their deep tribal knowledge, are able to aid the protagonists in their struggles to recover a place within their communities. Importantly—given students' predisposition to seeing traditional American Indian practices as locked in a nineteenth-century stasis and uniformity—what allows these characters to guide the protagonists effectively is their fluid understanding of American Indian culture. As the medicine man Betonie, himself mixedblood, tells Tayo, "long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing" (116). Here Betonie offers Tayo, whose PTSD both Western doctors and a traditional Laguna Pueblo medicine man failed in remedying, the possibility of recovery within an American Indian context. In other words, an ever-evolving view of American Indian cultures can accommodate new experiences like Tayo's wartime trauma, whereas a static understanding cannot. Thus, even on its own terms, *Ceremony* asserts that the vitality of American Indian cultures lies in their capacity for necessary adaptations over time; when paired with *Diary* it contributes powerfully to a much more varied representation of American Indian cultures than most students have encountered previously.

Ultimately, Tayo's and Abel's social and cultural recovery signals their physical and mental recovery as well. Whereas Junior struggles with his decision to leave the reservation and his conviction that he must leave to survive, Abel and Tayo struggle to find ways of assimilating their experiential and ancestral differences as mixedbloods into the heart of tribal life. Consequently, pairing *Diary* with either of these novels communicates the variability of reservations and any one American Indian's view of identity and survival, while calling students' attention to *Diary*'s subtler indications of the causes of alcoholism on the Spokane reservation and the positive aspects of Spokane tribal life.

Another way of both expanding students' critical frame of reference and providing them with useful analytical tools is by incorporating relevant American Indian literary theory and techniques, and engaging debates about Alexie's work. Even if it is not possible to assign many American Indian writers, it is possible to position their work within a large and varied conversation. In composition classes I find it works best to encapsulate a critical concept for students and begin discussion by asking them to identify connections with the assigned texts. I am always prepared to model at least one application by walking them through detailed analysis of a passage from the assigned text that reflects the critical concept I have offered. Afterwards students seem better prepared to do some of this work themselves, and often begin extending the application during discussion of the passage I select. In upper level literature courses, by contrast, it is more feasible to require short presentations in which students present their research on an assigned theory or literary technique and model close readings of literature in which they explicate how the theory or technique applies therein. I include below some of the theories and literary techniques I have incorporated in composition and literature courses:

- Jace Weaver argues that the most defining feature of American Indian literature is a commitment to American Indian community that works in opposition to five centuries of colonization (43). His term "communitism," which combines community with activism, can be used to illuminate such aspects of *Diary* as the Spokane community's response to Ted the Millionaire's misidentification of the beaded dance outfit's tribal origins as not just as a moment of solidarity and comic relief in the midst of grief, but also as an assertion of tribal specificity that reveals the acquisitive nature of his interest in American Indian cultures and the limits of his knowledge of them.
- Gerald Vizenor's "survivance" (survival and resistance). When asked in an interview about survivance, Alexie dismissed the idea—as well as survival alone—as being a low-level goal (Nygren 282). However, his body of work is threaded through with references, explicit and implicit, to multiple forms of survival, from simply persisting to actively resisting colonial threats. For example, his 1993 poetry collection *Old Shirts & New Skins* contains poems about drinking as a means of survival ("Sundays, Too") and as a threat to survival ("The 35th Annual Yakima Nation All-Indian Basketball Tournament"), survival as Crazy Horse's retort to Custer, and statements about U.S. Indian policy being designed to

ensure American Indian destruction, e.g., “*How do you explain the survival of all of us who were never meant to survive?*” (90, emphasis original). Incorporating Vizenor’s concept of survivance into analysis of Alexie’s writing thus provides a productive analytical framework. Indeed, Junior’s coming of age experience as a whole can be read as a form of survivance—not just surviving at a basic level but resisting the racist practices Junior at times internalizes, as when he asserts that “Indians don’t deserve shit” (56), and insisting on a high quality education and socioeconomic well-being.

- Indigenous appropriation and repurposing of colonialist discourse as anticolonial acts, as Deborah Miranda models in her tribal memoir entitled *Bad Indians* and on her blog “Bad NDNs.”¹⁶ By presenting those who were labeled “bad Indians” by Europeans and Euroamericans as models she can emulate today in the interest of her own survival and cultural recovery, Miranda upends the Eurocentric and colonialist norms behind the original negative diagnosis. In her “Novena to Bad Indians,” for example, she writes, “Oh unholy pagans who refused to convert, oh pagans who converted, oh pagans who recanted, oh converts who survived, hear our supplication: make us in your image, grant us your pride. Ancestors, illuminate the dark civilization we endure. Teach us to love untamed, inspire us to break rules, remind us of your brutal wisdom learned so dearly: Even dead Indians are never good enough” (99). She presents her pagan ancestors (who, by the standards of the Spanish missionaries who attempted to convert them forcibly, were “bad Indians”), as well as surviving converts, as guides who can illuminate her present experience and give her courage to resist oppressive norms by breaking rules. Notably, although a resistant paganism threads throughout this passage, the portrait Miranda paints of this group of ancestors as they interacted with Catholicism is highly variable. To be among the wise, prideful, resistant group of California Indians Miranda invokes for guidance, and likens to God through her request to be created in their image, does not require one “correct” response to Catholicism.

Pairing “Novena to Bad Indians” with *Diary* can help call attention to the ways in which Alexie invokes and satirizes assimilationist discourses and non-Native representations of American Indians, from the educational policies Mr. P regrets perpetuating to the bright red American Indian mascot wearing a single feather who is

the only American Indian at Reardan besides Junior (56). Throughout *Diary*, Alexie exposes the reductive logic of stereotypes. Junior’s early days at Reardan, for instance, contain numerous illustrations of the influence of colonialist logic on Euroamerican perceptions of American Indians. Initially Junior suffers the twinned shame of being ignored or called such racist names as “chief,” “tonto,” and “squaw boy”—names derived from old Westerns. Junior’s own comparison of himself as a star basketball player to a warrior, illustrated in a cartoon as including a feathered headdress, a loin cloth, and a widely aggressive stance, is just one indication that that his emergent sense of identity as a Spokane boy in a nearly all-Euroamerican school involves a dialectical relationship with stereotypical expectations about American Indian identity.

Further Pedagogical Applications

Although my primary focus in this article has been on teaching Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and the particular opportunities and challenges it poses, many of the pedagogical techniques I offer can be adapted for teaching many works of American Indian literature, and Multiethnic American Literature more generally, in classrooms where students have little prior exposure to the cultures, histories, and experiences showcased therein. Although my experience teaching *Diary* has been in composition classes, my techniques are relevant to and can be developed in more advanced ways for the literature classroom. Targeted close reading practices not only help students develop their analytical skills but prompt them to confront the subtleties of what the text itself argues, thereby directing their attention away from a surface level response that may say more about their presuppositions than the text itself. Incorporating relevant contextual content that students may not have been exposed to in their prior educations, minimizing the risk of one minority voice being read as representative by selecting complementary texts from the same cultural group, drawing upon internet resources in the interest of time and students’ responsiveness to multimedia content, and using relevant cultural criticism and literary theory, also are effective techniques for teaching a range of Multiethnic American literary texts.

As many colleges and universities embrace a “learner-centered,” rather than “teacher-centered,” approach to education, educators frequently are advised not to lead by offering information but instead to mentor students into

uncovering what they already know. I concur that students should be active agents in their own learning and that such agency can be activated by empowering them, on the front end, to see themselves as having valid and productive perspectives to offer. Unfortunately, however, when it comes to teaching courses on American Indian literatures, histories, or cultures, the majority of students in U.S. classrooms (especially at what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms HWCUs, or Historically White Colleges and Universities) have little accurate contextual knowledge. Withholding cultural and historical context, or refraining from exposing fallacious stereotypes, thus involves unnecessary risks and dangers. Because of how widespread and powerful such stereotypes and misunderstandings about American Indians are, once students voice these ideas and are echoed by peers, the ideas can take on a truth status that “student-centered” educators can be caught on their heels addressing. Moreover, in a culture in which facts increasingly are taken to be subjective (as in the media discussions of political debates in which factions operate with competing “facts” that are left to stand as such), many freshman and sophomores operating at a binary level of cognition can feel justified in holding fast to their presuppositions, even when presented with contradictory evidence. For this reason, offering selected contextual information and targeted reading practices for engaging primary texts, such as those I model above, are vital pedagogical tools that must not be discarded in tandem with the adoption of student-centered learning practices—lest we perpetuate colonialist violence in the classroom.

Appendix A: Classroom Survey of Students' Background Knowledge Concerning American Indian Peoples, Cultures and Histories

200H Survey (Honors Composition)—Anonymous

Your cultural/ethnic identity: _____

1. Prior to reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, how would you characterize your experience/knowledge of American Indian cultures? Be as specific and detailed as possible (commenting on such things, as relevant, as your direct interactions with American Indian peoples, time spent on tribal lands, books read, etc.).

2. Where do your impressions of American Indians come from? Approximate using percentages next to each of the items below (e.g., Hollywood films 50 percent, School 20 percent etc.).

- Hollywood Films
- School
- Interactions with American Indians
- Family Stories
- Other: please specify: _____

- What characteristics must a person have in order to identify as American Indian?
- How many federally recognized American Indian tribes are there in the United States today?
 - 3
 - 58
 - 100
 - 566
 - 987
- As of the 2010 U.S. census, approximately how many people identified solely as American Indian/Alaska Native?
 - zero
 - 1,000–2,000
 - 5,000–10,000
 - 1 million
 - 3 million
- As of the 2010 U.S. census, approximately how many people identified as American Indian/Alaska Native in combination with one or more other races?
 - 10,000
 - 500,000
 - 2 million
 - 5 million
- How would you characterize some of the defining features of American Indian life today?
- Identify one significant moment in American Indian history.
- Identify one U.S. policy designed to assimilate American Indians into the mainstream.
- What are reservations?
- What impressions do you have of American Indians and reservations based on your reading of *Diary* so far?
- Do you like *Diary*? Why/why not?
- What questions has *Diary* raised for you so far? What do you want to know more about?

Notes

- See also Wahpeconiah and Zitzer-Comfort.
- See Baxter Magolda, King, Taylor, and Wakefield's analysis of the results of the Wabash National Study concerning authority dependence in college students. I cite here only the general trend the study documents rather than commenting on precise percentages due to the authors' concluding cautionary statement about the limitations of the survey sample.
- For a discussion of teaching Alexie in classrooms that contain a sizable number of American Indian students, see Berglund.
- Students were informed verbally and on the survey itself that I was conducting research on teaching *Diary* and that the survey results might be cited in my future publications. They were asked to complete the survey, without credit or penalty, during class time. All survey responses were anonymous.
- Diary* is also winner of: the 2008 Boston-Globe Horn Book Award, the 2008 American Indian Library Association Youth Literature Award, the 2009 International Book on Books for Young People Sweden Peter Pan Prize, and the 2010 California Young Reader Medal. It was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in 2007.
- See the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report of August 29, 2008.
- See L. Lee Knepfelkamp, Patricia M. King, and Strohm Kitchener for discussion of the development from binary to syncretic thinking throughout most students' four years in college.
- <http://nativeappropriations.com/>.
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10. I find that calling attention to the fact that students from the dominant culture may not be the privileged audience for texts, and thus must do the work to understand the culture featured in these texts—and accept that there may be certain things they cannot understand—has a significant impact on students' cross-cultural competencies and understandings of alignments between race and socioeconomic power.

11. Reprinted with permission from Deborah Miranda.

12. Reprinted with permission from Deborah Miranda.

13. After students have had some time to engage with the novel, I provide them with a two-page handout that contains overviews of key eras in American Indian history, inclusive of the basic aims, scope, and duration of the boarding school system. I also show them clips from the documentary *Our Spirits Don't Speak English*, which contains testimonials from former boarding school students.

14. This issue of representation also tends to occur when we assign only one text from another underrepresented cultural group.

15. Following Louis Owens and other American Indian Studies scholars, I use the term "mixedblood" to refer to peoples of both American Indian and non-American Indian descent.

16. <http://badndns.blogspot.com/>.

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