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Superheroes Do Not Live on the Rez: The Nomadic Identity for Native Indian Young Adults in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

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I. Introduction

First appearing in 1941, Captain America stands as a symbolic figure in popular culture, representing American ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, and individualism, along with Superman. While Superman, who is an alien from another planet, has inherent superhuman abilities and disguises his identity as a journalist named Clark Kent in a fictional city Metropolis, Captain America is intentionally made through a scientific experiment by the government, and his physical ability is way better than ordinary humans, yet weaker and less glamorous than other superheroes. While Superman has his alter ego Kent to save the world and keep his secret identity, Captain America has no secret. He is a (super) soldier working for the government, and everything about him — name, hometown, height, and family history — is officially documented. Even though his body is dramatically changed by the super-serum, he is still the patriotic Steve Rogers who always wanted to serve the country. Despite blond hair and blue eyes, which is a perfect image of the white American male figure, Steve Rogers used to be a short, weak man living in poor Brooklyn, bullied every day. Probably, for many young comic book readers, rather than Superman, Captain America would be felt as a much more accessible, dreamable, and reachable superhero. His costume and shield, which are colored red, white, and blue, and patterned with stars and stripes, show for what he stands — America itself. Therefore, his existence itself becomes a threat and statement of and by the United States, and also as Jason Dittmer analyzes, he is "both a representative of the idealized American nation and […] a defender of the American status quo" (627).

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Thirty-three years later, after Captain America finds out that the American government is corrupted and abused by terrorists, he loses his faith in American values, abandons his superhero identity, and becomes a vigilante named Nomad. Instead of the patriotic costume, he wears a black suit and a mask to hide his identity and fight against who and what he did not when he used to be Captain America. Refusing to take orders from the U.S. government, Nomad, which is Captain America's alternative identity, is rather defiant, independent, secretive, anonymous, and placeless. Steve Rogers later returns as Captain America after the government's apology, yet Nomad remains as one of the most distinctive changes of Captain America (Ryan 68). In this essay, the concept of Nomad, an alternative identity of Captain America, is a starting point for my analysis of Native American author Sherman Alexie's 2007 first young adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (in this essay, from now on, I will call the novel *The Diary*).

In Alexie's novel, a young autobiographical boy narrator named Arnold Spirit Jr., who is a Spokane Indian living on the reservation, transfers from Indian school Wellpinit to white Reardan, searching for hope and a better future. Because Junior is going to a white school, he is considered a traitor by his Indian neighbors on the reservation and an alien to his white schoolmates at Reardan. While he struggles to find his identity not only as an Indian boy but also as an American, at the very end of the novel, his friend Rowdy—who had turned against him for part of the story—tells him that he is like the old-time Indians who are nomadic, searching for food and other things. The final resolution implies rich, complicated ideas, and Alexie has been argued with about his ideas on Native American literature, on education for young Indians, and on new Indian identity. According to Zygmunt Bauman, nomadism (or nomadic features in the modern era) is one of the characteristics of modern, Western settlers (14). Fluid, mobile, nomadic, or whatsoever it may be called, this feature of nomads defines modern people from people in the pre-modern era. From popular culture and scholarly fields, the idea of nomads and nomadism has been regarded as a possible, alternative form of resistance, to reject government authority and many other conventional norms that oppress people. I will argue that along with this idea of an alternative superhero—from Captain America to Nomad—Alexie alludes to the idea that an "old-time nomad" (*The Diary* 230) is a new, alternative, desirable identity for young Native Americans that they should pursue, just as Nomad seems to be a more accessible Modern superhero. *The Diary* is a guideline written by Alexie to

deal with and answer the question how becoming nomadic gives a vision and path for hope to the new Native Indian generation, saying that in order to get that hope, they need to leave the reservation. For Alexie, it is not a simple leaving. He implies that people should be keeping home in their mind and heading towards better possibilities. Alexie never says that people should abandon their traditional values and blindly long for the white world. In the next chapter, I will explain how Alexie's complicated vision is rhetorically explained through the young protagonist, Junior, living on the reservation and how Junior's understanding of his identity is useful and has potential for young readers, especially those who are of Native American background and who are struggling for their identity as Indian.

Ⅱ. Nomad, Exile, Immigrant: American Indian Identities

On the opening page, Alexie dedicates this book to his two towns, Indian and white: "For Wellpinit and Reardan, my hometowns." As an autobiographical fiction and a family memoir, *The Diary* has many of Alexie's personal stories, and these two towns are the real places where Alexie had been (qtd. in Kertzer 59). On the next page, Alexie quotes a line by W. B. Yeats: "There is another world, but it is in this one" (59). Yeats, one of the great literary figures in the Western canon, is summoned by Alexie for many reasons. As Alexie was living in the two different worlds of the Indians and whites, Yeats also was involved and dwelling in two worlds of Ireland and the British Empire. Moreover, as a canonical figure in Western literature, Yeats being called upon signifies Alexie's involvement in the Western literary world as well as in the Native Indian world. With two epigraphs, Alexie shows that he is going to deal with the two worlds of the whites and the Indians, on the personal level and on the literary level.

Alexie has a much more liberal idea on the relationship between the Native American tradition and the dominant white values. Or, he is much more skillful in dealing with the two. While some hardcore traditionalists accuse him of being a conformist, his idea on the past/history is more critical than any traditional writers such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Simon Ortiz, and his vision on the future is more active and hopeful for the young generation. On the issue of the genocide and trauma of the Native American history, he clearly asserts that the past is a piece of their identity. In

an interview with Åse Nygren in 2005, he explained his idea on Indian history and identity:

> The phrase I've also used is "blood memory." I think the strongest parallel in my mind has always been the Jewish people and the Holocaust. Certainly, their oppression has been constant for 1900 years longer, but the fact is that you cannot separate our identity from our pain. At some point it becomes primarily our identity. The whole idea of authenticity—"How Indian are you?"—is the most direct result of the fact that we don't know what an American Indian identity is. There is no measure anymore. There is no way of knowing, except perhaps through our pain. And so, we're lost. We're always wandering. (157)

His idea on the history and trauma is no different from that of other traditional writers. However, on the matter of the Indian identity, he denies that the sorrowful history should be part of the communal identity. Rather than mourning about how deeply they have been hurt, he is more interested in constructing and establishing a better future, a hopeful place for an individual identity, calling the Indians "immigrants." In the same interview, he says:

> It's so amazing that the indigenous people of the United States have become the most immigrant group. The process is slowly changing. My generation and the next generation—we are immigrants! I am an immigrant into the United States, and now my children are fully assimilated. (157)

His idea on the immigrants as the Indians asserts that, just as any other immigrant groups and minorities in the United States, we—the Native Americans—are capable of achieving what those minorities have achieved. By making the Indians as one of many immigrant groups in America, Alexie seems to give a brand new departure for them. As he acknowledges and admits, the Indian people are too damaged to go all over it again. The fresh start and new identity holding the past yet heading for a better future are needed, and by calling them immigrants, Alexie is giving a possible identity that has much more potential than by being the same old Indians, because the contemporary as well as traditional Indian identity is formed under ideas damaged too greatly, such as self-hate or lack of conviction. In a 2010

interview with Joshua B. Nelson, Alexie points out that "what 'Indian' can be and mean," the idea of questioning and searching for the Indian identity is so shattered and burdensome that it only "damages Indians" ("Humor Is" 40). When even questioning their identity, then, being assimilated is not a negative idea for him—it is another possible step to uplift the whole Indian people, or save them from the hard question of identity. He makes this idea clear in his writing through the voice of a character named Corliss in "The Search Engine," a story in a collection of his short stories, *Ten Little Indians*:

> She [Corliss] knew Indians were obsessed with authenticity. Colonized, genocided, exiled, Indians formed their identities by questioning the identities of other Indians. Self-hating, self-doubting, Indians turned their tribes into nationalistic sects. But who could blame us our madness? Corliss thought. We are people exiled by other exiles, by Puritans, Pilgrims, Protestants, and all of those other crazy white people thrown out of a crazier Europe. We who were once indigenous to this land must immigrate into its culture. I was born one mile south and raised one mile north on the Spokane River where the very first Spokane Indian was ever born, and I somehow feel like a nomad. (40)

In this passage, Alexie shows his view on American history and his vision for the future at the same time. He is critical and clinical on what has been done and what happened to the land and to people on the land, and at the same time, he raises his voice that it is natural to feel disenfranchised and uprooted—because that is what the U.S. government had done to the Native people and what these Natives are supposed to be—yet, that should not be all that is left to the indigenous people. By immigrating into American culture, the future generation of Native Indians will be able to dream the American Dream, which is something they have felt is not theirs. By noting Corliss's childhood background, which is also autobiographical, Alexie hints that it is natural to feel oneself a nomad. Forced to drift, rootless is what they have become, yet the Indian people cannot let the past encroach on their potential.

Through Corliss's contemplation, Alexie critiques the ideas of traditional, conservative nationalists who are holding onto the past and will never let go of it, its pain and its trauma. For Alexie, the question of Indian authenticity and the issue of Indian identity should be reexamined and questioned again, because the identity has too many problems and it does not help the new

generation get a better chance. Madness, as Corliss points out, is a mental and psychological issue that resides in the Indian people and may be the only thing the Indians have power over. It is a personal and individual issue that Indian people can change. By giving Indians an issue they can actively involve themselves in, Alexie tries to arrange a place where they can raise a hand for a brighter future. This is not what nationalist writers have done for their readers. Experts on describing the past and problems, yet many of them failed to give an active and plausible solution for readers. Unlike those writers, Alexie is providing a strong sense of hope and identity through his work.

In *The Diary*, the narrator does not reveal his name until page ten when he is being called by his mother when they have to kill his pet because they do not have money to take him to the vet. On the very first page, from the start, readers do not know how to call him and have to listen to what the narrator says about his physical illness and extraordinary body condition. Starting his story, saying, "I was born with water on the brain" (1), the protagonist abruptly leads his story without any detailed information, such as what readers should call the narrator, or is it he or she, and this is nothing like the traditional storytelling of the Creation myth of the Native Indian tribe about the water, the spider, and women creators from Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) or Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). While there is not enough information and readers have to rely on the narrator's story only, after the very first statement, he or she drops his first statement saying: "Okay, so that's not exactly true" (1).

The playful voice of a young narrator would make young readers feel more comfortable with and more interested in this story, and at the same time, what the narrator describes of the poor, harsh environment on the Indian reservation grows in intensity when it is filtered through a description of his medical treatment, which is conducted by a white doctor, or how poorly he was treated because he was a poor kid living on the poor reservation. After fully describing his physical abnormalities, he later says that he is fourteen years old and constantly being called a retard. Somehow he has survived, though with an enormous head, and he also has seizures, a stutter, and a lisp, and all of these unique characteristics make him easy prey for other kids in the neighborhood. So rather than playing outside, he chooses to stay home, the great indoors being much safer for him. Alone, he draws cartoons. He describes how desperate a boy he is, who just "want[s] to talk to the world" and who wants "to escape the reservation" (6). In a way, he is just a typical boy who wants to be important, as many young narrators do in other young adult novels; yet, since he happens

to be an Indian, he is destined to suffer more difficulties and severe poverty in life than any other kids. What he knows best is poverty and his own limit of possibilities because he is "really just a poor-ass reservation kid living with his poor-ass family on the poor-ass Spokane Indian Reservation" (7).

His perception of reality is so straightforward that only an innocent boy like Junior is capable of doing that, and his critique of the poor life of an Indian family on the reservation is not just his own personal surroundings but also something that the whole Indian people are now facing in the U.S., recognition of how badly they are treated. Junior's description of poverty in their own family is closely connected to the reservation Indians and then to white society, which does not care about their dreams and does not want to give them any chance to be more than poor. Under these circumstances, a young reservation Indian like Junior cannot dream his own future. Not only because he is bullied by other Indian kids, but also because the social structure stops him from dreaming and becoming someone important. He is systematically and institutionally banned from being important because he is an Indian boy.

Ⅲ. Superheroes Do Not Live on the Rez

Nothing but a best friend gives Junior a lesson on being better and larger, not even comic books—though that is how and why the two Indian boys, Junior and Rowdy, become friends. They seem an odd combination, for Rowdy is a strong, tough kid and Junior is considered a loser, yet both of the young Indian kids feel that they are "a zero on the rez" (16), and that is the common idea they share and the emotional link that connects both tightly. Rowdy and Junior read comic books, yet there are no superheroes, because they already know that they cannot be a superhero like Superman or Captain America, and there is of course no Indian superhero as cool as Superman or Captain America with the title role in a comic book. There are some Native Indian superheroes, yet they always play a minor role to help the main superhero, and none of Indian superhero characters play even a sidekick role. In order not to be disappointed, not to remind them of their real life as Indians who will never play a big role, they do not read "the cool superhero ones like *Daredevil* or *X-Men*." They only read "the goofy old ones, like *Richie Rich* and *Archie* and *Casper the Friendly Ghost*. Kid stuff" (22). Even though they are "goofy dreamer[s]" (23), they dare not read cool superhero comic books and dream of

being like one of them. In reading only comic books for kids, they seem to be trying to skip or ignore the adolescence they are about to face.

However, their paths seem to diverge at one point where Junior leaves the reservation. When he finds out that his textbook used to belong to his mother and the book is over thirty years old—because the Indian school on the reservation does not have a sufficient budget to afford a new book, students get books from their seniors and it has been a sad tradition—he gets angry and throws the book at the head of a white teacher, Mr. P. After Junior is suspended, Mr. P persuades him to leave the reservation, for education on the reservation kills the Indians as it kills Indian culture. He gives a harsh critique not only of the white government but also of the Indians who were passive on their issues. Internalizing the white education that tries to kill the Indian spirit, Indian people on the reservation only know how to give up, and they are "all defeated" and the Indian people will end up being killed (42). Mr. P's confession is both the whistleblowing of a white educator sent by the government and self-criticism of Alexie against the Indians who give up everything and are waiting only to vanish.

Leaving the reservation is described as the only hope, because the reservation is too poor and devastated to offer hope. No hope is offered by leaving one reservation and moving to another—as Junior's big sister Mary shows. She left the reservation where her family lives and moved to another reservation in Montana with her new husband, yet she failed to escape poverty, alcoholism, and many other dangers that await Indians. She burns to death while drunken and sleeping, and many other characters in the novel meet the same fate. Junior's grandmother is fatally run over by a drunken Indian driver. Eugene, Junior's father-like male figure, is fatally shot by his drunken friend Bobby, and Bobby kills himself because he can no longer endure himself as an alcoholic. Because of "the freaking booze" (200), the Indians on the reservations will all die out. In order not to repeat the tragedy, Junior has to leave. If he stays on the reservation, he will be the same loser in the same place forever. Trapped in the present and haunted by the ghost of the past, the Indian people cannot move on and get a better chance. In Alexie's 1993 collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the old Indian way of thinking is described as killing the people:

> *There are things you should learn* [as an Indian]. Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one

> step in front of you. […] See, it is always now. That's what Indian time is. The past, the future, all of it is wrapped up in the now. That's how it is. *We are trapped in the now.* (21–22, emphases original)

> How much do we remember of what hurts us most? I've been thinking about pain, how each of us constructs our past to justify what we feel now. How each successive pain distorts the preceding. (196)

Too damaged already, no Indian could possibly have a better future on the reservation. Leaving the reservation and leaving the old Indian way of thinking offers people the possibility to survive. Yet, other Indians, except for Junior, do not realize it. As Junior cries after beating Wellpinit, this young boy's idea of the reservation directly opens up how the reservation is killing people. Reservations are "prisons" (Alexie, *The Diary* 216) and "death camps" (217), yet people do not realize what this young boy knows. Alexie might have been criticized because of this, yet his view of life on the reservation is always sympathetic. Also, it is temporary leaving. Though Alexie suggests that people should leave the reservation, he does not say that people should leave all the good traditional values behind and become completely white. When people leave the reservation, they are leaving the devastating, hopeless place, but not leaving their home. In leaving, one is not necessarily abandoning one's whole family or whole identity as an Indian. Alexie's leaving includes the idea of coming back. Or, it is not leaving home but leaving 'with' home. As Nelson points out, Alexie's leaving the reservation is always "a roundtrip package" ("Fight as Flight" 462).

Again, Alexie's leaving does not promise a bright future and success. As Junior suffers a lot to be a member of Reardan, he has to go through many difficulties to balance his identity as a reservation Indian with his identity as an Indian attending a white school. Even though Junior successfully fits in at Reardan, this does not simply guarantee that he will have a bright future. Yet, it gives a possibility of hope because the reservation is too damaged and hopeless. Junior instantly recognizes that Mr. P's suggestion of leaving the reservation is too much a burden to a young kid like him. "[C]arrying the burden of [the Indian] race," Junior jokes that he will "get a bad back" (Alexie, *The Diary* 43), yet he still keeps his hope and refuses to give up, and he decides to go to the white school Reardan, twenty-two miles away from the reservation.

Junior's choice of going to Reardan shows how the Indians should act for a

better future. Just going to any old white school is not the issue. There are two other white schools, Hunters and Springdale, and they are on the reservation, but Junior decides to go to Reardan, a rich, small white town. The whole point here, as Alexie points out, is to get off the reservation, not to get assimilated to any white values. Small but decent, Reardan offers plenty of potential for a young kid like Junior. He describes his decision is "to find *something*" (46, emphasis original). Yet, he also immediately acknowledges that this will be seen as a betrayal to his tribal members, and they would dislike what Junior does. Though Junior knows that leaving is the best decision for his future, he has to count the cost of his plan—he loses his best friend Rowdy, becomes a traitor to tribal members, and suffers the question of his identity as an Indian alien in a white school.

When Junior talks to Rowdy for the first time about his plan of leaving, Rowdy ignores him and does not want to see his seriousness. The most important and distinctive difference between the two is that Junior does not hate anything. As Junior describes: "I was scared of those Reardan kids, and maybe I was scared of hope, too, but Rowdy absolutely hated all of it" (51). Through the whole narrative, Junior, the narrator of this novel, constantly expresses his weakness, fear, nervousness, fragility, anger, and many other negative feelings, yet he never hated anything or anybody. Even when he smashed Mr. P's nose, he was angry at the pessimistic, poor situation on the reservation, not at his white teacher. Hatred is not for Junior. He knows how to express his anger—he has his own ritual of "my grieving ceremony" through drawing and redrawing, writing and rewriting (178). However, Rowdy does not seem to have his own grieving ceremony ritual. Abused by his parents, Rowdy only learns how to hurt other people, how to hate others, and how to give up. By contrast, Junior shows that people develop a feeling of hatred when they think there is nothing they can do about the matter, so they give up and then hate giving up. Hate is the dead end, the last emotion for those who give up: Hate and hope are at the opposite poles.

Getting off the reservation and getting into a white world are the last two things that a traditionalist Indian would ever do. However, as Junior's father says, it is the thing only a brave warrior could do. Alexie suggests that neither assimilating nor giving up is the choice faced by a real Indian, but the real thing to be an Indian is to have a noble spirit. As he fully described how the Indians are slowly dying on the reservation and are into the freedom of exhaustion, Junior is on his way as a warrior. He knows that "it will be an adventure"

(49) when he tries to persuade Rowdy to go to Reardan with him. This idea of leaving the reservation is an inevitable step toward being a real Indian with a better future and real hope, making Junior a warrior. Think of his previous position on the reservation as a retard and "the most available loser" (17), and the attentive reader will see that Junior has been already changed in that he now thinks of his action of leaving as an adventure of a warrior as soon as he is off the reservation. Leaving equals being a warrior, for Junior. When he finds out that Mary had married and was living in a different state, he is glad to know that her "spirit hadn't been killed" (91). Junior keeps thinking,

> She hadn't given up. This reservation had tried to suffocate her, had kept her trapped in a basement, and now she was out roaming the huge grassy fields of Montana.
>
> How cool!
>
> I felt inspired. […] But I thought we were being warriors, you know? And a warrior isn't afraid of confrontation. (91)

Junior imagines his sister becoming a nomad, roaming the huge grassy fields of Montana, yet, this turns out to be only his imagination. On another reservation, she could not find a job because she has no experience and because she is just another poor Indian woman with a gambler husband, a woman who can do little better than work as a waitress in a poor reservation restaurant. Since Junior does not know until Mary dies in a fire that she was just escaping 'this' reservation and moving to 'that' reservation, he thinks that they are warriors. He also thinks that they are "traveling freak[s]" (98), which is another expression for a nomad. Still, this scene shows how Junior thinks of being a warrior and how he has his own definition of becoming a warrior. A warrior cannot give up. A warrior has to leave the reservation that constantly tries to trap and suffocate one. A warrior is not afraid of confrontation. After adopting the mindset of a warrior, Junior keeps to his adventure to become a warrior. After leaving the reservation, as if he is a hero in a great epic, a hero who has just begun his heroic journey to prove himself, Junior confronts minor and major challenges at Reardan. In the white world, he not only faces challenges but also learns lessons, and these are described in a humorous way.

When a big, white kid named Roger punches him and insults him for being an Indian, Junior, not yet informed and educated by the white rule, follows the Indian way of fighting as a warrior, but white kids including Roger

get scared and do not understand Junior's reaction. When Roger calls him an animal, Junior "[feels] brave all of a sudden" (65). Rather than being insulted, this, being called an animal, gives Junior a sense of victory, because he himself now feels that he is "no longer a human target" (65). Being bullied by Indian kids, he did not have many chances to behave as a warrior on the reservation. Yet, he is fully capable of doing that in Reardan and it even scares white kids. Junior says: "I had followed the rules of fighting. I had behaved exactly the way I was supposed to behave" (65). By getting off the reservation, Junior gets a chance to feel he is no more a loser who deserves to be bullied. In Reardan, he may be an alien, Indian, and outsider, yet his physical disabilities do not make him different, because his racial identity as an Indian is the biggest issue for the white students.

In a way, this does not seem particularly optimistic, for his identity and agency as an Indian takes away his individual, physical characteristics. However, this is a new chance for him to be more than a weak Indian kid on the poor reservation. As he says, "Maybe I was telling the world that I was no longer a human target" (65). This is his first statement and declaration that he is more than easy prey. The feeling does not last long when he deals with the identity issues, yet it gives him a sense of triumph, which he had never felt when he was on the reservation. This, a sense of triumph, is a critical and complicated issue for Alexie. In a 1998 article, he explained how this fiction was depicting his own childhood experiences with a distance: "[B]ecause I didn't think anybody would believe it . . . I didn't want to write a triumphant, American dream book that mythologised me" (Jaggi). Yet, this triumph becomes, seemingly, a rather complicated issue in this work. He once said: "Survival is a low hope. I don't want just survival, or 'survivance.' I want triumph!" (Nygren 156). As he emphasizes, he is not much interested in the idea of survival, which is a major theme to many traditional Indian authors, but in that of triumph. According to Alexie, survival is not enough for the Indians who seek a better future for themselves and for the next generation. Survival proves they are not dead, physically, and they need triumph to prove they are one of the winners as white people are. As Junior feels himself as a loser, when he first goes to Reardan, he not only thinks of himself as a loser, but his father, his family, and his whole world as losers (*The Diary* 55). His loser mentality is the ultimate outcome that has been running through the tribes from generation to generation in the Indian community, and his low self-awareness should be replaced, and he should be empowered better than a loser. In *The Diary*, Alexie tries to give what

triumph is to this young protagonist, as he wishes; however, at the same time, he clearly knows that it is hard to get triumph for the Indians, especially by one who has just transferred from the poor reservation. Junior will gradually suffer as the only Indian in a white school, yet Alexie hints that there are other ways that Junior is able to feel triumph and how leaving the reservation leads Junior to achieve triumph—which is a high hope.

While poverty continuously makes him suffer, Junior finds another way to be important. When he was into drawing cartoons back on the reservation, he was alone, or with Rowdy, and indulged himself in being a loser. Drawing gives him imagination yet it does not offer him a feeling of triumph or any feeling near that. However, as he becomes a member of the basketball team in Reardan, competing with Roger, he feels like a member of the team, and at the moment when Roger offers his fist and they bump fists together, he feels he is a warrior, not because he finally made a white friend but because he fought well (141). This feeling of triumph quickly vanishes on the very next page, when he realizes that his first game is against his old school Wellpinit. Alexie gives a moment of triumph to the protagonist, yet shortly after, he makes him face a bigger challenge, mainly of dealing with his identity as an Indian, because every small triumph for one who has left the reservation would make him face his guilt and burden that he has betrayed his own people.

Ⅳ. Becoming a Warrior and a Nomad

The ultimate triumph for Junior lies in reclaiming his wholeness as an Indian boy, not only in a white school but also on the Spokane Indian reservation. This includes being a warrior, being a nomad, and being a member of both white and Indian worlds. Leaving the reservation is only the beginning of the whole adventure, yet it means so much for an Indian boy, for he struggles before, during, and after the leaving. Alexie shows that leaving the reservation does not mean abandoning his identity as an Indian. As Gordy, Junior's new white geek friend in Reardan points out, Junior still lives on the reservation with his parents and his grandmother. He is just going to school in Reardan (131). Leaving the reservation means, for Alexie, having two identities, which would blend with one another in the end. As the title suggests, Junior feels he is a part-time Indian in both white and Indian towns, saying:

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

He struggles in both worlds, yet it is a natural outcome, for he chose to be part of both worlds. Junior's narration shows that he is not struggling to be fully assimilated in one world but struggling to belong to both. Other kids on the reservation call him an apple (131), contemptuously, yet this being red outside and white inside is actually what Junior has to achieve—he has to have two identities and to belong to two worlds. Junior has learned to be both ever since his name was called as Junior. When he explains to Penelope, his white female friend, on whom he has a crush, why he is Junior on the reservation and Arnold in Reardan, he says:

> My full name is Arnold Spirit Jr. But nobody calls me that. Everybody calls me Junior. Well, every other Indian calls me Junior.
>
> "My name is Junior," I said. "And my name is Arnold. It's Junior and Arnold. I'm both."
>
> I felt like two different people inside of one body.
>
> No, I felt like a magician slicing myself in half, with Junior living on the north side of the Spokane River and Arnold living on the south. (60–61)

Being both Junior and Arnold at the same time does not make him confused. Rather, he needs to explain why to Penelope, because white people—at least one in Reardan—do not understand why he has two names. White people living in a whole white world have only one name and they do not have this complicated identity issue. In a way, it is completely an Indian's problem. However, this idea and condition of twoness is not a problem to Junior. As he already knows and understands that he has two names, he would figure out how to belong to both worlds, or so Alexie hints. Young Indians naturally want a better future, hope, more than survival, yet Alexie comforts his young readers only through Gordy's comment that "life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community" (132). Junior's self-realization and search for hope would be unavoidably troubled, because

leaving the reservation and heading for a better future—mostly for a white world—are too much of a burden for a young boy who happens to be an Indian on a poor reservation. Gordy enlightens Junior that it is just a common, natural matter, of course, not only because he is an Indian living in white America but also because he is a young boy who wants to be a better person in the future.

Slowly and gradually, Junior learns how to be Arnold and Junior between two worlds. When he plays the basketball against Wellpinit, he once feels that he is a traitor, as other Indian kids call him, "one of those Indian scouts who led the U.S. Cavalry against other Indians" (182). And then, he instantly rejects the idea that dominates others' thinking. He is not betraying his own tribe, and he is not "playing for the white people," as if he were thinking that he only wanted to win and beat his friend Rowdy (182–83). Again, he is just a young boy wanting to win a game, desperate to win and to prove he is a good player. At the same time, he understands that even if he takes a minor role in the game, it is part of being a warrior (186). When playing the game, Junior marks and blocks Rowdy so that he cannot score a goal. Rowdy is shocked that Junior is playing with the white players, and he thinks that Junior is betraying the tribe, like an Indian scout. This game is the Indians vs. the whites, for Rowdy, and it is simply rivals vs. my team, for Junior.

The basketball game between Wellpinit and Reardan, where Junior's two worlds are, is just one of many challenges for a boy. Even before thinking of Indianness or whiteness, for Junior, it is all about his individual triumph. As he comments on the game: "We were all boys desperate to be men, and this game would be a huge moment in our transition" (187) and readers should remind themselves that this story is about a boy growing up, as many other young adult fictional works show. He simply happens to be an Indian boy who happens to live on an Indian reservation. There is some part that the whole ideology of race does not fully operate. Again, the basketball game is one of Junior's chances to be a warrior in an Indian way and a winner in a white way. Rowdy also might understand that it is one way of being a superhero, the Indian Superman, yet he thinks that he is "the only Indian Superman" (192). Because Rowdy is a boss over kids on the reservation, he cannot think of the possibility that there could be other superheroes, and this makes him hurt more painfully when the Wellpinit Redskins lose. Rather than giving him too much comfort, for both Rowdy and Junior, Alexie shows that playing a game, scoring, and winning is part of young boys who are growing up. Winning

or not, the game itself is considered to be one of many ways of becoming a superhero, along with "fighting for truth, justice, and the Native American way," as Junior puts it as how to become a superhero trio with him, Rowdy, and Gordy (131).

As Junior realizes right after winning, however, it was not a fair game at all. Rich white kids and poor Indian kids could not have a fair start, fair game, and fair result. Nevertheless, it is Junior's epiphany when he finally realizes who he really is:

> I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms.
>
> And the tribe of cartoonists.
>
> […]
>
> And the tribe of boys who really missed their best friends.
>
> It was a huge realization.
>
> And that's when I knew that I was going to be okay. (217)

He realizes that he completely belongs to two worlds. Besides, he also realizes that more than racial identity, there are many pieces holding him together as a whole. Having to identities is the biggest issue for him, yet Junior discovers that there are more possibilities, more identities, more hopes, and more.

V. Two Identities, Two Hearts, and Alexie's Declaration

As a member of an Indian community, Alexie does not hesitate to depict boldly how Junior has internalized the feeling of victimization, racial discrimination, and the communal trauma from genocides, and many other systematic forms of violence that have been committed by the American government. Since the Native American identity has owed too much obligation and debt to tribal, communal authenticity, the individual identity as a Native Indian could not stand alone, and even thinking of individuality itself makes one guilty. As Junior goes through his changes, people on the reservation, except for Junior's family and his father's best friend, Eugene, call him a traitor and an apple for that reason. This is one of many reasons why Junior suffers a hard time at Reardan, because he cannot get any emotional support from his

own people. This is why Junior's self-realization is not the end of the story—in order to have a final resolution, he needs moral support from his community and his friend Rowdy. As Junior needs his people's back-up to keep navigating his journey, people on the reservation have to change their way of thinking and start the change in motion. The reconciliation between Junior and Rowdy is the starting point. Rowdy, the Indian kid who at first refused to join Junior, who was reading silly comic books all the time, at last comes to Junior and talks about a book he is reading now. The final moment of Junior and Rowdy shows how a traditional Indian who refused to change comes to understand, and to try to understand, another Indian who refused to remain the past:

> "I was reading this book about old-time Indians, about how we used to be nomadic."
>
> "Yeah," I said.
>
> "So I looked up nomadic in the dictionary, and it means people who move around, who keep moving, in search of food and water and grazing land."
>
> "That sounds about right."
>
> "Well, the thing is, I don't think Indians are nomadic anymore. Most Indians, anyway."
>
> "No, we're not," I said.
>
> "I'm not nomadic," Rowdy said. "Hardly anybody on this rez is nomadic. Except for you. You're the nomadic one."
>
> […]
>
> "You're an old-time nomad," Rowdy said. "You're going to keep moving all over the world in search of food and water and grazing land. That's pretty cool." (229–30)

Rowdy used to represent a typical, traditional Indian who chooses to stay on the reservation, rejecting any change and challenge. Since he is as young, innocent, and as full of potential as Junior, and they are friends, Rowdy is able to understand Junior. Reading a history book is Rowdy's first step toward the adventure. At the same time, Rowdy's changed attitude toward Junior implies the reason why the old-time nomadic Indian story, which completes Junior's identity, is told by Rowdy, not Gordy. While so many good stories and ideas came from Gordy, who is Junior's smart white friend at Reardan, this nomad story has to be articulated exclusively from an Indian kid, who happens to be

Junior's friend, because it means the Indian community is slowly changing, thanks to Junior, and the story is only able to be cared for and empowered by the younger Indian generation, such as Junior and Rowdy.

As Rowdy changes and makes peace again with Junior, they play basketball again, yet they do not keep score, for it is not competition anymore and any longer. They are friends and companions, not rivals and enemies. Through the last scene, Alexie implies that maybe the whole thing they were fighting for and struggling against might be irrelevant to the winning or losing of binary thinking—because the lives of kids are more than a basketball game they could play. As Junior and other Indian kids were all unsatisfied, having low self-esteem, no racial pride, and no ego because they were educated to be losers "living in a world built for winners" (55), maybe it is important to be an Indian winner, yet more importantly, maybe it is not about winning or losing at all, and it is time to teach that to them. Through two Indian boys' basketball game without keeping score, Alexie indicates that old systems, like old education, set limits that have made the young Indian generation inherit a losers mentality or a sense of racial inferiority, so the time has come to change the rules.

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Abstract

Sherman Alexie's 2007 young adult fiction, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, depicts the life of a young Spokane Indian boy named Arnold Spirit Jr., and the writer tries to show how this young protagonist deals with his identity issues both on the reservation and at a white school. Off the poor reservation where limitations make him a loser, he needs to balance his Indian identity and agency with the white American identity he has come into contact with. The final answer, outcome, or resolution of his long search and struggle is to become a nomad (an old-time Indian way of life) or to become Nomad (an alternative superhero identity of Captain America). Following Junior's track, Alexie implies that there should be a new form of identity for the young generation, because obviously there is none, for them, available now. Giving them a reachable, accessible form of identity and heroic figure would lead young readers like Junior to dreams of being someone important.

Keywords: Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Nomad, Native American identity, nomadic identity, Native Indian literature

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