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ENGL 3514 Final Essay

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Self-Acceptance vs. Self-Actualization:

Comparing Different Morals in Texts by Alexie and Yang

**Essay Topic 5: Compare and contrast Arnold Spirit (“Junior”) in Alexie’s novel with Jin Wang in Yang’s. How are these characters conflicted about their ethnicities and their relationships to mainstream American culture? How do Alexie and Yang satirize their own ethnicities, and what ‘lessons’ do Junior and Jin Wang learn as they come to terms with their home cultures?**

One of the most prominent themes we have covered in this course has been that of cultural confusion for children of non-white ethnic backgrounds in America. Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* and Gene Yang’s *American Born Chinese* both deal with the issue of cultural identity crisis through their main characters, but in two different ways that both allow insight into what it means to be culturally different. While the cultural conflicts of Arnold “Junior” Spirit and Jin “Danny” Wang appear similar at first, taking place in similar settings, we will discover that Yang’s message of cultural self-acceptance is different from Alexie’s message of individual self-acceptance.

Both of these stories begin with the basic premise of two boys who are outcasts at school. They transfer from a school they are familiar with where they know everybody to a new school where they are loners and nobody knows or cares about them. Arnold Spirit from *The Absolutely True Diary* was already a freak at his old high school, with his large head, stutter, and glasses, but he had a best friend—Rowdy—and he knew his place. Jin Wang of *American Born Chinese* moved from an apartment complex where he had several friends to a suburbia where everybody was white and assumed he was a fresh-off-the-boat ignorant Chinese boy. Jin Wang and Arnold Spirit are stuck in similar situations, where they must try to make friends and overcome racial stereotypes in their new environments.

Arnold and Jin Wang begin to gather a small group of friends over the months, seemingly overcoming their outcast status and integrating with their new schools. They both befriend a boy who is a pariah just as they are: Wei Chen for Jin Wang and Gordy for Arnold. They begin to date popular white girls they fall in love with at first sight, Amelia and Penelope. They both take up basketball and become buddies with the largest, most alpha male player, Roger for Arnold and Steve for Jin Wang (as Danny). In-universe for both of these stories, at a glance it seems like Jin Wang and Arnold are experiencing normal troubles for a transfer student and slowly overcoming them.

“You’re in **America**. Speak **English**.” (Yang, 37)

However, the underlying issue for both of these boys is a conflict of their ethnic backgrounds with mainstream culture at their schools. Jin Wang is conflicted between his Chinese American ethnicity and the norms of his suburban white school, where everybody assumes that he is fresh from China and his family eats dog. He is teased for being Chinese, ignored by almost everybody, and wishes so desperately to be accepted that he begins to reject his own Chinese ethnicity.

Arnold Spirit feels conflict between his wish to remain true to his Native American culture and his need to escape the hopelessness of the reservation he grew up on. He transfers to Reardan to give himself a more hopeful future, and must deal with ill will from both sides. As Ian Chapman in his review of The Absolutely True Diary notes, “Arnold switches to a rich white school and immediately becomes as much an outcast in his own community as he is a curiosity in his new one” (Chapman, 61). In the reservation’s eyes, Arnold has abandoned his own people and is no better to them than any other white person, leaving Arnold with no safe haven.

These starting similarities are points we can construct to form a parallel between the two books. By forming this parallel, we can then begin to look at both stories and how they compare to one another; specifically, we can see the extremely important differences between the two. Because while they appear similar on the surface, *American Born Chinese* carries a message of self-acceptance that is very different from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* and the message of transcending ethnicity that it contains.

The way that the boys react to their cultural conflicts is the first and one of the most important differences that set up the different messages of the stories. Jin Wang’s cultural conflict begins because he is unable to be accepted as he is by his peers, and over time he comes to believe that his Chinese background is a curse and a stigma that should be erased. Over the years he continually tries to prove his whiteness to the world; when he first meets Wei Chen, he forces him to speak English—even though they could have conversed more fluently in Chinese—and refuses him as a friend, instead calling his white tormentors his friends. Jin Wang Americanizes himself at every opportunity, even calling his best friend Wei Chen a F.O.B. (fresh off the boat) and disowning him as a friend.

“It’s easy to become anything you wish so long as you’re willing to forfeit your soul.” (Yang, 29)

It comes to the point where Jin Wang literally transforms himself into a white student and renames himself Danny in order to fit into life as a white American student. As Danny he is more popular, and he is allowed to have normal friends, like Steve. But now, Danny is so paranoid and so hateful of anything Chinese that he despises any reminder of his former race, dreads his cousin Chin-kee’s annual visits, and “finds out quickly that this self-willed racial make-over leads him further into an identity crisis” (Fu, 275). This situation is arguably even worse than how he started out, since he has no long-term friends, hates his own ethnicity, and has a completely unstable high school life with only small tastes of friendship with white students before he is forced to relocate every year due to the humiliation he feels from Chin-Kee’s visits.

Arnold Spirit on the other hand, rather than reject his Indian culture like Jin Wang rejected his Chinese culture, retains a distinct identity throughout his high school life. Arnold’s cultural conflict comes from the fact that he is a pariah to both his new white classmates and his former friends from the reservation, because he abandons them to be a part of the more privileged Reardan kids. So rather than trying to hide his Indian background and be white, Arnold is more concerned with trying to fit in with both cultures while retaining his Indian identity.

And slowly Arnold begins to gain respect from his peers as an individual with his own unique identity. The Reardan kids start accepting Arnold after he breaks the standard rules of their micro-society and punches Roger. He connects with Penelope on a personal level based on their shared desire to leave their small town and grow into something more important, rather than simply adopting the correct standard white behaviors to impress her. Arnold’s individual determination to grow and be accepted for himself is what finally begins to gain him lasting respect from his white friends.

This difference in how Jin Wang and Arnold approach their ethnic identity crises highlights how the two are part of two stories with different messages. For Jin Wang, the primary cause for his suffering is the fact that he begins to hate his own Chinese background and cannot accept himself for who he is. Rather, he transforms himself into his idealized vision of what he feels he should be in order to fit in to the culture around him. Yet even when this happens, his culture follows him in the form of his cousin Chin-Kee, whom he despises because he represents everything that Jin Wang sees wrong with his Chinese heritage. He runs from his problems when they get overwhelming, while failing to see the merits of simply staying true to his Chinese identity. As the monkey king tells Jin at the end of the book, “You know, Jin, I could have saved myself from five hundred years’ imprisonment… had I only realized how good it is to be a monkey” (Yang, 223). The monkey king explains to Jin that while he was hating himself and becoming ever more depressed, he could have simply been contented with what he was and learned to be happy. Yang’s story carries the message that it is better to accept yourself for who you truly are, and enjoy what makes you unique, rather than molding yourself into what you think will please everybody else.

“You probably think I’ve fallen completely in love with white people and I don’t see anything good in Indians. Well, that’s false.” (Alexie \*)

Alexie’s novel has a darker and more serious tone than Yang’s, and has a more complicated message as well. Arnold recognizes the upsides and downsides of both reservation Indian and Reardan white culture. He transfers to Reardan in order to be a part of a group that has more hope than the Indians. Whereas the Indians are “the worst of times” the Reardan kids are “the best of times”, and though they can be bullies, they are also more compassionate than kids on the reservation (Alexie \*). However, Arnold also realizes that the community of white people at Reardan is not nearly as tightly-knit as the Indians at his reservation. Many white parents are apathetic, and as Arnold says, “I’ve learned that the worst thing a parent can do is ignore their children” (Alexie \*). They blend in to the background. People don’t know each other very well, and there is no sense of community.

“And I realized that, sure, Indians were drunk and sad and displaced and crazy and mean, but, dang, we knew how to laugh.” (Alexie \*)

Meanwhile, despite being ravaged by alcohol and filled with hopeless children and adults who are resigned to a substandard life, Arnold’s reservation has a strong sense of community. The Indians all know each other, and everybody feels the loss when somebody dies. Ultimately, though, Arnold knows that he has no bright future at the reservation and he must leave in order to flourish. As Karen Coats states in her critical review of *The Absolutely True Diary,* “[Arnold] begins to get a sense of who he is and where he belongs, of which affiliations he can afford to keep and which he must walk away from” (Coats, 72). Arnold begins to realize that in the end, he cannot choose either Reardan or the reservation; he must leave both entirely and become individually accomplished, transcending the conflict of two ethnic cultures.

“Such pletty Amelican girl wiff bountiful Amelican bosom! Must bind feet and bear Chin-Kee’s children!” (Yang, 50)

In terms of the books themselves and how the authors satirize their own ethnicities, Yang pulls out ahead and creates two parents for Jin Wang who are only concerned with work, grades, and success. They do not care for the emotions of their son. Then Yang cranks it up to eleven with Chin-Kee, a hurricane of every worst stereotype of Chinese people. Yang crosses the line and then crosses back, giving Chin-Kee yellow skin, clawed hands, purple imperial dress, buck teeth, and a tendency to constantly kowtow and mix his l’s and r’s. He is a genius in all subjects, embarrassing beyond measure, and knows kung-fu.

“I’m nothing like him! I don’t even know how we’re related!” (Yang, 123)

With Chin-Kee, Yang takes refuge in audacity, as nobody could possibly take the character seriously. Shelly Glantz noted this in her review of the book, saying “The depiction of the cousin is so painfully stereotypical that you feel guilty laughing” (Glantz, 65). In this way he is an effective exaggerated idol to represent Jin Wang’s hatred of his own culture.

“I used to think the world was broken down by tribes… but I know that isn’t true. The world is only broken into two tribes: The people who are assholes and the people who are not.” (Alexie \*)

Alexie’s novel, in comparison, can’t really be called a satire in any real way. The character of Arnold Spirit may satirize his own ethnicity through his cartoons, true, but the subject material of Alexie’s book never seemed lighthearted enough to rate as satire; rather, I would call it dark humor. Presenting the Native Americans of his reservation as almost all drunk and depressed does not come off as humorous, or satire, or even offensive; it is dark, and creates a more serious and realistic tone that makes the occasional humor much more surprising and effective. It emphasizes Arnold’s absolute need to leave the reservation and live his life out in the world, overriding any question of ethnic loyalty.

In a way, *American Born Chinese* is a circular story similar to the concept of *aware* from Japanese folktales. The status quo is restored when Danny returns to being Jin Wang, and goes back to accepting his Chinese self, just as the Monkey King had to accept himself as a monkey rather than a man. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, however, is a destruction of the status quo. Arnold is the first Indian to leave the reservation to attend Reardan, is the first to decide to make himself a hopeful future free from the bounds of his hopeless, dying culture, while still celebrating his roots. Jin Wang learns how to accept himself. Arnold, on the other hand, learns to accept who he wants to become.

“I realized that I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I was not alone in my loneliness. There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream.” (Alexie \*)

This is perhaps best summed up by comparing the final pages of both stories, which are again very similar and form a parallel. In Yang’s story, Jin Wang finds Wei Chen, who had run away from his father—his cultural heritage as a monkey—to forge his own path through life. It is implied that they reconcile, and perhaps Wei Chen will learn through Jin Wang to accept who he is and return to his proper path. On the other hand, in the reconciliation between Rowdy and Arnold, it is Arnold who has run away from his background. And rather than returning Arnold to his former path, Rowdy accepts that Arnold is going to leave the reservation behind and become a new kind of person. He compares him to the ancient nomadic Indians, and the implication is that as Arnold creates a new life for himself, he is both doing something completely new and at the same time reviving the most ancient traditions of his people.

“I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian… 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 boys who really missed their best friends.” (Alexie \*)

\*Please note that my copy of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was an ebook, and I do not have page numbers to go with my citations. I apologize for this.

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