Response to Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary*

I purchased Sherman Alexie’s novel as soon as it was released, because it was by the same writer who did the screenplay for the film “Smoke Signals.” As I read, however, in contrast to the film which on first viewing struck me as comedic, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* overwhelmed me with the feeling of “Eureka!”

Let me explain. Two memories came sharply into focus as I read *Diary*. The first was a childhood image: my school mate, Alfred Trujillo, bending over the back of the family pickup parked near our house, weeping. He and others had just buried his mother, who died when her hogan burned down through the drunken actions of another family member. The second memory was more recent. In 1998, while visiting the Navajo Mission in northwestern New Mexico where I grew up, I met Gary Yazzie, the younger brother of my classmate Barnabas. He was leading an alcohol recovery group of Navajo men recently released from the San Juan County jail. He was hopeful, and engaged, but one side of his face was severely disfigured from an earlier street fight.

I spent my elementary school years as the only white child in my classroom. (My brother and sister were both also in the mission school, but the classroom divisions of this K-8 school kept us separate.) Class photos show me as large, blond, squinting into the desert sun as I awkwardly position myself on the edge of the group. My Navajo classmates are petite, dark, heads hanging down. Only in my thirties did the memories of those years come back with full force—memories of what then had no name, but I now know as bullying. I recall the choking fear as recess approached, the depression with which I faced the end of vacations. I remember being teased, grabbed, baited with sexually charged expressions, and once when some classmates trying to pull off my clothes. Only when I mentioned these memories to my siblings did I learn that my brother’s chipped tooth came from being held upside-down and banged over the open outdoor boys’ toilet. Children can be cruel.

My world view as an adult had grown to allow for a map which drew my Navajo classmates as “the oppressed” and my people as “oppressors”—and I rued decisions of the missionaries among whom I grew up to, for example, forbid my elementary schoolmates to speak Navajo. Intellectually I could explain and even justify the behaviors I had suffered. None of these understandings, however, had any impact on the emotions I still felt when these memories arose. Then as I read *Diary*, it struck me: I was as weird as Arnold Spirit! His story was the other side of the coin of my own. Other memories emerged: the conversations with my eighth-grade friend Pauline Francisco, and Alfred Yazzie helping me practice for my best event, the standing broad jump. Growing up with my Navajo classmates had turned me into a nomad too—I never really fit into my own “tribe” either. And I’ve “traveled the world,” with love and longing to share some small piece of life with Navajos, Brethren in Christ, Lutherans, Congolese, Burkinabè, South Africans (black and white), Russian Orthodox, Zimbabweans, Paraguayans, Mennonites, and all my students at EMU.

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