

Kenneth John Odle

Professor Tarbox

ENGL 5830

10 December 2010

Emersonian and Du Boisian Double Consciousness and Assimilation:

The Formation of Dual Characters in the Works of Sherman Alexie and Gene Luen Yang

Roberta Seelinger Trites describes the role of protagonists in adolescent novels as one of learning to “negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death” (3). As a lens through which we can examine young adult literature, this is a useful definition, yet in her list of adolescent works reviewed, few are “multicultural” as I define the term, and so it would seem that within the scope of this work she has not had the opportunity to thoroughly examine the role that race, ethnicity, language, and assimilation play in complicating the negotiation of these levels of power¹.

However, as she later points out, many of the points she raises can be readily applied to multicultural literature. Assimilation, like adolescence, is about learning how to play a part in the larger society’s power structures. Because a multicultural protagonist must often negotiate between a “minority” world of culture and an “acultural” white world, this dichotomy often creates a “twinning” effect in which the protagonist must face life as a child of color trying to assimilate into a dominant Anglo world, but also as a child with greater understanding of that Anglo world, which often places the child in a position of power over their parents and other people in their minority community. Assimilation, through the formation of these dual

characters, therefore complicates this “power negotiation” process which Trites describes.

There have been parallels to this effect in non-multicultural literature for young people before. Caroline Hunt has studied the quest for identity in adolescent literature and has examined the ways in which adolescents in literature can establish their own identity by taking on someone else’s identity, “an ancient and familiar device which gives rise to comedies of mistaken identity, farces, [and] mystery stories” (109). Hunt does not focus on multicultural literature, either, and so she does not fully examine the role of assimilation in the formation of identity. However, it is possible to combine these two ideas: that of negotiating levels of power and that of assuming another identity, in order to examine the role of assimilation and how characters can negotiate these levels of power and establish their own identity.

I propose to examine two works under this light. The first is Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel in which the main character is actually split into two distinct characters (Jin Wang and his American alter ego, “Danny”), only to be reunited at the end (a truncation of the usual process). The second is Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, in which Junior unwittingly creates a dual character (Arnold Spirit) by choosing to leave the reservation to obtain a better education in an all-white world. These works are especially interesting because they do address “the social constructions of sexuality” and (especially in the Alexie work) “cultural mores surrounding death” mentioned previously by Trites (3), along with the racial, spiritual, and materialistic aspects of double consciousness.

These two works share a remarkable number of similarities. Besides their graphic nature and their subject matter, they both show an attempt to assimilate without the need of first moving very far. Jin Wang moves out of Chinatown to the suburbs (Yang 25, 30), while Junior travels “exactly twenty-two miles away from the rez” (Alexie 45). Indeed, as Christine Wilkie-Stibbs

has pointed out, in much of the young adult literature about “colonized childhoods” (the author’s term),

[t]he discourses of “Westernism” are privileged and conducted not so much in relation to geographical regions or, indeed, across any recognizable “East/West” or “North/South” divides, but rather in relation to a transnational capitalist class identified and accessed via the global economy, capital, and new technologies. (238)

In other words, because we live in an age where high-speed internet and cell phones can bring the world to those with the material means to obtain them, the attempt to become “Westernized” (i.e, assimilated) need not involve much physical travel at all. Furthermore, because there is little physical space separating the “old self” from the “new self,” these two selves will tend to overlap, hence the formation of dual characters. As Samir Dayal puts it,

[d]ouble consciousness need not be conceived in the restricted sense in which W.E.B. Du Bois casts it....Doubleness is more productively conceived as the interstitiality of entering (or leaving) and destabilizing the border zones of cultures, as fracturings of the subject that resist falsely comforting identifications and reifications. (48)

For Jin Wang, Dayal’s “border zone of culture” is the local high school he attends with Wei-Chin, which Jin Wang must leave in order to resolve his double consciousness. For Junior, that border zone becomes the reservation itself, which eventually also becomes the locus of the resolution of his double consciousness.

Du Bois’s formulation of double consciousness is still useful, however, and although couched in terms specific to the African American experience of the latter half of the nineteenth

century, it is still a useful definition to begin with, even if it is cast in distinctly racial terms:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (3)

That idea of “two unreconciled strings” rings especially true in the case of *American Born Chinese*, where the story of the dual characters of Jin Wang and Danny must be teased out from the carefully woven narrative. The image of “two warring ideals in one dark body” reflects the nature of Sherman Alexie's work, where many of Junior's/Arnold Spirit's struggles are described in terms of violence and battle.

Emersonian Double Consciousness

The term “double consciousness”, at least in relation to literature and philosophy, did not originate with W.E.B. Du Bois. As Joel Porte points out, Ralph Waldo Emerson, when considering the work *Faust*, identified with the dual nature of the main character, noting that “the worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other” (Emerson, as quoted by Porte, 42). Here, double consciousness is seen not in racial terms, but in terms of the struggle between the intellectual and the spiritual sides of humanity. As we shall see, the characters in multicultural literature for young adults often face this dichotomy. According to Dickson D. Bruce, Emerson constantly wrote that “the individual is pulled back from the divine by the demands of daily life,” and this theme echoes the struggles of both Junior/Arnold Spirit and Jin

Wang/Danny, who experience both “the downward pull of life in society” and the “upward pull of communion with the divine” (300), or I might add, the “ethnic,” since both characters experience little spirituality in the white mainstream world. Indeed, Yang’s work is set firmly within the world of Chinese mythology and spirituality (particularly in the character of the Chinese herbalist’s wife and of Tze-Yo-Tzuh and the Monkey King), while Alexie’s work has an entire chapter (“Wake,” 159-167) which caricatures white interpretations of Indian spirituality. Even Junior’s mainstream name, Arnold Spirit, symbolizes the spiritual aspect of Junior’s struggles in the mainstream world.

I have chosen to emphasize both the Emersonian and Du Boisian concepts of double-consciousness, because, at least in terms of the Yang and Alexie works, they are not entirely dissimilar. “For Du Bois the essence of a distinctive African consciousness was its spirituality,” Bruce tells us, adding that such spirituality is “based in Africa but revealed among African Americans in their folklore, their history of patient suffering, and their faith” (301). Both Jin Wang and Junior spend a fair amount of time suffering, albeit less than patiently. Bruce adds that “double consciousness related particularly to Du Bois’s efforts to privilege the spiritual in relation to the materialistic, commercial world of white America” (301), thus neatly acknowledging Emersonian double consciousness while lending a Marxist note to what is, at its heart, a struggle to form a coherent identity. The Marxist elements of this struggle are especially foregrounded in Sherman Alexie’s *Absolutely True Diary*..., and are practically absent in Yang’s *American Born Chinese*, perhaps reflecting the different economic fates that Asian Americans and American Indians have experienced.

Both of these works manage to explore the Emersonian and Du Boisian concepts of double consciousness, because in creating dual characters which are distinguished by race, they

can also be distinguished by the distinct severing of their intellectual and spiritual or emotional halves. Additionally, they are able to show these differences more clearly to young people because of their graphic (or in the case of the Alexie work, semi-graphic) novel format.

Double Consciousness and Dual Characters in Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*

For Yang, double consciousness arises from his confusion about his racial identity coupled with a reluctance or even an unwillingness to fully assimilate. "I'm still trying to figure out what it means to be Asian American" he has stated. "There's definitely a temptation to become fully assimilated, fully a part of America, but as Asian American, we have to constantly struggle against that" (Woan 78), adding that "we constantly have this East-piece and this West-piece fighting and struggling within ourselves" (84).

American Born Chinese is unique in having three sets of dual characters: The Monkey King, who transforms into "The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven" (60); Jin Wang, who transforms into Danny (194), and Wei Chin, son of the Monkey King, who transforms into Wei Chin, immigrant from Taiwan (217, 36).

Yang's narrative is complex, yet the story of the Monkey King, which precedes that of Jin Wang and Danny, is told in a straightforward manner. Angered at the gods for being denied entrance to a part, he masters the twelve-disciplines of kung-fu and transforms into The Great Sage (60). For his arrogance, he is imprisoned beneath a mountain of rock for 500 years, until at last he resumes his true form to aid the emissary of TzeYTzuh, Lai-Tsao (150).

In contrast, the story of Jin Wang and Danny is revealed in a much more complex fashion. Jin Wang is introduced in chapter two, and Danny is introduced in chapter three, but it is not until the end of the book that it is revealed that Jin Wang transforms into Danny (194), and a

mere twenty pages later before Danny transforms back into Jin Wang (204). Their story is folded in half, and readers must start in the middle and work back to the beginning and forward to the end simultaneously, thus echoing the “East-piece” and “West-piece” (Woan 84) that struggle within both Gene Yang and Jin Wang (and note the similarity in their names), and reflecting the double consciousness that both experience. The folding in half of a story presents a doubling of the story itself, seen at once by Jin Wang from an Asian standpoint, and at the same time by Danny from a white standpoint.

Jin Wang’s sense of double consciousness arises out of his exposure to other Asian American students at his elementary school, which serve as a mirror that allows him to see his otherness. Shortly after joining Mrs. Greeder’s third grade class, Jin notes that

The only other Asian in my class was Suzy Nakamura.

When the class finally figured out that we weren’t related, rumors began to circulate that Suzy and I were arranged to be married on her thirteenth birthday.

We avoided each other as much as possible. (31)

Jin has a similar experience when Wei Chin arrives the following year from Taiwan, observing that “something made me want to beat him up” (36).

The theme of double consciousness is also carried visually. On page 97 there is an entirely wordless panel which shows Jin Wang devising a scheme to win the heart of Amelia, a white classmate. In the middle sequence of this panel, he first envisions Amelia, and then Amelia and Greg, and then Greg alone, trying to decide which aspect of Greg’s white identity he can most easily adopt for himself. In the bottom frame of the panel, he decides on Greg’s curly hair, reflecting Carline Hunt’s assertion that the hero of such a text often “finds that what he appears to be...is somehow distasteful to him....Inevitably it turns out that his counterpart has exactly

those qualities which he lacks” (97). While Jin Wang and Greg are not dual characters as I have described, Jin Wang is experimenting with potential white aspects of his identity, which will allow him to go from Jin Wang, to “that Asian boy with the afro” (Yang 101), to Danny (194-198), who is white enough that he no longer requires Greg’s curly hair.

The evolution of Jin Wang into Danny demonstrates a concept first described by Marcelo and Carola Suárez-Orozco and summarized by Michael Boatman as an “ethnic flight identity in which immigrants abandon what they perceive as negative attributes of their native culture to assimilate into the dominant culture of the receiving country” (Boatman 472). Danny’s abandonment of Jin Wang is what allows the Monkey King, in the form of Chin-Kee, to act as Jin Wang’s consciousness. Chin-Kee is there to remind him that he can never stop being Chinese and that he must embrace his Chinese identity, although such a decision means tolerating (at least in the short term) racist and stereotyped attitudes from the mainstream culture. Jin Wang is forced, ultimately, “to confront what it means to be Asian American” (474).

Double Consciousness and Dual Characters in Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

For Alexie, double consciousness arises out of the “ironies of American Indian reservation life and the tensions between traditional lifeways and contemporary social realities” (Goldstein 77). Junior becomes a dual character on his first day of class at Reardan when he tells Penelope that his name is Junior and the other students laugh.

I had no idea that Junior was a weird name. It’s a common name on my rez, on any rez. You walk into any trading post on any rez in the United States and shout, “Hey, Junior!” and seventeen guys will turn around.

And three women. (Alexie 60)

In other words, for Indians, “Junior” is used similarly to “dude” or “guy” in English-speaking communities, or “ese” or “vato” in Spanish-speaking communities. Thus, the name Junior is symbolic of Junior’s Indian identity, but he is torn away from that when the teacher calls out his “*name name*” (60, author’s emphasis).

“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)

From this point on, there is a near-constant dichotomy between Junior and Arnold Spirit, two characters “inside of one body” who are very much in conflict with one another. The words Alexie uses here echo Du Bois when the latter speaks of double consciousness as being “two souls...two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 3).

The sense of double consciousness and the dual characters of Junior and Arnold Spirit are carried throughout the novel most strongly by the illustrations. Even before the episode of the name, we see on page 57 an illustration titled “White/Indian,” which depicts a white student on the left (complete with “Ralph Lauren shirt,” “a bright future” and “hope”) and an Indian student (with “a vanishing past,” “Kmart t-shirt” and “bone-crushing reality”) on the right. It is tempting to view this character as an amalgam, half Junior and half some other student (Gordy, perhaps). But as Sherman Alexie has attested to in an interview, “Arnold’s split right down the middle so the white side of him has the bright future...and the Indian side has the Glad garbage bag” (“Author Sherman Alexie Targets Young Readers” n. pag.). Junior’s head-on encounter with Reardan’s wealth, along with his reluctance to reveal his true economic status, lead to the

creation of his double consciousness, and his transformation into Arnold Spirit.

Resolution of the Double Consciousness

Interestingly, both of these novels provide for a resolution of the double consciousness: an opportunity for the characters to reconcile their two selves into a whole being, through the reconciliation of their friendship with their best friend. In each of these, there is an identical pattern. First, there is a fond reminiscence, followed by an initial antagonistic encounter, and concluding with a rapprochement between the two characters, which allows the main characters to come to terms with their dual nature.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the fond reminiscence begins with an illustration, showing “Rowdy & me in 3rd grade, jumping into Turtle Lake.” The two boys are shown holding hands, and an additional caption reads “Boys can hold hands until they turn nine” (218).

At the beginning of the next chapter Junior recalls a long story about Turtle Lake (219-224), starting with a tribal memory of the lake (the story of Stupid Horse), and ending with a personal memory of Junior and Rowdy climbing the tallest pine tree on the reservation (224-226). At last, Rowdy comes to visit, and after some playfully competitive banter (the initially antagonistic encounter), they end up playing basketball in a friendly, non-competitive way:

Rowdy and I played one-on-one for hours. We played until dark. We played until the streetlights lit up the court. We played until the bats swooped at our heads. We played until the moon was huge and golden and perfect in the dark sky.

We didn't keep score. (230)

Again, echoing Goldstein's idea that communal experience is privileged over individual experience in Indian culture, Junior manages to navigate a line between those types of

experiences. He begins with a communal memory, proceeds to an individual one, and then shows how the individual “one-on-one” basketball game, which is generally a communal experience in any culture is now reduced to a community of just two: Rowdy and Junior.

A similar pattern is found in *American Born Chinese*. The fond reminiscence is made by Wei-Chen’s father, the Monkey King, who recalls how Wei-Chen chose to undertake a test of virtue in order to become an emissary himself, telling Jin “You met him during the first week of his test. He spoke very highly of you” (216-217). After the Monkey King departs, Jin visits the 490 Bakery Cafe “every day for over a month” (227), and when Wei-Chen eventually shows up, he is not initially happy to see Jin, saying “<What the hell do you want?!>” (229). Interestingly, in the conversation which follows, Wei-Chen speaks entirely in Chinese, while Jin Wang speaks in English (230-232). This is in direct contrast to their first meeting, when Jin Wang tells him “You’re in America. Speak English” (37), although later, when discussing Wei-Chen’s toy robot, they both speak Chinese (39-40). Clearly, young Jin Wang has no trouble communicating in Chinese, but he is unable—or uncomfortable—to conduct a conversation in both languages. By the time of the last conversation in the book, Jin Wang is comfortable straddling the line between two languages. Finally, in the last panel, which is wordless, we see Jin Wang and Wei-Chen smiling and laughing together (233). Their rapprochement is complete.

Conclusions

What role does double consciousness play in multicultural literature for and about young people? As Bruce points out, for Du Bois “double consciousness allowed for a sense of distinctiveness that really did entail equality...that did not imply inferiority” (305). Both Jin Wang and Junior experience racism frequently; Jin Wang even experiences it as Danny, his white alter ego (Yang 121) and Junior experiences it both off (Alexie 63-64) and on the

reservation (143-144). However, the amount and texture of racism they experience is different: Danny experiences less racism than Jin Wang, and Junior experiences a racism which is based on stereotype and ignorance much more than outright dislike or even hatred.

Much multicultural literature for young people expresses the idea of double consciousness to a greater or lesser degree² because “adolescent literature is at its heart a romantic literature” (Trites 15) and, at least in an Emersonian sense, double consciousness evokes a set of opposites that “had become commonplace in Transcendentalism, and...in Romanticism generally” (Bruce 300). Combined with Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness as “being both an American and not an American” (301), and it is clear that examining multicultural adolescent literature through the lens of double consciousness can lead to exciting new insights.

Double consciousness in literature for young people serves as a “second-sight, a way of seeing...which escapes notice by the White majority” (Balfour 349). That “escaped notice” is what allows Roger and Penelope to see that Arnold is poor, but doesn’t allow for them to question the social, cultural, and political reasons underpinning his poverty (Alexie 127-129). That same escaped notice is what allows Jin Wang to believe that Chin-Kee’s visits to him as Danny are a form of punishment because as “Danny” he is able to shift his embarrassment about being Chinese onto Chin-Kee, for whom embarrassment is unknown (Yang 221). And yet, the reactions of Roger and Penelope and Jin Wang seem reasonable within the contexts of each novel. Rather than outrage, they feel compassion or confusion. This reasonableness adds to, rather than detracts from, the sense of verisimilitude within each novel.

As Lawrie Balfour notes, “the gentle conviction with which Du Bois makes his appeal to the reasonable among his fellows belies the ambivalence engendered by double consciousness

and mutes his outrage” (349). But neither Alexie nor Yang are afraid to show their outrage. Both novels contain a fair amount of violence: Alexie writes chapters with titles such as “The Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club,” “Revenge is my Middle Name,” and “How to Fight Monsters,” and even includes an illustration captioned “all ass-kicking bruises look like Texas” (45), while *American Born Chinese* ends in a violent confrontation between Chin-Kee/The Monkey King and Danny/Jin Wang (205-214). Double consciousness and the accompanying twinning effect on multicultural characters can therefore give voice to the rage of not just the characters, but of the authors themselves, proving an effective tool for gaining insight into the struggles and ambitions of multicultural people in a predominantly Anglo world.

Most importantly, double consciousness and the use of dual characters allows for the full and complete expression of characters of color. When one compares the portrayal of Junior to the portrayal of American Indians in such traditional works as the Little House series, one sees a fully-formed, three-dimensional characters, as opposed to the flat stereotypes of the past, as described by Sharon Smulders. Most importantly, double consciousness allows character to rely on both their own culture as well as the dominant mainstream culture for help and advice, a distinct turn from older depictions of youth of color, in which “rescue” often came in the form of a white savior, a trope observed in Latino literature for young people by Opal Moore and Donnarae MacCann. Characters such as Jin Wang and Junior leap off the page complete and fully formed. Double consciousness, often foregrounded by the graphic elements of these novels, precludes their becoming stereotypes, and ensures that they will continue to live on in the minds of readers long after the book is closed.

Notes

¹ She does note, however, that “several of the strategies...already discussed work beautifully as we discuss multicultural narratives,” adding that

We can talk about competing voices—intraculturally or interculturally. We can talk about competing ideologies—explicit ones or implicit ones. We can talk about discourses of power, historical contextualization, how various multicultural novels create implied readers, aporias, and how they are overcome, or even how the aesthetics in novels by authors of color are different from and similar to aesthetics by Euro-American authors. (150-151)

² Recent examples include Matt de la Peña’s *Mexican Whiteboy*, Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis* (especially the latter half which begins with her move to Austria), and An Na’s *A Step from Heaven* and especially, *The Fold*.

Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. "Author Sherman Alexie Targets Young Readers." *Morning Edition*. NPR. 21 September 2007. Transcript. <www.npr.org>.
- Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Illus. Ellen Forney. New York: Little, Brown, 2007. Print.
- Balfour, Lawrie. "'A Most Disagreeable Mirror': Race Consciousness as Double Consciousness." *Political Theory*. 26.3 (1998): 346-369. *Sage*. PDF.
- Boatright, Michael D. "Graphic Journeys: Graphic Novels' Representations of Immigrant Experiences." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. 53.6 (2010): 468-476. *WilsonWeb*. PDF.
- Bruce, Dickson D., Jr. "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness." *American Literature*. 64.2 (1992): 299-309. *JSTOR*. PDF.
- Dayal, Samir. "Diaspora and Double Consciousness." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*. 29.1 (1996) 46-62. *JSTOR*. PDF.
- de la Peña, Matt. *Mexican Whiteboy*. New York: Delacorte-Random House, 2008.
- Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. 3rd ed. Chicago: McClurg, 1903. *Google Books*. PDF.
- Goldstein, David S. "Sacred Hoop Dreams: Basketball in the Work of Sherman Alexie." *Ethnic Studies Review*. 32.1 (2009): 77-88. *Ethnic News Watch*. PDF.
- Hunt, Caroline C. "Counterparts: Identity Exchange and the Young Adult Audience." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. 11.3 (1986): 109-113. *Project Muse*. PDF.
- Jiménez, Francisco. *Reaching Out*. New Nork: Graphia-Houghton Mifflin, 2008.
- Lyne, William. "The Signifying Modernist: Ralph Ellison and the Limits of the Double

- Consciousness.” *PMLA*. 107.2 (192): 318-330. *JSTOR*. PDF.
- Moore, Opal, and Donnarae MacCann. “Paternalism and Assimilation in Books About Hispanics: Part One of a Two-Part Essay.” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. 12.2 (1987): 99-102. *Project Muse*. PDF.
- . “Paternalism and Assimilation in Books About Hispanics: Part Two of a Two-Part Essay.” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. 12.3 (1987): 154-157. *Project Muse*. PDF.
- Na, An. *A Step from Heaven*. New York: Speak-Penguin Putnam, 2001.
- . *The Fold*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2008.
- Porte, Joel. “Emerson, Thoreau, and the Double Consciousness.” *The New England Quarterly*. 41.1 (1968): 40-50. *JSTOR*. PDF.
- Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon, 2003, 2004.
- Smulders, Sharon. “ ‘The Only Good Indian’: History, Race, and Representation in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie.” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. 27.1 (2002): 191-202. *Project Muse*. PDF.
- Trites, Roberta Seelinger. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000. Print.
- Wilkie-Stibbs, Christine. “The ‘Other’ Country: Memory, Voices, and Experiences of Colonized Childhoods.” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. 31.3 (2006): 237-259 *Project Muse*. PDF.
- Woan, Sunny. “Interview with Gene Luen Yang.” *Kartika Review*. 1.1 (2007): 77-88. PDF. <www.kartikareview.com>.
- Yang, Gene Luen. *American Born Chinese*. Color Lark Pien. New York: First Second, 2006. Print.