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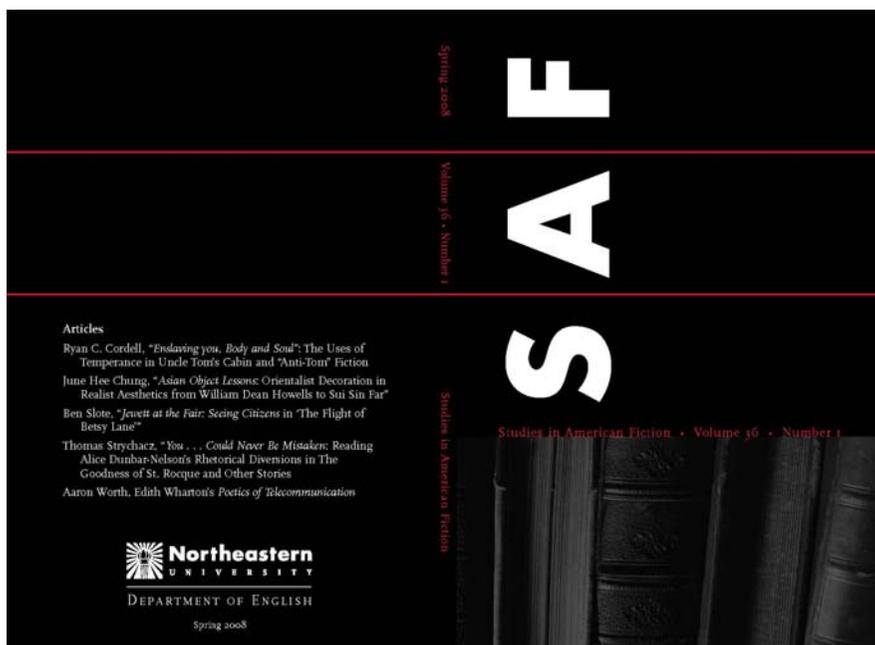
Sex and salmon: queer identities in Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*

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Lisa Tatonetti, *Sex and Salmon: Queer Identities in Sherman Alexie's
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**SEX AND SALMON:
QUEER IDENTITIES IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S
*THE TOUGHEST INDIAN IN THE WORLD***

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Contemporary queer Native American writing emerged circa 1976 with the publication of two pieces by Mohawk author Maurice Kenny: an essay, "Tinsel Bucks: A Historical Study of Indian Homosexuality," and a poem "Winkte."¹ This beginning was followed in 1981 by Laguna author Paula Gunn Allen's essay, "Beloved Women: Lesbians in American Indian Cultures." During that same year, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's landmark anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* brought two more gay Native voices to print: Hunkpapa writer Barbara Cameron, cofounder of Gay American Indians, and Menominee poet, Chrystos. Two years later, in 1983, Mohawk poet and short fiction writer Beth Brant (Bay of Quinte Mohawk) published *A Gathering of Spirit: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women*. The first Native-edited collection of American Indian and First Nation writing, Brant's collection included pieces by eleven Native lesbians. It would be five more years until Will Roscoe's *Living the Spirit* (1988), an anthology devoted entirely to the writing of gay Native people, appeared.² While there has been a steady rise in the publication of literary work by and about gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual/transgender, queer (GLBTQ), and Two-Spirit Native peoples since Roscoe's 1988 collection, critical investigations of this important body of literature are just now finding representation in scholarly forums on American Indian literature.³

Paralleling the reticence of the larger critical community regarding queer Native voices has been the troubling inclusion of both implicit and explicit homophobia in the work of influential Native writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko and James Welch. Both Silko's 1991 *Almanac of the Dead* and James Welch's 2000 *The Heart Song of Charging Elk* contain negative images of queer sexuality: in each text, gay male characters function as the site of seemingly unrelenting evil.⁴ Against such a backdrop, the 2000 release of Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie's collection of short stories, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, represents one of the most positive and explicit depictions of queer sexuality offered in the work of the more canonical contemporary American Indian fiction writers—Leslie Marmon

Silko, Louise Erdrich, N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Alexie.⁵ Alexie's work in *The Toughest Indian* is representative of his outspoken championship of queer issues. An ally to the LGBTQ/Two-Spirit community, Alexie frequently addresses the problems of homophobia in both his public speaking engagements (which often resemble stand-up comedy routines) and his numerous interviews. Alexie's 2002 independent film, *The Business of Fancydancing*, focuses on the fictional (but semi-autobiographic) experiences of a gay Native poet, Seymour Polatkin, as he negotiates the sometimes-difficult relationship between his reservation history and his present urban reality.⁶ Given Alexie's prominent position in contemporary anthologies, in current syllabi, and in the eye of the reading public in the United States—Alexie has laughingly called himself the “Indian du jour”—his representations of queer Native identity have the potential for considerable impact.

My analysis here centers on the productive and markedly significant images of queer sexuality found in Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000). While Alexie's collection has at its heart the examination of human relationships in all their forms, two stories in particular bring queer identity to the fore: the title piece, “The Toughest Indian in the World,” which tells the enigmatic story of a Spokane journalist's first sexual experience with a Lummi Indian man; and “Indian Country,” which unravels the rambling tale of Low Man Smith's unplanned reunion with his white college friend, Tracy Johnson, who rescues Low Man by getting him out of jail and bringing him to the tumultuous dinner at which she meets her Spokane girlfriend's parents for the first time. In “The Toughest Indian in the World,” Alexie forwards what Two-Spirit author/activist Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee/African/Irish/Lenape/Lumbee) has termed the “Sovereign Erotic” by using queerness as a potential foundation of Native cultural identification.

Both “The Toughest Indian in the World” and “Indian Country” ground themselves in the safety of the heterosexual relationship before they introduce queer characters and themes. The unnamed, first-person narrator of “The Toughest Indian” tells the story of his recent sexual relationship with his co-worker, Cindy, while “Indian Country” opens when Low Man Smith steps off the plane in Missoula, Montana, with the intention of asking Carlotta, a Navajo woman, to marry him. Although both Cindy and Carlotta appear only in flashback, their presences at the beginning of each narrative serve as a heteronormative safety net since each story's subsequent exploration of queer desire and identity are, at least to some degree, mediated by the narrator and main character's seemingly grounded heterosexual identity. This me-

diation is upheld with vigor in a number of the reviews of Alexie's book.

While some reviewers fail to mention Alexie's representations of queer relationships at all, others take the protagonist's heterosexuality as a given. Polly Paddock Gossett, for example, while calling Alexie's title story "masterful," sums up its plot by saying that "the [story's narrator], though straight, winds up sleeping with the hitchhiker. 'I wanted him to save me,' he explains."⁷ Gossett's caveat—"though straight"—and her use of the verb "explains" to describe the narrator's depiction of his sexual encounter illustrate how the narrator's sexual identity can be represented as unequivocally heterosexual rather than bisexual or gay despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that the bulk of the story circles around what seems to be the narrator's first gay sexual experience. Ken Foster, the reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, reads the encounter in much the same way: "Over the course of the story, the narrator, who is straight, picks up a scarred Indian fighter, takes him to a hotel and ultimately has sex with him. What makes this so astonishing is that Alexie doesn't feel the need to tack on any kind of sexual epiphany: At the end of the story, the narrator is no more gay than he was at the start."⁸ Alexie himself points out the ironies of such reader response in a discussion of the title story's reception:

When I wrote it I honestly didn't think about the reaction people would have to it. It's funny—it really brings up the homophobia in people. When a straight guy like me writes about a homoerotic experience in the first person with a narrator who is very similar to me—I could see people dying to ask me if it was autobiographical. They always ask in regard to everything else, but no one's asked me about that story. In the Seattle paper here, the critic called it a "graphic act of homosexuality" and I thought "graphic?" There's nothing graphic about it at all. It was three sentences. He talked about me being a "literary rabble-rouser" again.⁹

In each of these cases, Alexie's story, or, more specifically, Alexie's inclusion of queer sex, provokes strong response among reviewers. On the most basic level, such responses reflect current dominant attitudes toward sexuality, in which heterosexuality is still compulsory and sexuality continues to be framed as a system of binaries. In such equations, the narrator is either straight (preferably) or gay (possibly), but not bi, nor queer, nor Two-Spirit. The choices are limited and both the categories and responses remain rigid.

Such limited choices evoke Qwo-Li Driskill's commentary on co-

lonialism and sexuality. Driskill points out that “[a] colonized sexuality is one in which [indigenous people] have internalized the sexual values of dominant culture. The invaders continue to enforce the idea that sexuality and non-dichotomous genders are a sin, recreating sexuality as illicit, shocking, shameful, and removed from any positive spiritual context. Queer sexualities and genders are degraded, ignored, condemned, and destroyed.”¹⁰ Driskill focuses specifically on indigenous sexualities here, addressing the sometimes-virulent homophobia that has been part of the assimilation process in many indigenous communities. Hir argument, however, extends beyond the boundaries of indigenous communities: Driskill suggests that heterosexist and/or homophobic responses (like those in reaction to Alexie’s investigation of the range of human sexualities) tie directly to ideologies of colonialism. Furthermore, Driskill points out that these attitudes are part of the colonial project of erasure, which silences non-dominant histories such as, in this case, the fact that many indigenous cultures traditionally included multiple gender categories and alternate constructions of sexuality. As Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang note, “Cross-cultural comparative studies have shown that genders and sexualities are not always fixed into only two marked categories. Institutionalized gender diversity is found throughout the world but not in all cultures. In Native North America, there were and still are cultures in which more than two gender categories are marked. There is more than a hundred years of writing on this subject (albeit sporadic until the mid-twentieth century).”¹¹ In Driskill’s argument, this history of indigenous sexualities is not an aside or addition, but a point of departure. Both Driskill’s theory and Alexie’s story speak against the sometimes-virulent homophobia and the often invisible heterosexism that has been part and parcel of the colonial project.

In “The Toughest Indian in the World,” the narrator’s sexual identity is a great deal more ambiguous than Alexie’s reviewers acknowledge. The narrator’s description of his short-lived relationship with his co-worker Cindy, for example, one of the many stories the narrator shares in his rapid-fire monologue, appears to be a sort of locker-room story, a performance of masculinity designed to situate the teller firmly within an accepted version of heterosexuality:

I dated [a co-worker] for a few months. Cindy. . . . In daily conversation, she talked like she was writing the lead of her latest story. Hell, she talked like that in bed. . . .

During lovemaking, I would get so exhausted by the size of her erotic vocabulary that I would fall asleep before my orgasm, continue pumping away as if I were awake, and then regain con-

sciousness with a sudden start when I finally did come, more out of reflex than passion.¹²

The details of the episode, however, undercut such simplistic identification. The narrator's reaction to his partner is inconsistent with expectations regarding the performance of heterosexual masculinity—the narrator is not titillated, but “exhausted” by his partner's eroticism, while his obligatory climax is, according to his own description, a result of “reflex” rather than “passion.” The narrator's depiction of his last heterosexual experience serves, not as a marker of heterosexuality, as it has been read by some, but instead as a fitting prologue to his subsequent queer sexual experience with the Lummi hitchhiker who the narrator believes might be “the toughest Indian in the world.”

From the outset, the narrator's description of the hitchhiker suggests a less-than-sublimated desire. The narrator says of his passenger: “Even before he climbed into my car I could tell he was tough. He had some serious muscles that threatened to rip through his blue jeans and denim jacket. When he was in the car, I could see his hands up close, and they told his whole story. His fingers were twisted into weird, permanent shapes, and his knuckles were covered with layers of scar tissue.” The narrator's fascination with the hitchhiker's physicality, his attention to the small details of his passenger's appearance, portends the two men's impending intimacy. That intimacy hinges on more than simple sexual desire, however: the narrator's entire interaction with the hitchhiker is circumscribed by his need to perform, to claim, an “authentic” indigenous identity, as he explains in his self-conscious narration of their conversation:

“Jeez” I said. “You're a fighter, enit?”

I threw in the “enit,” a reservation colloquialism, because I wanted the fighter to know that I had grown up on the rez, in the woods, with every Indian in the world. . . .

“What tribe are you?” I asked him, inverting the last two words in order to sound as aboriginal as possible.

In the midst of the exchange, the fighter offers the narrator deer jerky and, looking back on the moment, the narrator glows: “I felt as Indian as Indian gets, driving down the road in a fast car, chewing on jerky, talking to an indigenous fighter” (*TI*, 26–27).

While the narrator's monologue signals his awareness of his own cultural performance, he seems blissfully unaware of the constructed nature of the Native identity he idealizes. This tension between reality and representation is highlighted when the Lummi hitchhiker tells

the story of his most recent fight, which he forfeited to an injured opponent who “was planning to die before he ever went down.” The narrator’s exclamation—“Jeez, . . . You would’ve been a warrior in the old days, enit? You would’ve been a killer. You would have stolen everybody’s goddamn horses. That would’ve been you. You would’ve been it”—casts the fighter into the mold of a stereotypical Hollywood Indian. The fighter, however, seems to recognize the irony in the narrator’s depiction, when he answers without making eye contact: “A killer, . . . sure.” This noncommittal response points to the fighter’s discomfort with the narrator’s enthusiasm, which feeds off dominant narratives of Native identity by equating warrior traditions with the marauding Plains Indian of the popular imagination (*TI*, 29–30).

The narrator’s need to *be* Indian does not stand alone in this story, however, since the narrator’s desire for a certain representation of indigeneity is indelibly wed to his burgeoning feelings of sexual desire for the fighter. Thus the narrator’s outburst about the fighter’s “warrior” status is explained with a portentous, “I was excited. I wanted the fighter to know how much I thought of him.” And, correspondingly, when the time comes for the two men to part, the narrator responds to the hitchhiker’s potential departure with an almost desperate litany of need:

“Thanks for the ride, cousin,” he said as he climbed out. . . .

“Wait,” I said. . . .

I wanted to know if he had a place to sleep that night. . . . I wanted to tell him how much I cared about my job. . . . I wanted to tell the fighter that I pick up all Indian hitchhikers. . . . I wanted to tell him that the night sky was a graveyard. I wanted to know if he was the toughest Indian in the world.

The narrator’s yearning to “know about” the fighter is merely one of many implicit signals of his ultimate decision to know the fighter sexually, and thus his internal monologue is followed by an invitation: “It’s late, . . . You can crash with me, if you want” (*TI*, 30–31).

The fighter accepts the narrator’s invitation and during the night the two men have sex in an encounter that, rather than being “surprising,” is a predictable outcome to the sexual tension that has been building throughout the story. What I want to highlight here is not that Alexie depicts queer sexuality in the first place, which seems to be the center of many early reviews (whether in the presence or absolute absence of acknowledgement), but that he intertwines his character’s search for indigeneity with a simultaneous exploration of queer desire. In “The Toughest Indian in the World,” then, Alexie

figures gay male sex as an avenue for cultural renewal.¹³

A number of Native writers/critics have been theorizing the ties between indigeneity and sexuality in recent years, key among them Craig Womack (Muscogee Creek/Cherokee), Deborah Miranda (Esselen/Chumash), and Qwo-Li Driskill. Each of these authors refers to the historical suture between American Indian and queer histories, examining the variety of ways in which examinations of sovereignty and sexuality come together. For example, when analyzing how mainstream HIV-prevention messages function (or fail to function) for tribal people, Womack suggests that American Indian people “need not accept limited definitions in [their] imaginings of [them]selves, in [their] actions, or in [their] prevention messages. Maybe tribal sovereignty, rather than a repeat of European nationalism based on triumphalism and supremacy, can be more flexible, rooted in dynamism rather than ‘staticism’—looking to change as culture evolves. Maybe sovereign nations can make a part of their concern homophobia and the lack of AIDS services in their own homelands.”¹⁴ Deborah Miranda also recognizes the overlaps between indigeneity and sexuality in her examination of Native women’s love poetry and erotics: “we cannot be allowed to see indigenous women in all their erotic glory without also *seeing* and acknowledging all that has been done to make those women—their bodies and cultures—extinct.”¹⁵ Driskill extends such contentions, forwarding the concept of erotic sovereignty: “A Sovereign Erotic is a return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality that are ever-present in both the human and more-than-human world, but erased and hidden by colonial cultures.” S/he explains that “healing our sexualities as First Nations people is braided with the legacy of historical trauma and the ongoing process of decolonization. Two-Spirits are integral to this struggle.”¹⁶ In these theories, the legacies of racism, colonialism, sexism, and homophobia function as a palimpsest. Rather than situating such legacies as separate and separated issues, and thus putting queer Native people in the position of having to choose allegiances, Womack, Miranda, and Driskill argue for a more nuanced resistance to colonialism and for fully articulated understandings of queer Native realities. I suggest that Alexie’s work is part of this project.

Alexie’s exploration of the liminal spaces in which queer desire and Indian identity meld is evidenced by his narrator’s description of and reaction to his experience with the fighter in “The Toughest Indian in the World.” Halfway through what is, for the narrator, a nearly sleepless night, the fighter joins him in the hotel bed and begins to caress him. Their foreplay sends the fighter in search of condoms while,

as the narrator says in retrospect, “for reasons I could not explain then and cannot explain now, I kicked off my underwear and rolled over on my stomach.” Once the condom is in place the fighter asks, “Are you ready?”, to which the narrator replies, “I’m not gay.” This exchange, which undoubtedly plays a large part in reviewers’ heterosexual readings of Alexie’s story, points to the ephemeral nature of sexual identity categories—at the very moment of penetration, the narrator is compelled to reject the possibility that his actions are sutured to any specific subject position. But while the narrator might deny a tie between his *sexual* identification and his actions, he acknowledges, on the other hand, a correlation between his desire for the fighter and his desire to reconnect with his ethnic heritage. He says, “I wanted him to save me. He didn’t say anything. He just pumped into me for a few minutes, came with a loud sigh, and then pulled out. I quickly rolled off the bed and went into the bathroom. I locked the door behind me and stood in the dark. I smelled like salmon.” Although the fighter departs shortly after their brief encounter, the narrator is left “feeling stronger” (*TI*, 32–33). And, despite his denial of a queer identity, the scent of salmon suggests that Alexie’s protagonist is productively enabled by his sexual encounter with the fighter. Signifying birth and renewal, sustenance and interconnectedness, the salmon, for Northwest Indians like Alexie and his main character in “The Toughest Indian in the World,” is both traditional food and, correspondingly, a regionally specific sacred symbol depicted in art and daily life.

In light of the text’s references to salmon, I argue that the narrator’s queer relationship to the fighter is situated as an avenue of transformation. Though the narrator initially constructs his understanding of indigeneity through references to dominant markers of Indian identity, he now augments that generic Plains-based vision with a more specific reference to his own Spokane background. In the final scene of Alexie’s story the narrator experiences an undefined but undeniable epiphany that further links his sexual experience to a process of decolonialization:

I woke early the next morning, before sunrise, and went out into the world. I walked past my car. I stepped on to the pavement, still warm from the previous day’s sun. In bare feet, I traveled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die. At that moment, if you had broken open my heart you could have looked inside and seen the thin white skeletons of one thousand salmon.

The concluding metaphor ties the narrator again to the salmon. According to the narrator's father, the "salmon—our hope—would never come back." But such "cruel" lessons are called into question by the text. The narrator's intention to return home, a place where, as he explains, "I hardly ever go," is triggered by queer sex with an indigenous stranger (*TI*, 33–34, 21, 27). And while the sex itself leaves him carrying the salmon's scent, the entire experience leaves him as the salmon embodied. Just as in Craig Womack's injunction, here we see an indigenous man who is suddenly able to see beyond "limited definitions in [his] imaginings of [him]self" because of his sexual experience.

While queer experience enables the narrator of "The Toughest Indian in the World" to begin a journey home, such is not the case for Sara Polatkin, the Spokane lesbian in Alexie's "Indian Country." In this story Alexie abandons the metaphor of cultural renewal, exploring instead the consequences of homophobia for familial relationships and, by extension, for Indian peoples and nations. The protagonist of the story, the heterosexual Coeur d'Alene Low Man Smith, acts as the reader's window into the fraught dinner encounter where Sara's parents, Sid and Estelle, meet Sara's white lover, Tracy Johnson. As the encounter unfolds, the intricacies of family, love, and sex are played out over salmon specials in the neutral territory of the Holiday Inn.

"Indian Country" does not attempt to offer a window into a specifically Native lesbian experience; instead, Alexie presents a highly mediated account in which Low Man takes center stage.¹⁷ The story begins with the abrupt end to Low Man's romantic dream as he arrives in Missoula, Montana to discover that the woman he had hoped to marry has just married someone else. Low Man's subsequent search for validation leads him to the local book store where he is tracked and detained by police who have been alerted to his erratic behavior. And since, as Low Man explains to the one person he knows in Missoula, his college friend, Tracy, "The police . . . just don't want me to be alone tonight," Tracy is left with no choice but to bring him with her to meet Sara's parents (*TI*, 136). The tumultuous meeting, which Low Man exacerbates, sets up a classic confrontation in which Sara must choose between her partner and her sexuality on the one hand and her family and culture on the other.

Although Sara's choices are at the heart of my analysis of "Indian Country," the narrative also toys with the archetypal heterosexual male fantasy in which a man is at the center of a lesbian encounter. One example of this triad occurs when Low Man first meets Sara. After Tracy collects Low Man from the police station, the two then pick

Sara up for dinner. In the truck, Low Man “watche[s] as the women lean over him to kiss each other. He could smell their perfume” (TI, 138). Low Man’s voyeuristic intrusion into the two women’s intimacy is followed by back-and-forth banter in which Low Man and Sara exchange barbs about the nature of their relationships to Tracy. The exchange highlights the fact that Low Man’s romantic attachment to Tracy, despite never having been reciprocated, remains staunchly in place. Low Man’s desire for Tracy underscores one of the limitations of the story: because the limited omniscient narrative perspective is largely tied to Low Man’s point of view, the two women’s relationship is circumscribed by an ever-present insistence on heterosexuality. As a reader, I initially read this limitation as a failure of vision on the part of the author. At first glance, “Indian Country” contains none of the sex or the more intimate sense of queer connection found in “The Toughest Indian in the World.” On the most basic level, I thought: Alexie, a heterosexually identified male writer, has “got it wrong.” But after returning to *The Toughest Indian in the World* repeatedly both in and out of the classroom, I have come to believe that rather than being inaccurate, this story’s highly mediated perspective on queerness offers a useful window into the way contemporary U.S. society attempts to contain lesbian identities within dominant heterosexist narratives. Alexie’s story suggests, rightly I would argue, that despite gains in theoretical understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality, we have not come far in the nearly twenty-five plus years since Adrienne Rich first offered her famous critique of compulsory heterosexuality.¹⁸ In the end, Alexie’s story is an object lesson about the consequences of homophobia—through the limited and limiting perspectives of Low Man and of Sara’s parents, Alexie demonstrates the enormity of the obstacles often faced by contemporary queer folks in their everyday lives. And while such realities are not necessarily bounded by race or culture, Alexie shows how considerations of both can further complicate familial relationships.

When the discussion between Sara and Low Man concludes, Low Man is sitting between the two women across the table from Sara’s parents. He serves as both a physical and a psychological barrier in the scene since his very presence incites Sid, Sara’s father, to a display of sexism intended to silence the two women. Ignoring Sara and Tracy entirely, Sara’s father focuses solely on Low Man, grilling him about his religious beliefs and telling him “Why don’t you and I pretend we’re alone here. Let’s pretend this is a country of men.” Sid peppers Low Man with a barrage of questions about Low Man’s relationship to Christianity and to Jesus as a savior figure, finally “moving from ques-

tion to command": "Please, Low, tell me what you think about Jesus." Low Man's single, noncommittal answer—"I'm not a Christian. Let them have their Jesus"—does not deter Sara's father since Low Man, despite being the object of Sid's conversation, is clearly not the object of his intent. Sid's next question—"Tell me, then, what do you think their Jesus would say about lesbian marriage?"—clarifies the actual targets of his barbed religious rhetoric (*TI*, 140–42). And since, prior to the dinner, Sara had informed her parents of her intention to marry Tracy, Sid's question is by no means idle. His sexism, as evidenced in his insistent focus on Low Man to the exclusion of the three women at the table, is thereby wedded to the heterosexism and homophobia that underlies his conservative version of Christianity. The exchange serves to demonstrate how such oppressions routinely intersect.

Irony abounds in the ensuing scene, in which Alexie captures, in turn, the subtle interplay of race, gender, history, culture, and sexuality as all of the characters grapple with the way their own desires challenge the beliefs of those they love. Through it all, Low Man stands as the figure of heterosexual attachment; even as Tracy fights for the legitimacy of her relationship to Sara, Low Man continues to watch her, reading every word, every imagined sign, as the potential fulfillment of his poorly concealed desire for a romantic attachment to her. Low Man's failure to release his irrational hope demonstrates not the strength of his feelings, but instead, the strength of his belief in heterosexuality itself. The situation incites Low Man's flashback to a heated conversation with Tracy: "*Low, she'd said to him in anger all those years ago, I'm never going to love you that way. Never. Can you please understand that? I can't change who I am. I don't want to change who I am. And if you ever touch me again, I swear I will hate you forever.*" Low Man's memory is triggered by Tracy's flash of anger at Sara's mother's "We came here with love, . . . We came here to forgive" (*TI*, 142). Just as Tracy repudiated Low Man's sexual advances so many years before, so now does she repudiate the suggestion that her sexual object choice necessitates "forgiveness." Her anger in each case points to her recognition of the validity of her subject position as a lesbian. Low Man's relentless heterosexual desire and Estelle's less than implicit suggestion that lesbianism is inherently transgressive both act as attempted cultural constraints. Tracy casts each off, but like the process of coming out as queer, which one must replicate ad infinitum, so, it seems, must she continually reiterate the legitimacy of lesbian identity. In each case, Alexie demonstrates how dominant versions of heterosexuality can be wielded like weapons.

Low Man's position in "Indian Country," then, symbolized on one

hand heterosexual privilege, and on another persistent heterosexist attempts at erasure. In each case, however, because readers are tied to Low Man's perspective, they see that he recognizes the impossibility of categorizing and thereby containing human relationships even as he reinforces dominant stereotypes. For example, as a Coeur' d'Alene, Low Man is well aware of the historical irony of an Indian invoking Christianity as a disciplinary mechanism. He openly mocks Sid's attempts to do so by queering Jesus and highlighting his status as outsider:

“Just think about it. I mean, there Jesus was, sticking up for the poor, the disadvantaged, the disabled. Who else but a fag would be that liberal, huh? And, damn, Jesus hung out with twelve guys wearing great robes and great hair and never, ever talked about women. Tell me Sidney, what kind of guys never talk about women?”

In a moment of camaraderie over Low Man's religious irreverence, Tracy cries out in answer to his final question: “Fags!” Besides undercutting Sid's religious rhetoric and allying himself with Tracy, Low Man also draws attention to the sexism inherent in Sid's insistent denial of female agency. At the same time, however, he himself denies Tracy's subjectivity by refusing to accept her lesbianism. Thus, by the end of the story, Low Man's heterosexual desire for Tracy allies him not with her, as he so hopes, but instead with Sara's father and all he represents. Other moments in the story further reinforce this unlikely alliance: when Low Man looks at Tracy and Sara, he thinks that he, too, “want[s] to separate them”; later, Low Man explicitly tells Sid, “I want to take Tracy out of here. I want to take her back home with me. I want her to fall in love with me” (*TI*, 142–47). Like Sara's father, Low Man continually attempts to contain and control the inherently unruly nature of queer desire. His repeated failures to subsume Tracy's lesbianism beneath his more and more overt expressions of heterosexual desire become almost Foucauldian in their spiraling replication. Together, Sid's attempts to silence his daughter and her partner and Low Man's attempts to subsume queer desire within a heterosexual matrix represent a classic explosion, rather than repression, of discourse. Rather than silencing queerness, Low Man and Sid's speech acts make queerness doubly visible.

In the chaos at the dinner table, Low Man's insistence on heterosexual desire serves for Tracy's partner, Sara, as a reminder that heterosexism and problematic gender performances are by no means limited to dominant culture. For example, when Low Man exacer-

bates the already fraught dinner conversation by asking sexually explicit questions designed to shock her father, "Sara looked at Low and wondered yet again why Indian men insisted on being warriors. *Put down your bows and arrows*, she wanted to scream at Low, at her father, at every hypermasculine Injun in the world. *Put down your fucking guns and pick up your kids.*" But as Sara recognizes, Low Man is far from coming to such an epiphany. Moreover, Sara sees that although Low Man's masculine posturing at the dinner table would seem to challenge Sid's homophobia, it ultimately replicates it, replacing homophobia with heterosexism. Sara quietly acknowledges this irony, "understanding that Indian men wanted to own the world just as much as white men did. They just wanted it for different reasons" (*TI*, 144–45). With this exchange, Alexie pulls the rug out from under readers who might romanticize Indian culture as an avenue of escape from dominant modes of gender performance.¹⁹

In the end, the intersections of culture and sexuality in "Indian Country" are defined in ways that diametrically oppose the same investigations in "The Toughest Indian in the World": while queer sexuality engenders cultural affiliation in "The Toughest Indian," it is situated as the barrier to such affiliations in "Indian Country." These lines are drawn early in the story when Tracy explains to Low Man, "I'm freaking out her parents. Completely. Not only am I a lesbian but I'm also white." The tie between whiteness and queer identity—which Low Man calls the "double whammy"—is a classic invocation of the stereotype in which "queerness" is cast as a "white man's disease." Sid reinforces such connections when he categorically states: "My daughter wasn't, wasn't a gay until she met this, this white woman" (*TI*, 137, 146). His denial, which implicitly situates Tracy as the "cause" of his daughter's queerness, invokes the historical erasure of accepted traditions of gender variance in many indigenous communities.

Sid's suggestion that homosexuality is, like English or strong coffee, a product of assimilation into white society is untrue. As anthropologist Sabine Lang points out, reports of accepted gender variance practices among indigenous peoples in what is now the present-day U.S. have been recorded "[e]ver since Europeans came into contact with North American Indian cultures."²⁰ While Sid's Christianity *is* a product of assimilation, Two-Spirit identity is not.²¹ But though such history might be undeniable, it holds little sway in the face of the homophobia that has come to characterize responses to non-dominant sex/gender categories in many Native communities. On a positive note, according to the 2000 U.S. census, "Native women on 43 different reservations told census interviewers that they lived in a fe-

male, same-sex partnered household . . . with the numbers totaling just over 4,000 lesbian couples in all.”²² But Cherokee-Choctaw journalist Diane Anderson-Minshall suggests that many indigenous urban queer folks doubt the accuracy of these numbers. Anderson-Minshall herself found that, in her own research for an article on Native lesbians, “tribal elders and reservation leaders weren’t interested in talking about their queer citizens. . . . I contacted more than 100 tribal council members, museum curators and PR reps from reservations in Colorado, Connecticut, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Idaho and California, and none were willing to comment.”²³ Such silences lead to the sort of typified responses Alexie presents in “Indian Country,” the sort of responses that bring Qwo-Li Driskill to ask, “How do we as Two-Spirits remain whole and confident in our bodies and in our traditions when loss attempts to smother us?”²⁴

As Driskill’s comment emphasizes, Sid’s suggestion that lesbianism is somehow alien to indigenous communities dichotomizes queer and Native American identities. Craig Womack invokes a Hank Williams analogy to describe the internal divisions such dichotomies create:

[T]here was something about those Hank Williams songs. . . . I don’t know quite how to put my finger on it, but it has to do with alienation, loneliness, a shitload of pain, and not being able to speak to the one you love, remaining hidden and silent in the shadows for a lifetime. The songs have everything to do with being queer; the songs have everything to do with being Indian . . . the beauty and terror of both identities.²⁵

In Alexie’s short story, this division means that Sara is positioned between her family and the cultural ties they represent and her lover. After their dinner explodes into acrimony, Tracy gets up from the table, at which time Sara confronts a difficult decision; she looks at her parents, thinking, “Together, the three of them had buried dozens of loved ones. The three of them know all the same mourning songs. Two of them had loved each other enough to conceive the third. They had invented her! She was their Monster; she was surely going to murder them.”

Angry and hurt, Sid leaves her no middle ground, saying, “If you leave now, . . . Don’t you ever call us. Don’t you ever talk to us again.” For Sara, the “murderous” choice, at least as constructed in the heat of her father’s anger, seems to be whether or not she will agree to remain “hidden and silent in the shadows” or whether she walks away. Thus, when Sara stands to follow Tracy, turning from the table and

literally stepping “away from the salmon” on her plate, she figuratively steps away from the strictures and love of her family and all they represent in terms of her cultural ties (*TI*, 147). Her experience evokes a scene from Alexie’s film *The Business of Fancydancing*, in which Seymour Polatkin’s white lover tells him, “I’m your tribe now.” Sid’s ultimatum and the melee that follows reinforces the story’s critique of homophobia, suggesting that such attitudes harm indigenous communities by forcing queer Native people to make radical and unnecessary choices.

Together, “Indian Country” and “The Toughest Indian in the World” bring conversations about queer Native literature and queer Native people to the fore in the larger field of American literature. Given Alexie’s position as one of, if not most likely *the* most recognizable and most frequently taught American Indian author in current U.S. literature today, his work attains a kind of exposure that few Native authors receive. And, whether an author embraces it or not, with exposure comes the power to influence public perception. In an era in which stereotypical images of Indians are still used to sell butter and football, and homophobia is being further codified by state laws, Alexie’s representations of queer and Native and queer Native identities are important cultural artifacts and influences, forwarding complex understandings about the productive intersections of sexuality and culture. Craig Womack talks about such intersections in personal terms: “I began to see that every angle of vision from which I saw myself was refracted through the larger lens of being Indian and fighting for survival. It was no longer a matter of reconciling being gay with being Indian but of being Indian, period, and understanding being gay in Indian terms.”²⁶ The melding of queerness with Indian identity is at its heart, as Womack emphasizes, a political issue. “The Toughest Indian in the World” addresses such concerns by depicting a character who does not choose, as Sara must in “Indian Country,” between queer desire and American Indian community. Instead, Alexie’s unnamed narrator in “The Toughest Indian in the World” finds queerness an avenue for cultural identification, thereby “braid[ing]” “the legacy of historical trauma”—as evidenced by manifestations of homophobia—with what Driskill calls the “ongoing process of decolonization.”²⁷ By contrast, “Indian Country,” a story about both connection and misperception, is not nearly so celebratory. It is, however, just as important to understanding the often difficult decisions faced by contemporary Two-Spirit people. “Indian Country,” like “The Toughest Indian in the World,” is ultimately an activist text that highlights the dangerous consequences homopho-

bia can have for Indian people and communities. Alexie's story points to the fact that it is not queerness, but negative and uninformed reactions to queerness that can cause queer Native people to be separated from their tribal communities. Alexie is not creating such a tradition of activism. Instead, he allies himself with those Two-Spirit authors and activists—Beth Brant, Barbara Cameron, Chrystos, Qwo-Li Driskill, Janice Gould, Joy Harjo, Daniel Heath Justice, Maurice Kenny, Deborah Miranda, Janet McAdams, Vicki Sears, and Craig Womack, to name just a few—who have been and are writing and fighting for social justice and sovereignty.

Notes

I would like to offer thanks to Jane Hafen for encouraging me to write this essay.

¹ I use “American Indian,” “Native American” and “Native” interchangeably when referring to indigenous people of North America. As this essay focuses primarily on American Indians, I at times include First Nations, or indigenous Canadian writers, within these blanket terms as well. While sometimes necessary, such terminology is inherently inaccurate as it groups hundreds of differing Native nations with radically different languages, belief systems, and histories under a single name.

² Will Roscoe, “Native North American Literature,” *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* (Henry Holt: New York, 1995), 514–15.

³ The term “Two-Spirit” was coined at a 1990 Winnepeg meeting as, in part, a way to resist the history of colonization and homophobia that was tied to “berdache,” a derogatory term historically used by non-Native anthropologists and missionaries to refer to indigenous people whose sexualities did not fit within the dominant heterosexual matrix. Referring to queer Native peoples in the U.S. and Canada, the term denotes the distinctly different histories that often separate queer American Indian people and histories from non-Native queer people and histories. For more background, see Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang's edited collection *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality and Spirituality* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press), 1997.

⁴ The problem in these two texts, which I use as examples of a larger trend, is not the inclusion of negatively depicted queer characters, but the way that representations of non-normative sexualities are uncritically paired with psychological and social deviance as if one begets the other. Such pairings have long histories in literature and film where representations of not only queerness, but also of disability, race, and culture are represented as either dangerous or tragic if they do not align with dominant norms.

⁵ A notable exception to this claim can be found in the recent work of Louise Erdrich. Cyprian Lazarre, a queer Ojibwe circus performer, is central to Erdrich's *The Master Butcher's Singing Club* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), while Erdrich's novel *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) includes references to the Ojibwe people's traditional acceptance of indigenous Two-Spirit traditions and a brief historical vignette in which a two-spirit character appears. Erdrich's earlier work also includes characters who are Native lesbians. For more on the queer characters in Erdrich, see Julie Barak, "Blurs, Blends, Berdaches: Gender Mixing in the Novels of Louise Erdrich," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 8, no. 3 (1996), 49–62. While such inclusions are important, I would argue that Alexie's work is markedly different in light of the centrality of queer issues to both the two short stories examined here and to his film, *The Business of Fancydancing* (Wellspring, 2002).

⁶ Alexie is clear about his aims in *The Business of Fancydancing*. For example, in an interview with filmcritic.com, he says, "I've spent more time in urban situations and in the art world. I've made more friends who are gay. So it's a huge part of my life. . . . Part of me writing about gay people in this movie was a larger social effort. I knew a lot of Indians will see this movie, and there's a lot of homophobes in the Indian world, so I wanted to slap them in the face a bit." Quoted in Aileo Weinmann, "Hold Me Closer, Fancydancer: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," *Filmcritic.com*, 2002 <<http://www.filmcritic.com/misc/emporium.nsf/95a45e26914c25ff862562bb006a85f2/1adbe1e88680513188256c340015b7b9?OpenDocument>>.

⁷ Polly Paddock Gossett, "Tribal Past is a Strong Presence in Alexie's *Toughest Indian*," *The Charlotte Observer*, July 2, 2000, sec. Bookweek, 6F.

⁸ Ken Foster, "Bold, Sexy Stories from Alexie," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 21, 2000 <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2000/05/21/RV25336.DTL>>.

⁹ Joelle Fraser, "An Interview with Sherman Alexie," *Iowa Review* 30 (Winter 2000–2001), 59.

¹⁰ Qwo-Li Driskill, "Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic," *Studies in American Indian Literature* 16, no. 2 (2004), 54.

¹¹ *Two-Spirit People*, 2.

¹² Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (New York: Atlantic, 2000), 26; hereafter cited parenthetically as *TI*.

¹³ This intertwining of ethnic and queer identities is also a place where Alexie's representations of queer identities depart from Erdrich's. While Alexie's narrator searches for identity through a queer encounter, Erdrich's characters tend to separate and/or minimize the relationships between queerness and indigeneity. For example, the Two-Spirit runner in *The Last Report on the Miracles of Little No Horse* is a minor, one-dimensional character who runs off into the sunset; Agnes

DeWitt's explorations of gender/sexuality in the same text are bounded by her whiteness; and, in *Master Butcher's Singing Club*, Cyprian Lazzarre initially hides both his queer desire and his Ojibwe heritage. Though Cyprian ultimately enters a same-sex relationship, he does so outside the boundaries of the text as he and his partner disappear from the storyline. While these representations merit further study, they present much less interplay between queerness and ethnicity than that depicted in *The Toughest Indian in the World*.

¹⁴ Craig Womack, "Politicizing HIV Prevention in Indian Country," in *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods*, ed. Jace Weaver (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 215.

¹⁵ Deborah A. Miranda, "Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy: Searching for American Indian Women's Love Poetry and Erotics," *Frontiers* 23, no. 2 (2002), 145.

¹⁶ Driskill, 56, 51.

¹⁷ Alexie himself said, "I pay attention to the stories of the least powerful group in the country: gay Native women. . . . We all feel lonely and isolated. Perhaps my work helps lesbian Native women feel less alone in the world." Qtd. in Diana Anderson-Minshall, "Without Reservations: Native American Lesbians Struggle to Find Their Way," *Curve* 13, no. 2 (2003): 37.

¹⁸ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (1980), 631–60.

¹⁹ This disruption of romanticism is especially relevant in the context of Queer Native history in which GLBTQ/Two-Spirit traditions and identities are so often co-opted by dominant culture. See the introduction of *Two-Spirit People* and Womack's "Politicizing HIV in Indian Country" for two of the many existing discussions of this pattern.

²⁰ Sabine Lang, "Various Kinds of Two-Spirit People: Gender Variance and Homosexuality in Native American Communities," in *Two-Spirit People*, 100.

²¹ I don't mean to invoke a romanticized, nineteenth-century version of identity in which Christianity is incompatible with Indian traditions. A large percentage of contemporary American Indian people are Christian. Instead, what I'm pointing to here is how certain aspects of Christianity are used in Alexie's story and elsewhere to deny the validity of Two-Spirit Native traditions that predate the introduction of Christian belief systems.

²² Anderson-Minshall, 36.

²³ Anderson-Minshall, 34–35.

²⁴ Driskill, 56.

²⁵ Craig Womack, "Howling at the Moon: the Queer but True Story of My Life

as a Hank Williams Song,” in *As We Are Now: Mixblood Essays on Race and Identity*, ed. William S. Penn (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 38.

²⁶ Womack, “Howling,” 45.

²⁸ Driskill, 51.

