WHORES AND HITCHHIKERS: SEXUALITY AS DECOLONIZATION IN *THE TOUGHEST INDIAN IN THE WORLD*

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About the Author

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Native American voices have notoriously been left unheard and unappreciated, not just in social contexts, but also in literature circles. Even when natives are somewhat represented, they are often forced into stereotypes of "nature-loving" and "primitive." However, looking at contemporary Native American literature proves the contrary: Natives are not as one-note as many people may perceive. This is presented in their use of urban settings, modern technology, and, possibly the most interesting, their exploration of

sexuality and the act of sex itself. This is exemplified in Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World,* specifically the titular short story and "Indian Country." This paper argues that sexuality uniquely emerges in Native Literature through queer relationships to separate Native people from the dominant culture, to separate themselves from the social restrictions that have been forced upon them by centuries of colonization.

The stereotypes that Native Americans have been labelled with have stunted their growth and progress in a society where they are not the dominant culture. Natives have often been represented in popular culture with men being "buckskin rippers" and women "as either squaw sluts or Indian princesses" (Miranda 140). These stereotypes by the mainstream have prevented any positive social movement from Native people. This connection to primitive conventions creates a barrier for many contemporary authors, preventing them from being published unless they fall into the "first ecologist or romanticized Indian princesses" labels (Miranda 140). This notion extends to the exploration of sexuality in Native literature. Limits of sexuality and gender have been set by colonial standards that do not align with norms that were in place before Western expansion. It was not until 1990 that Native activists and academics congregated to dispute the Eurocentric history that has been written over their own, coining the term "Two Spirit" to challenge the non-Native expression "berdache," a term used to label any indigenous sexualities that were different from dichotomy established by the colonizers (Tatonetti, *Help and Stories* 151). Until relatively recently, fitting into the dominant culture meant "denying or erasing a sexuality that has already been completely misrepresented by the dominant culture" (Miranda 140). Natives ended up internalizing the stereotypes and enforcing the conviction that "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" (Driskill 54).

When looking at Sherman Alexie's short story collection *The Toughest Indian in the World*, it is apparent that his inclusion of nontraditional sexuality is a challenge to the dominant culture. It is important to note that Alexie is not the first Native American author to write about topics of sex, sexuality, and relationships, with authors like Chrystos and Joy Harjo being published decades before *The Toughest Indian in the World*. Alexie is just the first to jump into the mainstream, him being a man helping him in that regard (Miranda 137). However, Alexie's inclusion of queerness and queer sex breaks the barriers of the "rigid" categories that many of his critics try to confine him to (Tatonetti *Sex and Salmon* 203). "Indian Country" and the story the collection is named after, "The Toughest Indian in the World," show sexuality as a way of breaking away from the dominant culture.

As Tatonetti points out, "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" (*Sex and Salmon* 202). "Indian Country" starts with Low Man Smith, the main antagonist, stepping off a plane to meet Carlotta, a Navajo woman whom he plans to marry. Low Man is a Coeur d'Alene Indian. However, his mother is white, he cannot speak his own tribal language, and he "had visited his home reservation only six times in his life" (Alexie *Toughest Indian* 121). Low Man plans to "begin his new life" with Carlotta "with a simple declaration: *Thank you for inviting me*" (Alexie *Toughest Indian* 121). To Low Man, this invitation represents a return to his roots. He has created an image of what an "Indian" is: someone who speaks their tribal language, someone who lives or frequently visits the reservation. The dominant culture has convinced him that an "Indian" is the "buckskin ripper" that Miranda warns about. This sentiment is mirrored in Sherman Alexie's lived experience. In a 2008 interview with KCTS, Alexie said that "The notion of any sort of success, was seen as being white. So, I was labeled early on as an 'apple.' Red on the outside, white on the inside." In the same interview, Alexie states that all of his stories are "autobiography,"

making the connection between Low Man and Alexie even more obvious, as both went to schools outside of the reservation, becoming successful authors.

"The Toughest Indian in the World" begins in a very similar manner as "Indian Country." The unnamed narrator, after taking a moment to explain his relationship with his father, talks about a sexual relationship that he had with a white female coworker. However, even though the narrator presents us with a heterosexual relationship, he speaks about the dissatisfaction that he experienced with the relationship, specifically during lovemaking:

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 consciousness with a sudden start when I finally did come, more out of reflex than passion (Alexie *Toughest Indian* 25).

Tatonetti points out that the way the narrator describes this event does not fall in line 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'" (*Sex and Salmon* 205). Both stories start in a place of discomfort for the main character, but most likely familiarity for the reader. Like in "Indian Country," the narrator of "The Toughest Indian in the World" creates a caricature of what an Indian is. When he picks up the hitchhiker, he creates a facade of what he thinks an Indian should be for someone who spends time on the reservation, making a point to use "enit" to show the hitchhiker, a reservation Indian, that the narrator had "grown up on the rez, in the woods, with every Indian in the world" (Alexie *Toughest Indian* 26). Once again, the narrator's perception of what an Indian should be is narrow. He does not see himself as an Indian because he rarely visits the Spokane reservation that he has lived an hour away from for the past 12 years (27). To make up for this, he uses colloquialisms and even

says, "'What tribe are you?' I asked him, inverting the last two words to sound as aboriginal as possible" and explicitly states "I felt as Indian as Indian gets" when he accepts the jerky from the hitchhiker (26). His participation in the activity of the hitchhiker makes him feel more Indian than he would otherwise.

Both characters share the common feeling of "not being Indian enough" while living in the dominant culture and undergoing heterosexual experiences. Their outlook starts to shift, however, when they encounter an outlier; either when they encounter someone who does not fall into the heteronormative social ideals that have been pushed on them, or when they experience attraction themselves. For the narrator in "The Toughest Indian in the World," it is the latter. His encounter in the car, before he ultimately has sex with the hitchhiker, gives us hints that the character might not be as straight as he may have led us to believe. The narrator spends a considerable amount of time watching the small details and mannerisms of the hitchhiker, paying close attention to his hands: "The hitchhiker looked down at his hands, flexed them into fists. I could tell it hurt him to do that" (Alexie *Toughest Indian* 26), "He rubbed his hands together. I could see fresh wounds,", and "watching him for a little too long" while driving, leading to the narrator almost driving off the road, cars honking at them (28). This special attention, to the point of putting their lives at risk, shows a break away from the heterosexuality he has tried to paint himself in.

This box that the narrator traps himself and other Native Americans in shows the fear of progression when it comes to Native Culture and perception. The stereotypes set in place by the dominant culture through media and social standards lead to restricting the boundaries of what a Native is. These types of restrictions "register a sort of ethnocentric regression that holds contemporary American Indians back from progression" (Kim 5), exemplified by their idea that an Indian must be on the rez, must be nature-loving, must eat jerky.

These "musts" lead the narrator in "The Toughest Indian" and the Low Man Smith towards reaching to become the stereotypes.

The narrator in "The Toughest Indian in the World" has a sexual encounter with the hitchhiker that provides an interesting revelation for him. Once he reaches the destination the hitchhiker asked for, the narrator asks him to stay with him for the night, wanting to tell the hitchhiker "that [he] picks up all Indian hitchhikers, young and old, men and women, and get them a little closer to home, even if I can't get them all the way…that the night sky was a graveyard," and wanting to know "if he was the toughest Indian in the world," establishing that the narrator has formed some sort of attraction towards the hitchhiker (31). This attraction comes to its apex when the hitchhiker grabs the narrator's penis while they are trying to sleep, eventually leading to them having sex. When the hitchhiker pushes himself into the narrator, the narrator states, "I wanted him to save me" (32). The narrator sees sex as redemption. Edward A. Hagan in his chapter "The Headache and the Aspirin," from his book *Goodbye Yeats and O'Neill,* argues that sex is a disease. It brings us into the world and thus into suffering. However, sex is also a cure (235). For the narrator, sex with an Indian from the reservation is treated as a "cure for the ailments of mainstream American society" (Hagan 138). When looking at his prior relationship with his coworker, it is safe to say that she can represent the exploitation of non-white people in American society, her being "one of those white women who date only brown-skinned guys," claiming that white men "bore" her (Alexie *Toughest Indian* 24). "Brown-skinned" guys are seen as an object for her own desire, as exotic. This is apparent by his reaction to their sex, being uninterested and tired. Sex with the hitchhiker is the "aspirin" for the "headache" that is white society and the effects of colonialism. His exploration, not just of sex with a Native person, but with another man, creates a break in the expectations that a heteronormative society has set in place, especially for Native people. When the hitchhiker comes, the narrator moves into the bathroom, locks the door, and states: "I smelled like salmon" (32). Salmon is mentioned at the beginning of

the story as a representation of hope that was only present in the hitchhikers that he picked up. In the context of the story, Alexie is referencing the acquisition of Native land by the United States to erect dams, leading to the total disappearance of salmon, destroying their food supply and a "sacred symbol in Spokane art and daily life" (LeMay 5). In fact, his father had advised him that when encountering white people, "they'll still smell the salmon on you, the dead salmon, and that will make white people dangerous" (Alexie *Toughest Indian* 21). The dominant demographic is aware of the minority and outsider groups present within their society. In an interview with Bill Moyers in 2013, Sherman Alexie calls himself an "Indigenous Immigrant," a phrase implying an othering in modern-day society of Indigenous people (Alexie *Moyers & Company*). Sex for the narrator becomes a way around this "othering"; as Tatonetti states, the encounter becomes an "avenue for cultural renewal," sharing an intimate experience with another Native American, the experience itself lying outside of the expectations set for relationships (Tatonetti *Sex and Salmon* 206).

While it is apparent that queer sex is a form of redemption in "The Toughest Indian in the World," in "Indian Country" there are no explicit sexual acts written. Only a same-sex couple and a confrontation with other Natives. The presentation of the dominant culture is also different in "Indian Country," having other Native Americans represent the pressure against progress. In "Indian Country," Low Man Smith meets up with one of his friends from college, Tracey, who is planning on getting married to her girlfriend soon. Low Man is invited to a dinner where Tracey and her fiancée, Sara, are being confronted about their marriage by Sara's parents. The main contention with Tracey and Sara's marriage from their parents' viewpoint is that it goes against their religious values. Sara's parents are Mormon, a religion that was created by settlers, with Mormon settlements having famously expanded into Navajo territory in Utah in the 1870s. There has always been enormous pressure from settlers to convert Native Americans to Christian religions, with Mormonism being seen as one of the most successful.

An estimated 20% of the Navajo population were baptized as Mormon in 1992 (Pavlik 21).

Sara's father, Sid, evokes Mormon values, asking as the dominant culture to Low Man, "Tell me, then, what do you think their Jesus would say about lesbian marriage?" (Alexie *Indian Country* 141), cutting right to the chase. Their contention with the queer relationship is a colonial religion. Low Man even pokes fun at their religion calling Jesus a "fag:"

"No, no, no," continues Low, "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?"
"Fags!" shouted Tracy (142).

Low Man's analysis of Jesus's actions versus the standards that his followers place on other people breaks open the barriers that Sid is trying to place on Tracey and Sara. Like in "The Toughest Indian in the World," the characters are shaped by the dominant culture to create a perception of what an "Indian" should be. Low Man believes that he should be on the reservation. Sid, once again representing the dominant culture, believes that heterosexual relationships make a "good Indian" while Low Man creates cracks in his heteronormative worldview through the actions of his own prophet.

The imagery of salmon from "The Toughest Indian in the World," is brought about again in "Indian Country," with every character ordering salmon for dinner. As the argument about Sara and Tracey's marriage starts to get more heated, Sid and Estelle, his wife, start to leave, claiming that "Whatever treaties we signed here are broken now" (Alexie *Indian Country* 145). However, the salmon arrives right as they are about to leave. The salmon is what continues the conversation. As they continue the conversation about Tracey

and Sara's relationship, Sid continues to eat his salmon. Alexie then parallels Sid to the United States government removing salmon from the Spokane River, stating: "Sid chewed on his salmon. The great fish was gone from the Spokane River. Disappeared" (145), once again reinforcing that Sid represents the dominant culture. Tracey and Sara use their sexuality to break out. At the end of the story, the two parties do not settle on acceptance. Instead, Low Man insists to Sid that the conservative roles he has tried to impose on these women will never work: "'Sid,' said Low Man. 'These women don't need us. They never did,'" in which Tracey and Sara Walk away, "hand in hand" (147). This leads to Sid claiming ownership of Sara, chasing after them, pushing Tracey out of the way, and grabbing Sara by the elbow stating, "You're coming with us," and shouting "She's my daughter, she's fine," when Low Man stops Sid from slapping his daughter (148). As Low Man comes between them, Sid shifts his blows from Sara to Low Man, eventually leading to both on the ground. Alexie uses this moment to show that "The two Indian men sat on the ground as the white woman [Tracey] stood above them" (148). As the Native Americans fight amongst themselves, the one who still stands above them is the white person, the dominant culture. Sara represents a break away from the infighting and the conservative values being forced onto her by her father through choosing to leave her parents. Low then closes the story by asking Sid, "What are you going to do when she's gone?" (149). Sid's enforcement of the dominant culture has created a rift between him and his daughter. The only way to fix it would be to move away from the stereotypes and values that have been forced on them by Mormon missionaries and colonists. Sara's queerness is what saved her from the regression.

Sid may be stuck in the past, but Low Man is also not free from the cage of stereotypes. With his belief that Natives must be reservation Indians, he is enforcing that Natives must always be the same. This becomes apparent to him when he first lands in Montana and he asks the old man at the airport if he can find a "pop." The old man replies with "Carlotta's [the woman Low Man came to Montana see] been

sober for six years… She told me you drank a lot of soda pop. Said it was your substitute addiction" (124). Alcoholism is infamous for ravaging Native American households, Sherman Alexie even calls alcoholism "endemic" to Native communities (*KCTS*). This is commonly seen because of colonialism, and, as Deborah A. Miranda would call it, "Intergenerational Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome" (138). This Post-colonial Trauma is a result of being forced into reservations by the United States government, stunting any form of progress. Low Man does not drink alcohol, but he has a "substitute addiction" to pop. This sentiment returns when Alexie first introduces Sid and Etelle:

Sid's hair was pulled back in a gray ponytail. So was Estelle's. Both of their faces told stories. Sid's: the recovering alcoholic; the wronged son of a wronged son; the Hamlet of his reservation. Estelle's: the tragic beauty; the woman who stopped drinking because her husband did; the woman who woke in the middle of the night to wash her hands ten times in a row.

Now they were Mormons (140).

Between the allusions to Shakespeare, Alexie paints the picture of recovering alcoholics. Their "substitute addiction:" Mormonism. Their religion becomes a way to cope with the trauma associated with the reservation. However, it is just as destructive to their family as alcohol is, resulting in a split in their family caused by Sara's queerness that Alexie leaves unresolved.

Kim mentions a passage from Alexie where he is responding to critics of his work:

[I]n writing about drunk Indians, I am dealing with stereotypical material. But I
can only respond with the truth... When I write about the destructive effects of alcohol on Indians, I am not writing out of a literary stance or a colonized mind's

need to reinforce stereotypes. I am writing autobiography (5).

Alexie's mention of "the colonized mind's need to reinforce stereotypes," is apparent throughout both "The Toughest Indian in the World" and "Indian Country." The characters in each have created an "ideal Indian": an Indian who lives on the rez, who speaks their tribal language, who eats jerky, who fights other Indians. However, these stereotypes are broken through the queer relationships present in both stories, whether it is through an explicit sexual encounter or exposure to a queer relationship. Sexuality becomes a way of expression, a definition for one's identity. The dominant culture has created standards, whether through stereotypes or religions, that have stunted the growth and progression of Native people. The unnamed narrator of "The Toughest Indian in the World" and Low Man represent these stereotypes. However, Alexie proves through his stories that there is no answer to what makes a Native. The struggle against colonialism toward progress proves to be a nasty fight, not just against postcolonial systems, but also against other non-dominant cultures, like Sid and Estelle. As Kim says it best:

Native identity is not fixed, but is constantly shaped and reshaped in contemporary
American society. In other words, Alexie's fiction represents the ways in which Indians continue to change, survive, and resist all at once (11).

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