

Written by the Body: Gender Expansiveness and Indigenous Non-Cis Masculinities. By Lisa Tatonetti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 293 pages. \$25 paper.

Indigenous queer and two-spirit studies continue to grapple with the impacts of colonial gender impositions. Through boarding schools in the United States, residential schools in Canada, and other widespread assimilation attempts and policies, Indigenous populations adopted and participated in colonial gender binary as a means of survival. Indigenous communities have engaged with what their masculinities look like and reclaim cultural roles and practices. Gender diversity and matrilineal practices of Indigenous communities has been erased and disrupted through forced assimilation to binaristic and patriarchal gender systems.

In *Written by the Body*, Lisa Tatonetti brings together conversations around Indigenous queer studies and masculinities through the examination of a selection of texts representing important aspects of Indigenous gender and masculinities. Tatonetti addresses the body as contextual (relating to what is happening around them), relational (coming from kinship) and embodied. As Tatonetti writes, “Masculinities, the body, and gender intelligibility bring me to forward affect theory as a particularly applicable tool for conversations about the contours, meanings, and creative possibilities of gender in Indigenous texts” (15). Utilizing the importance of affect theory, Tatonetti largely draws on Dian Million’s “felt theory” and its importance for Indigenous feminist analysis (Million, “Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History,” 2009).

Tatonetti begins by discussing the “warrior women” in response to the means in which “concepts of warrior have been discussed at length precisely because Indigenous men have been bombarded with these damaging messages about how they should inhabit manhood” (25). Through the narratives of settlers, Indigenous masculinities have been intricately tied to violence—with the image that many Indigenous men have sought to emulate being violent and patriarchal, despite the respect for women and the matriarchal histories of many Indigenous communities. This is additionally addressed through Bob Antone’s *Indigenous Men and Masculinities*, which more broadly addresses Indigenous masculinities than through Tatonetti’s focus on non-cis masculinities. Tatonetti’s discussion of women warriors analyzes S. Alice Callahan’s *Wynema: A Child of the Forest*, the first novel published by an Indigenous woman in North America where the author centers Lakota warrior women who joined the battle at Wounded Knee. Tatonetti continues to argue that female-identified and gender-variant Indigenous warriors expand kinship traditions rather than invalidate the gender traditions of their communities. Tatonetti’s focus on non-cis masculinities, including those of women-identified individuals, examines the impacts that toxic views

of masculinity have had on Indigenous communities as a whole and refutes the narrative that masculinity equates to male identities.

“Big moms,” a term that Tatonetti uses to refer to women who use their bodies to service their nations, are the women that are often seen as aunties, mentors, and advisers within the community. She begins her discussion on big moms with Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*, arguing that the big mom is a literary cultural hero who moves past toxic masculinity. Tatonetti begins with Alexie’s work because of his own 2018 charges of sexual harassment that embodies the toxicity that big moms challenge, while being stuck in the “cishet settler gender structures that authorize the objectification and abuse of women” (76). Those Tatonetti describes as big moms are important to challenging the violence that exists within Indigenous communities, particularly toward Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people. Indigenous women continue to do what needs to be done, which gets coded as masculine in the settler narrative but has always been the work of women in Indigenous communities.

While left out of mainstream narratives, Indigenous women and two-spirit folks have always played activist roles against heteropatriarchal and settler colonial norms. Indigenous women played roles in mainstream feminism and—as discussed by Tatonetti—the HIV/AIDS pandemic from their beginnings. Despite being active in the community, “(Carole) LaFavor was the only Indigenous person among the impressive roster of HIV/AIDS activists to be appointed to the first Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA)” (138). LaFavor was present at Wounded Knee during the American Indian Movement standoff with federal authorities. Being visibly Indigenous and queer poses a danger to individuals in a settler society, as they become targets of violence, especially sexual violence. Tatonetti uses LaFavor’s public testimony about the sexual violence that she faced (and that is well known to Indigenous women), analyzing the widespread sexual violence being intertwined with pornography and racism. Tatonetti describes LaFavor’s story as an example of “radical love,” which Andrew Jolivet calls for in HIV/AIDS support (Andrew Jolivet, *Indian Blood*, 2016). Her analysis of LaFavor exemplifies the work Indigenous people and organizations do to educate their own communities about prevalent threats, preventing Indigenous communities from continuing to be forgotten in major health crises or used as test subjects for health experiments. Tatonetti provides evidence of the strong activism that two-spirit Indigenous folks have done and continue to do.

When addressing the erotics of responsibility, *Written by the Body* addresses the use of Indigenous gender categories by non-Natives to justify and argue the existence of queerness in history, even though in Indigenous cultural contexts these identities would not be considered queer. Tatonetti addresses Joshua Whitehead’s withdrawal from the Thirtieth Annual Lambda Literary Awards when he was announced as a finalist. He withdrew to refute the equation of two-spirit to the contemporary queer and trans identities. She utilizes his refusal as he rejects Western LGBTQ identities and points out the divisions between Western and Cree identities. Indigenous communities have long histories of rejecting settler colonial recognition politics and identity politics. Tatonetti argues that “the historical existence of gender-expansive traditions in Indigenous communities does not equate to a romantic present in which

nonbinary people exist in their nation in total acceptance and harmony” (214). This section addresses important complexities of settler claims to Indigenous identities as their own, whether it be through overall claims to indigeneity or to specific Indigenous identities and practices. Tatonetti concludes by arguing that literature created by and for non-cis Indigenous people can provide healing and be medicine.

With its literary analysis, *Written by the Body* is a valuable book within literary studies at the graduate and undergraduate level. Tatonetti’s writing is accessible to undergraduate students who are studying literature while also offering important points of analysis for discussion in graduate student seminars. In addition, this book offers important points of analysis within Indigenous studies, ethnic studies, women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, queer studies, history, and English. The book addresses the impacts of colonialism on gender and sexuality and draws on representation of non-cis narratives from within Indigenous communities. This book would be beneficial to and offers important interventions into Indigenous studies and women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, particularly those courses exploring Indigenous gender, sexuality, and two-spirit identities.

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