Outlaw Lovers and Aporetic Politics: Derrida’s *The Politics of Friendship* and Sherman Alexie’s ‘South by Southwest’

Mara Steele

*State University of New York (Buffalo)*

This article provides a comparative reading of Jacques Derrida’s *The Politics of Friendship* with Sherman Alexie’s short story ‘South by Southwest’. In these texts, ‘friendship’ or love is impossible to achieve by seeking conformance to pre-existing models. Instead, it requires faith in unknown possibilities, which will often appear extralegal or marginal. The ‘outlaw lovers’ of Alexie’s story become a device for exploring Derrida’s questions, seeking the meaning of love and friendship on a journey and beyond the horizon. The history of friendship, for Derrida, is historically marked by the exclusionary racist and sexist rhetoric of fraternal groupings—linking its ideals to violent nationalism, as in the case of Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*, where the sovereign decides its friends and enemies so that it may justify killing the latter. Alexie and Derrida’s texts will underscore this aporia with paradoxical themes or phrases: in Alexie’s story, two men attempt to understand what it means to love one another during a “non-violent killing spree,” while Derrida will contemplate the meaning of the phrase Montaigne attributed to Aristotle, ‘oh my friends, there are no friends’.

‘Perhaps friendship, if there is such a thing, must honour what appears impossible here’, writes Jacques Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship*, his investigation of the political history of friendship *qua* brotherhood haunting the Western tradition.\(^1\) Fraternal definitions of democracy endanger the potential for a cosmopolitan hospitality, restricting friendship to autochthonous collectives of gendered sameness and nationalism: the fraternal friend is both male and blood relative. Instead, Derrida challenges the reader to imagine a not-yet-existent space of the political—and of love—in which the other is welcomed as unidentifiable exception; doing so, however, requires a gestural turn away from expecting the known and towards the unrecognizable event on the horizon. For this reason, Derrida suggests that one should travel ‘in the direction of a hyper-aporetic’; instead of insisting on a solution to all contradictions, one should ideally approach ‘knots of thought that promise something else’ beyond an analytical outcome.\(^2\)

In his short story ‘South by Southwest’, Sherman Alexie will also employ tropes of paradox to illustrate the difficulty of knowing what it means to love. Accordingly, a number of clear parallels exist between Alexie and Derrida’s texts, both engaging and precipitating provocative questions while refusing easy solutions. Instead, the small and dangerous word *perhaps* is integral to Derrida’s argument.

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\(^2\) Derrida, *Politics*, p. 199.
while providing a key to understanding the mystifying paradoxes of Alexie’s tale. Derrida identifies the term ‘perhaps’ with the figure of a ‘crossroads’, alluding to a journey and revealing his project to be a quest for possibility beyond the inadequate practices of language.\(^3\) Likewise, Alexie’s story situates two men on an extravagant quest to comprehend the practice of love—an experience that by all normalizing definition has thus far eluded them.

No comparative work appears to have yet attempted to bring Alexie and Derrida into conversation, although both authors routinely remind their readers of the instability of identities and the dangers of uncritically embracing exclusionary traditions and contingent truth claims. The political is never far from the personal for Alexie, whose celebrity as the United States’ most vocal ‘Indian writer’ makes him a distinctive and undeterred representative of a marginalized population. Nevertheless, in the wake of the World Trade Centre attacks of September 11\(^b\), Alexie will often denounce blind tribal loyalties and identity politics, equating such ideology with the self-assured sovereignty of the Bush administration and the dangerous fundamentalism of the attackers, noting his desire to ‘let go of the idea of being right, the idea of making decisions based on imaginary tribes’.\(^4\)

‘Love for me has always been political,’ asserts Alexie, because they both call into question matters of identity, belonging, and loyalties. The Toughest Indian in the World, the collection from which ‘South by Southwest’ comes, is noted by the author and his reviewers as a book primarily concerned with matters of love.\(^5\) Furthermore, writing that it ‘has at its heart the examination of human relationships in all their forms’, Lisa Tatonetti notes that it is also one of the most ‘queer’ of his texts.\(^6\) Representations of homosexuality and bisexuality feature prominently within, frequently as transformative experiences of self-identified straight men that force them to love and relate to the other in previously unimagined ways. Carla Freccero suggests that the term ‘queer’ describes a spectral category inviting the breakdown of identities and collectives, linking it directly to the French philosophical tradition in which Derrida figures prominently. Rather than lending itself to hypostasis of community and boundary-drawing identity politics, Freccero insists that ‘queer’ is a temporal haunting that follows social activity at a close distance, unwaving stable categories and practices, and is therefore nearly indiscernible from Derridean differance or deconstruction.\(^7\) Queerness takes a similar form in the work of Alexie and Derrida, not self-identified as ‘queer’ writers, whose work is nevertheless deeply situated in its era and ethos.

‘South by Southwest’ is a parable of one man’s desperate attempt to fall in love while pursuing a quixotic flight of banditry across America to the fabled destination of the Wild West. Like Derrida, Alexie invites his reader to experience

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3 Derrida, Politics, p. 30.
possibility through confusion when Seymour, the protagonist, refers to his journey as the threat and promise of ‘a non-violent killing spree’. For while he resolutely pursues his telos at gunpoint, his intention is not to kill but to love, as criminally and outrageously as Bonny and Clyde ever did. Though a white man who kidnap[s] his potential lover, a male American Indian, he welcomes the potential for a cross-racial and homosexual bond (though both note that they are ‘not gay’) with little discomfort; despite his initial act of force, his strategy will not be one of rape or assault, but of mutual exploration and philosophical questioning. The story unfolds with humour and naïveté as both men reveal a childlike belief in that ephemeral and inconstant thing called love: a vulnerable, impossibly unmediated desire for the uncodified maternal bond—a love untouched by the normalizing practices of language.

Derrida also begins his text with a seemingly nonsensical or unanalyzable prolegomenon—the quote that Montaigne attributes to Aristotle, ‘O my friends, there is no friend’-like the ‘non-violent killing spree’, prompting a dizzying effort to comprehend the two theses or phrases ‘incompatible as they may appear, and condemned to the oblivion of contradiction’. What friend can I address if there are no friends to address? The frustrated reader no longer knows what to expect—brought to an affective comprehension of the dilemma, vulnerable and desiring as a child for the answer to a text woven of questions. Derrida will leverage poetic ambivalence and neologism to rhetorically position himself as a patricidal or seditious force in the symbolic order of language, suggesting a place for the word ‘perhaps’: a small yet troubling modifier, linking the future’s positive potential with the destructive ruin and madness of unresolved aporias.

Abolishing the perhaps and declaring authoritative knowledge of the friend/enemy binary, Carl Schmitt’s political ‘decisionism’ would grant the state its ability to determine identifiable enemies of whom it maintains the possibility of putting to death in battle. In his critique of Schmitt’s The Concept of the Political, Derrida’s deciding subject becomes a distinctly helpless entity overtaken and compelled by the beating heart of the other. At this point, writes Derrida, ‘I am helpless…I decide what I cannot fail to decide, freely, necessarily, receiving my heartbeat from the other’. Violently interrupting all plans and calculations, a decision unfolds in the suspense of paradox between two irreconcilable oppositions, such as justice and crime, hospitality and hostility—linking the ideal to a disruptive, singular reality. Refusing to lend itself to sovereign action, it must take everyone by surprise, including its supposed agent, for the circumstances of its coming cannot be known or calculated; the decision is made out of necessity, and in this sense by necessity itself. Refusing to believe his will is ineffective, hoping for providence to take his side, the individual invokes strength and force while revealing the vulnerability and need that render him ultimately incapable of sovereign decision. The decision would perhaps be like a frightened first kiss and all its accompanying fears of impotence or rejection. Perhaps it would look like someone waving an empty pistol in the grave hope of securing what he would be helpless without.

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8 Derrida, Politics, p. 1.
9 Derrida, Politics, p. 29.
10 Derrida, Politics, p. 69.
This is in fact how Alexie begins his story, writing that

Seymour didn’t want money—he wanted love—so he stole a pistol from the hot plate old man living in the next apartment, then drove over to the International House of Pancakes, the one on Third, and ordered everybody to lie down on the floor.11

The first decision blindly precipitates endless decisions to come, acts of necessity and response to become increasingly unpredictable, intimate, and irreversible. Seymour is a man with a dream, yearning to be touched by love, to be summoned by that from which he is alienated and yet somehow still believes to exist. ‘Seymour was a white man, and therefore he was allowed to be a Romantic’—as such, he believes that he terrorizes the patrons of IHOP in the name of one of the great metaphysical quests of mankind: to understand what it means to love. This narcissism justifies the terror he inflicts; like a suicide reverie, he dreams of a tragic greatness that will forever redeem and elevate the banality of his heartache to a heroic and memorable event.

He imagines future headlines describing him as ‘the Man with Scotch Tape Wrapped around His Broken Heart’. In such fantasies, Seymour’s desire for love would be exceptional enough to survive his death, gaining an immortal sovereignty in the collective imagination, like the dream of European nations to fulfil their manifest destinies. Standing on the table, he collects a single dollar from everyone before him, because he wants to be kind and reasonable—a man who wishes to be loved and who would therefore like to avoid violence at the same time he practices it. He announces, ‘I aim to go on a non-violent killing spree, and I need someone who will fall in love with me along the way’. An American Indian man volunteers himself, to which a sceptical Seymour responds:

Are you gay?...I’m not gay. Are you gay?
No, sir, I am not homosexual, said the fat Indian, but I do believe in love.12

These words are enough to satisfy Seymour, and after determining that the Indian is from a ‘Salmon tribe’, and therefore trustworthy—unlike a nomad, who might wander from him—he names him ‘Salmon Boy’, at once an affectionate and imperialistic gesture. Naming, like the act of circumcision, violently inscribes the other with the law of the sovereign while initiating him into the order of the same: the social contract and patrilineal blood-bond. Such is the paternalistic ground of European politics—an endeavour of loyal brothers seeking to exclude absolute alterity or incorporate it through the violence of appropriation and absorption. Any quest for love beyond appropriation must first acknowledge the corrupt existing space of the political—a space of naming and appropriation, advantages, privileges, and selfish desires.

Seymour and his newly-christened Indian believer escape for Arizona. Their quest for love follows careful and conventional steps as they drive away: the men

kiss self-consciously at a stoplight, after which they share shameful secrets of childhood transgressions, to include theft and infantile sexual perversion. Their nonviolent killing spree begins with a mutual opening and disclosure of body and mysteries, for love is traditionally experienced as this demand for disclosure, as Derrida notes. The reason why the Aristotelian lover is celebrated is because he has knowledge of loving, a love that even before it is declared (to the other, in a loud voice), the act of love would thereby be, at its very birth, declared. It would be in itself declared, given over to knowledge or to consciousness.¹³

The lover congratulates himself on two types of knowledge, two certainties: first, that he loves and is in love; and second, that he knows the beloved or friend better than anyone. This conventional lover does not honour secrecy or amnesiac ecstasy, instead dwelling in the light of competence, achievement, and self-congratulation.

As Alexie’s story continues, the men encounter a dark augury: a dead coyote with a missing paw nailed to a fencepost. Although they agree that this is certainly a sinister omen, neither know just what it means. The reader might hazard a guess: the coyote is the mythical trickster figure of Native American lore, related to paradox, chaos, and creation—turning the established world upside down in the process of social innovation. Notoriously famished and foolish, the trickster leverages his hunger for food and sex to invent tools and strategies to achieve his desires, while inevitably falling victim to his own traps; Lewis Hyde notes his ability to instigate and thrive from the state of aporia.¹⁴ The trickster is remarkably similar to the personification of Eros described in Plato’s The Symposium, a mischievous daemon who always lives in a state of need. On the other hand, taking after his father, he schemes to get hold of beautiful and good things… [He is] a formidable hunter, always weaving tricks.¹⁵

Seymour and Salmon Boy are on a cupid or trickster’s quest to discover love through foolish paradox and excess—lawless and naïve, armed and impotent, on a journey of well-intentioned terrorism. The dead coyote is a crucified revolutionary and Seymour and Salmon Boy stare at it ‘the way the disciples stared at the resurrected Jesus’—gripped by an encounter with the prophetic uncanny, begging for answers, suspecting that anything might be possible and that this is not always a good or safe thing. Perhaps they too will be punished for their transgressions.

Daydreaming, Seymour suddenly remembers how as a child he once walked in on his father making love to his mother. His father explained that he was doing it so that his ‘beautiful mother will love me forever’. Seymour suggests to Salmon Boy that

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¹³ Derrida, Politics, p. 9.
[w]e need to find a farmhouse…and we need to terrorize an old man and his wife. That is, he added, if we’re going to do this nonviolent killing spree thing the right way.16

Perhaps he believes that the old man and his wife will know the secret of love from a lifetime of erotic denouement, alchemy of soul to body that would reunite ideal with reality—a concrete formula for love’s revelation. Beyond the animal’s corpse lies a red farmhouse, where they are invited inside by an old woman who makes them lemonade and ham sandwiches while telling her story. Her husband was a ‘reluctant soldier’ in World War Two, which she calls the ‘Good War’. She tells how:

He shot a dozen men, a dozen of those Japs, on some island in 1943. He shot twelve of them...He shot twelve of them without thinking, didn’t stop to wonder what it meant, but then number thirteen came running over the hill, over the grassy hill.17

It is always counting, writes Derrida, that opens up the wound, ‘tragic and irreconcilable’, when deciding one’s friends and enemies. Matters of friendship, fraternity, and politics have traditionally been those of demographic delimitation: knowing and counting one’s brothers. Derrida calls this ‘the arithmetical dimension that will mark the entire history of the concept of friendship’.18 Alternately, the quasi-principle of the perhaps would be the opposite of counting one’s friends or enemies to settle scores and seek security and instead a means of loving the future beyond certainty. He writes that

[t]he arrivant will arrive perhaps, for one must never be sure when it comes to arrivance...such a thought conjoins friendship, the future, and the perhaps to open on to the coming of what comes.19

The diligent soldier shoots a clean dozen, but then arrives the surprise: the odd, exceptional figure disrupting the count, just when counting has brought security. Who can act when surprised like that? He who hesitates with battle fatigue is lost. Despite the twelve down, history is decided here not by the defeated majority but by the unexpected singular exception, and one must have a plan for this moment. One cannot hesitate and say ‘perhaps’, thinking, perhaps, of the nonsensical idiom the Good War, like a non-violent killing spree—suddenly caught in a surreal moment on the battlefield, which serves as such a troubling disjunctive to the soul. ‘There are pieces of my husband buried everywhere’, says the old woman.20 When he forgot who his enemy was, he fell apart, broke into pieces, losing not only his life but integrity, identity, and home. All are functions of the political that depend upon delimitation and calculation, a clear vision of the horizon of friend and enemy.

16 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 61.
17 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 66.
19 Derrida, Politics, p. 29.
20 Alexie, ‘South’ p. 67.
Carl Schmitt writes that ‘the enemy can only be the ensemble of grouped individuals’, decided beforehand in order for the battle to be legitimate. So concretely figured, twelve is the ensemble, predictable and reassuring as even numbers always are. Number thirteen is the unlucky singularity bearing destiny, disruption—thirteen is the reaper causing us to tremble with fear or sympathy and drawing us into the sphere of the private, the vulnerable, and the insecure. One never knows what or who is arriving over the hill—is it a friend or enemy? Distracted by blindness and reassurance, one forgets just in time to be surprised.

‘Only a great man can kill thirteen’, says the old woman. ‘My husband, he was never the best. He was a good man, but never a great man.’ Goodness implies a quiet personal struggle, never notably consummated, while to be great is an honour and a prize of conquest. Greatness means to be once and for all exceptional, yet one might ask whether the exception is ever to be found in such a calculated, strategic goal. One ought to question exactly how the exception could ever be anything so commonplace that its qualifications would be widely known, lending themselves to someone’s competent judgment, the gift of this honour, this Greatness. The competently Great is the exception who has, in fact—has he not?—just proven himself to be nothing less than the most banal and predictable, programmable, as he responds or shoots every time unerringly—that is, without exception.

The old woman also tells Seymour and Salmon Boy that she receives many visitors:

> I think I recognize everybody who visits me. I spend whole days with my visitors, thinking I know them, thinking I have to be a good hostess… Sometimes, at night, I get a bed ready for them, pillows and sheets and blankets, before I realize they aren’t real.

‘Are you real?’ she asks. The story’s only significant female character, she lives in the solitude and exile to which fraternal politics condemns feminine alterity in Derrida’s critique. The brother twins found fraternity and the political, excluding the sister whose absolute difference disrupts the reassuring image of the other as calculably functional presence. The old woman is a hostess whose men are long departed and who no longer knows whether or not to believe in their presence, when metaphysical presence is all that they have traditionally stood for—strength and virility, numerical integrity and certainty. The abandoned sister, she alone suspects what Derrida does—the ephemeral and unreliable nature of what would claim to be concrete. All of her visitors appear to be ghosts, as are her husband and a prodigal son who ‘stood up one day, walked out that door right there, and has never returned’—as forgetful of the maternal as Descartes’ sovereign reg cogitas that ‘needs no place and depends on no material thing’. The old woman has become a haunting ground and way-station for those like Seymour and Salmon Boy who are on the path of ‘an impossible

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21 Derrida, *Politics*, p. 86, as quoted/modified in the English translation. George Schwab’s translation of *The Concept of the Political* gives a slightly different formulation (see page 28).
22 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 64.
23 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 23.
axiomatic that remains to be thought’. Abandoned by what she once loved, she remains a hopeful placeless place or *chora* for the homeless outlaw to seek refuge—the ‘lighthouse’ of possibility that Derrida writes is all that remains world in a where there are no longer any homes or stable axioms. Spectres of the concrete fraternal order drift through this empty, maternal-material space that has lost its inhabitants in a diaspora of the masculine for the battlefield or the ghostly life of the wandering prodigal son.

Asking if there could be a concrete without a haunting, Derrida explores the absurdity of Schmitt’s concept of the political, which would rely on a ‘concrete’ reality unaffected by all other factors. Schmitt advocates a pure pragmatic politics existing above all liberal pluralisms and interests, a confused Platonism in denial of its idealism, eliding the very situated, dependent nature of anything materially manifest or ‘concrete’. Schmittian Realpolitik would depend upon the reliable existence of a nevertheless virtual enemy, established by a polemic in which the ‘real possibility’ of battle implicitly refers to the *eventual*, and the eventual to the *actual* or ‘real’. For Schmitt, this tri-part progression would happen instantaneously, in what Derrida refers to as ‘a denial of the abyss’, for the immense gulf between each of these descriptions (possible, eventual, actual) is ignored by the presumption of an uninterrupted, totalizing concatenation granting the state authority to declare war.

One must be hospitable to the coming exception: that which takes place only once, the impossible event that would *perhaps* be love or friendship, and still cannot be named or honoured by the stabilizing demand of speech. To love or to try to understand love would be to keep on the run—towards rather than away from the frighteningly empty limit or horizon beyond concepts. ‘One must love the future’, writes Derrida, embracing the absurd measures necessary for loving what is nameless—declaring faith, yes, or ‘I believe in love’ as Salmon Boy says more than once.

Seymour and Salmon Boy join a tradition of real and fictional outlaw lovers of the American West: Bonny and Clyde, Thelma and Louise, and one could include Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty amongst these couples. Each are bound in an extraordinary, dangerous, and unspeakable friendship that will prove all others to be farces, foreshadowings, and ersatz reproductions. The Outlaw Lovers are autoimmune, driving toward their ruin because their love would finally have been too bright and too close to the end already and because it is a crime to question the acceptable methods of loving and being-with the other that anchor ‘realist’ politics and law. This is what Derrida will call the greatest political crime: ‘that of stopping to examine politics’, which leads to the aporias calling all subjective authority into question. The outlaw lovers understand that, as is conditional of each and every exception, their days are numbered. However, to last long doesn’t matter here—what

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28 Derrida, *Politics*, p. 86.
29 Derrida, *Politics*, p. 66.
30 Alexie, *Politics*, pp. 59, 73.
matters is to be exceptional, extravagant, and mad. And the police, the armies, are always right behind them—writes Derrida, ‘One must think and write, in particular as regards friendship, against great numbers. Against the most numerous who make language and lay down the law of its usage’.32

Here, the nonsense terms that Derrida calls ‘mad and impossible pleas, almost speechless warnings, words that consume themselves in a dark light’ jar our linguistic *qua* ontological assumptions, such as those informing Schmitt’s discourse. That is, his hyperbolic insistence on a concrete, real, and present meaning of a concept quickened at the instant the enemy is taken under one’s sword.33 The opposite of such determinations—the absurd language of the ‘non-violent killing spree’—serves as a reminder of the instability of concepts, the impossibility of inventing a name to finally grant presence beyond spectrality. This is what Derrida seeks to highlight when proposing a theory of friendship or equity beyond calculation—an equality without arithmetic, a community without commonality: ‘all these X’s without X’.34 Seymour and Salmon Boy are driving ‘into all the south and southwest that remained in the world’, as the last line of the story reads.35 Outlaws seek a country’s borders in order to cross them, to reach that place of extra-legal freedom: the *perhaps* or singularity opening upon what may finally be love—something that has never yet taken place as-such. Derrida writes that ‘the horizon is the limit and the absence of the limit—the loss of the horizon on the horizon’.36

This is the undecidability and anxiety that accompanies the frightening fall into love and the loss of the political as-such. An absolute singularity that surprises and overcomes the one who is falling, the decision must be made in blindness. It is this absence of calculation that separates a virile Aristotelian loving embarked upon by an empowered and competent subject from the exceptional experience of falling in love with an indefinable friend.37 Most would hope to feel like the former while experiencing the latter; this would be Seymour’s plight, to hope to fall in love and to be loved without any chance of failure. Yet falling implies a loss of control, dangling over an abyss—an accident taking one by surprise that cannot be calculated, although its conditions can be set.

The story fragments after the vignette with the old woman when Salmon Boy falls asleep. Loss of consciousness, as broken narrative, appears to represent a syncope or seizure, delivery from conscious deliberation and knowledge of love. A device that will occur again later, such fits and lapses underscore the characters’ loss of control and further the reader’s mimetic response. Salmon Boy awakens suddenly to find himself at the Grand Canyon, watching Seymour, whose gun is pointed at a family of tourists, ‘Mother, father, son, daughter’, a traditionally ideal domestic whole, a rare revealed vision of happiness to Seymour:

Here, here, said the father, you can have all my money.

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32 *Derrida, Politics*, p. 70.
33 *Derrida, Politics*, pp. 80-81.
34 *Derrida, Politics*, pp. 80-81.
35 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 75.
36 *Derrida, Politics*, p. 60.
37 *Derrida, Politics*, p. 15.
I don’t want your money, said Seymour, I want to know how you met, I want to know how you met, I want to know how you fell in love. But that’s our story, said the father, you can’t steal it.

Love must be the extra-linguistic exception and that exception cannot be violated by trying to speak of it or to name it. This is the sworn silence that would solemnly bind Derrida’s description of ‘friends without friends’. The community of the solitary, recognizing the ephemerality or namelessness of their relation must therefore protect it by keeping silent, keeping its secret that is its abyssality, impossibility, and ruin. Speaking of God, negative theologians claim, create a laughable story, a cartoon, a mere guess or stab at the ghostly figure without form. The husband implies that this would do violence to the couple’s apophatic love, reducing it to a banality, a cheap film romance, something incredible-as-in-unbelievable, without credit or belief. In doing so, cynical ears could force a renunciation of their belief in love, finally far more fragile than they hope for it to be, only safe when untold. Indeed, in ‘South by Southwest’:

Please, please, said the mother, my husband was somebody else’s when we met. But I waited for him. I didn’t want to break up his marriage. I never told him I loved him. I just loved him and hoped that was enough. And it was and it was. They divorced and he called me three days later and asked me to marry him. We’d never done anything but talk in the copy room, but he asked me to marry him. And I knew it was crazy but I married him and we’ve been married for fifteen years.

Sure enough, Seymour is unbelieving:

How does that happen? He asks. It happens all the time, replies the father, you just never hear about it.

No, no, no, says Seymour, shaking his head. People don’t love each other anymore. Not anymore.

Seymour is devastated, disappointed to hear only another lie, all a narrated truth will ever become: the summoning of a long-lost moment to the present as its ghostly replacement, shimmering here like a Southwest desert mirage. This formula is too formulaic, this prose too prosaic, so exceptional to not be exceptional, perhaps only a tired film plot. One can only wonder what his multiple negations do to the couple, if they now believe less in their love. Seymour’s empty pistol and absurdly harmless demands have made a wound and violated a promise. In seeking the truth of love through violence, Seymour does violence to the possibility of love itself. This violence would occur any time one would try to fall in love or calculate his friends,

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38 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 68
39 Derrida, Politics, p. 53.
40 Alexie, ‘South’, p.68
41 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 68.
seeking to control this loving or this decision as his own sovereign creation and narcissistic virtue.

After the failed interrogation, Salmon Boy watches in breathless terror as Seymour runs to the edge of the Grand Canyon, expecting him to leap. Instead, he throws down his gun—where, writes Alexie, ‘it fell then, and is still falling now’.  

At this great landmark, Seymour sees the abyss and takes a step further, abandoning not himself, but the violence of his effort. Confronting the abysmal limit, he is humbled, perhaps humiliated by the impossibility of his journey, and the fact that such a profound love story has failed to touch him. If love cannot be found this way, if its apparition is always already vanishing, his feelings of impotence still do not deliver him over to suicide but to the disposal of his posture of power. He has not given up hope, only control. The gun fell and is still falling now, its descent being the limitless step beyond the political. Derrida asks:

> What if another lovence (in friendship or in love) were bound to an affirmation of life, to the endless repetition of this affirmation, only in seeking its way […] in the step beyond the political as the horizon of putting to death?  

At the end of the day, Seymour and Salmon Boy lie in bed beside one another.

> Seymour, said Salmon Boy.  
> Yes, said Seymour.  
> I am the most lonely I have ever been.  
> I know.  
> Will you hold me close?  
> Yes, yes, I will.  

They agree that they do not want to have sex, and when Salmon Boy asks how they will fall in love without having sex, and Seymour says he doesn’t know, they agree that they are happy in each other’s arms. In this moment they have reached a conclusion, not of certainty, but only that they are happy holding one another—at least for the exceptional moment. Like a child, Salmon Boy asks ‘Can we be like this forever?’, and Seymour replies, ‘I don’t think that’s possible’. Interrogating each moment and analysing every possibility, their journey is less about the sensational and climactic Eros of intercourse than it is about philosophy and the necessary state of uncertainty that would accompany it. Seymour and Salmon Boy never stop saying perhaps to one another, to the next event, and to the next chance at discovering love.

Just as in a dream where anything is possible and all that is ‘real’ is inaccessible, narrative and consciousness once again lapse. Like itinerant narcoleptics, the men wake to find themselves in a McDonald’s in Tucson, Arizona, agreeing that they are quickly running out of money and ‘almost all of the south this country has’. Salmon Boy wonders how much further they can go on ten dollars, and

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42 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 68  
44 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 70.
just ‘how much south, how much southwest, could fit in the world’. Is there a limit to the limitless horizon? he is asking; can outlaws truly stay on the run forever, chasing the impossible and running from the juridical? Seymour asks Salmon Boy if he is learning to love him and Salmon Boy replies that it is very difficult for one man to love another, ‘whether they kiss each other or not’.

Their discussion of this matter only yields more questions.

We’ve only kissed once, says Seymour. Maybe we’ll fall in love if we kiss again. Do you think there’s a number? Asked Salmon Boy. Do you think there is a magic number written on every heart? Do you think you can kiss up to a certain number and make someone fall in love with you?

The arithmetical dimensions of love never seemed more pressing, as money, space, and the moments of life are running out quickly—and along with them, perhaps the only chance to ever encounter love concretely. Looking around at everyone in the McDonald’s, Seymour thinks ‘there are so many possibilities’, and he asks Salmon Boy:

Do you think there’s somebody in here who might love me, who I might love?
I don’t know, said Salmon Boy, but you are my friend, and I believe in love.

As he did at the beginning of the journey, Seymour takes these believing words as inspiration and decides that they will continue to run as far as they can toward the limits of the world, self, and other, into ‘all the south and southwest that remained in the world’. His hand held out in the shape of a pistol, he orders everyone to the floor, asking them for whatever they can spare. The customers of McDonald’s obey with no physical threat of violence to compel them, like religious believers prostrate before these two exceptional seekers of love, who conceivably radiate the light of their dreams like illustrated saints lit up from within and behind by a golden cinematic glow. ‘The customers gave up their money’, writes Alexie, ‘as an offering. They filled the plate. They moved that much closer to God’. Without a gun, the threat of a killing spree is transformed into the perhaps-impossible promise of love qua non-violence. The seekers effortlessly convert the crowd to the faith in love for which they stand and to which the customers readily surrender their money.

Yet the efforts of the men remain imperfect and inescapably violent, even when they would abandon its physical threat. They can only ever believe in love—not personify it, or serve as its ideal delegate in the world. Total nonviolence would require always saying ‘yes’ to the other, or practicing unconditional hospitality,

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45 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 73.
46 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 73.
47 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 73.
48 Alexie, ‘South’, pp. 74-75.
which can obviously cause harm to the naïve host. All Seymour and Salmon Boy can ever say ‘yes’ to unconditionally is not the other or the practice of nonviolence, but the strange and unspeakable exception that Derrida would call love or friendship, in whatever meagre, great, or desperate manner they are capable of performing it.

Like Don Quixote, an absurd yet sympathetic Seymour begins the story seeking a determinate grandeur and heroism—the sensationalism of a newspaper headline and the teleology of his personal narrative. He would like to finally embody the impossible friendship to come, would like to be ‘The Man Who Saved the Indian’, as Alexie writes.49 Seymour is clearly foolish in this performance of heroic virility, a posturing that throughout the adventure is gradually supplanted by the vulnerability it truly belies. Salmon Boy, perhaps less concerned with the greatness of conquest because he has not inherited such a privileged cultural tradition, only quietly proclaims ‘you are my friend, and I believe in love’. By the end of the story, Salmon Boy has the last word.

Discovering it impossible to finally achieve nonviolence or love in the dramatic ideal form that would make the headlines or the pages of chivalrous romances, it is for this reason that the two must keep running. They represent Derrida’s friendship-to-come only insofar as they function, imperfectly, as naively determined outlaws from the demands of both of peace and war, unsure of even their own evolving desires. This extra-legality is also what would allow their characters to perhaps initiate the entrance, albeit merely gestural, of excluded femininity into fraternal politics: as the historical force of différence that Freccero would broadly call ‘queer’ they may effect the destabilization of categories and established practices. Tricksters of Eros, they cause trouble in order to enable new paradigms, risking crucifixion at every crossroads.

Yet all this may be a lot to ask from our simple protagonists. Their paradigm-altering behaviour is not a conscious task: they remain ignorant of this ‘purpose’, which is, after all, only established or interpreted by the discerning reader with theory in hand. While their ignorance will often serve ironically for Alexie-as-narrator and his readers, the characters are genuinely ignorant, epistemologically captive to the limitations of their dyadic and fraternal coupling. Salmon Boy twice notes his jealousy when Seymour shows affection for the old woman in the farmhouse—indicating that, even within their arguably queer endeavour, foreign parties pose a threat to the perceived sanctity of friendship.50 This imperfection is also their impotence: they cannot achieve an idealistic political friendship by occasioning the inclusion of the subaltern into the political through their journey. Rather, they can only attempt, in their ignorance, to love in a manner of the ‘exception’—a love or friendship neither bound to legal precedent nor liberated by any magical epiphany.

Although Seymour and Salmon Boy would try to love without appropriation, this is never possible, as they readily admit—all they experience, instead, is the fleeting sense of a momentary shared embrace, which could just as easily become a demand or stranglehold. They can only believe in love, although its ‘perfect’

49 Alexie, ‘South’, p. 74.
representation or actualization would always be disappearing over the horizon—
while only its traces are left behind by every story of love or war.