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Better Worlds: The Politics of Hope and Exclusion in the Literature of James Baldwin and Sherman Alexie

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BETTER WORLDS:
THE POLITICS OF HOPE AND EXCLUSION
IN THE LITERATURE OF JAMES BALDWIN
AND SHERMAN ALEXIE

Emma LaPlante

Mentor: Gerald Early

Twentieth-century author James Baldwin is just as celebrated for the stirring force of his prose as for his role as a leading voice in the American Civil Rights Movement. As a black, gay man from Harlem who spent years of his life abroad, Baldwin spoke often of his marginalization within most communities he was a part of; he was never fully accepted or embraced by them. In many ways, contemporary Native American author Sherman Alexie carries on Baldwin's legacy of blending art and activism, and their lives overlap in several meaningful ways, particularly when it comes to exclusion from social groups. Alexie was a bookish child with several disabilities, and in his young adulthood he left the reservation where he grew up, which he describes as being seen by his tribe members as a betrayal marking him as "not Indian enough." In this thesis, I investigate the ways that Baldwin and Alexie's personal histories inform their writing, taking their nonfiction writings and fiction inspired by real life events as my most prominent sites for analysis. I ultimately argue that the personal histories of Baldwin and (to a lesser extent) Alexie facilitate a queerness in their writing that allows them to imaginatively break down boundaries and borders. This helps account for the strains of hope and optimism in their bodies of work, even as they write movingly about social ills and structural injustice.