

# SEXUAL ORPHANINGS

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## Native Queer Childhood

This essay is about orphans and orphaning, queerness and queering. An orphan is a child without parents, a child who has either been permanently abandoned or whose parents are dead; in the United States, an orphan is also a ward of the state. I argue that the process through which Native American children were taken from reservations and required to attend boarding schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is usefully understood as a state-produced orphaning, an orphaning away from Indian customs and culture and ultimately toward death. The education that children received in boarding schools can be seen as a process of further, mandatory orphaning, one that children learned to enact on themselves. The intensity with which these boarding schools intervened in the sexuality of Native children was crucial to this process, and I argue that “sexual orphaning” was the goal of the boarding schools’ alienation of Native children from their culture, a goal that queered children away from futurity and away from reproductivity. This queering was achieved paradoxically through heterosexualization, but a racialized heterosexualization oriented toward failure—they would never be straight (or white) in the settler state’s eyes. The ultimate goal of my argument is to suggest that the familiar coupling of “queer” with “no future” proposed by Lee Edelman (2004) is especially distressing for Native studies, and I conclude by asking, instead, what “erotics” might remain for these orphans and look at how the genocidal sexual orphanings of Native children might be recalibrated in Native fiction toward survival rather than disappearance.

This essay takes up a particular version of racialized and sexualized childhood: Native American queer childhood. In Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, one version of the queer child she proposes is the *child queered by color*, or the racialized queer child. While children are often synonymous with innocence, the child queered by color is

GLQ 22:4

DOI 10.1215/10642684-3603114

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incapable of that innocence.<sup>1</sup> The innocent child is free of a past, which is understood as “antithetical to childhood” (Stockton 2009: 30), even though the child’s very innocence is the product of adults’ desire for a “preferred past” (Bruhm and Hurley 2004: xiii). Adults narrate some children as blank slates not because they are but because adults want them to be.

Racialized queer children, however, are queered by a historical past, and in the case of Native children, by a settler-narrated past. In other words, Native children are incapable of innocence because of settler ideology that has viewed Natives as backward, deviant, and dangerous—that is, queer. By “queer,” I mean that the state and its institutions and agents structure gender, sexuality, and kinship for children so that settler understandings and practices are “straight,” and anything Native is consequently not-straight and thus queer.<sup>2</sup> This definition of queerness is drawn from Mark Rifkin’s scholarship in *When Did Indians Become Straight?*, in which Rifkin (2011: 5–6) explores how “coordinated assault on native social formations . . . [can] be understood as an organized effort to make heterosexuality compulsory as a key part of breaking up indigenous landholdings.” The settler state intervened into and violently restructured—or straightened—Native traditions, customs, and kinship to justify violent dispossession of Native land. The parenting nation narrates queerness in an effort to normalize, naturalize, and instantiate heteronormativity, which enables settler claims on land, property, and inheritance. Adult or child, all Natives have been and continue to be queered by this narrative. Native children in particular have been crucial to the settler state’s attempts to queer Native communities. Since the turn of the century, this queering has served to justify and enable state-sanctioned genocide under the guise of welfare and false promises of protection—the future functions as a trap, enabling violence. Innocent children, seen as free of a past, can enter the future; racialized queer children, seen as having a past, are barred from the future, and this barring is enacted precisely through promising futurity.

The boarding school system of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States and Canada was the mechanism through which many Native children were made to experience queer childhood. Producing queer childhood was pivotal for eliminating indigenous populations through proclaimed assimilation of their children. Children were removed from their reservations and required to attend the boarding schools, where they were violently forced to abandon their names, languages, and cultural practices. At school, they were educated to look back and understand their Native communities and culture as queer and something to abandon, an education that occurred alongside all-but-institutionalized sexual abuse.

I understand this abandonment as an orphaning and see it as a mandate for those Native children who passed through the boarding school. The boarding schools produced Native children as orphans in order to enforce metaphorical orphanings of Indianness. By Indianness, I mean all those features whose loss would facilitate cultural genocide—languages, custom, and practices and understandings of kinship, gender, and sexuality. I term the state-enforced abandonment of the latter a *sexual orphaning*, and its metaphorical loss had material effects: orphaning children from Native conceptualizations of gender and sexuality alienated children from Native acculturated bodies, and this alienation oriented children toward nonreproductivity. I conceptualize sexual orphaning as a historical process that produced bodily practices, sensations, and affects lived out in the bodies of targeted children. Drawing on Rifkin's scholarship in *Erotics of Sovereignty* (2012), I understand these practices and sensations as “erotics—sensations of pleasure, desire, memory, wounding, and interrelation with others, the land, and ancestors” (39). Queering Native children necessitated an education in erotics: how to apprehend them and how to disavow them. The schools educated children to understand and experience erotics as shameful, but these shamed erotics created avenues for decolonization. In her reading of M. Jacqui Alexander's concept of “radical self-possession,” Ann Cvetkovich (2012: 25) explains how decolonization can and must include “the senses and feelings.” Building on this claim, I argue that the Native child's body, a strategic target of colonization carried out by the boarding school and its agents, has a capacity for decolonization at the level of the individual body by reclaiming those senses and pleasures that education forces the child to disavow.

Sexual orphanings are a key feature of Native queer childhood: they both queer Native children and compel these children to orphan their sexuality. The attempt to orphan children from their sexuality was twofold. First, schools imposed heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality on children, and this imposition necessitated that children renounce Native understandings of gender and sexuality, viewing them now as backward and sinful (Rifkin 2011; Morgensen 2010). Second, school agents violated children's bodies through sexual abuse that was “indeed institutionalized as to almost form a core part of the curriculum” (Schneider 2010: 18). Chris Finley (2011: 32) argues that “for many tribes . . . shame around sex started in the boarding schools, and sexual shame has been passed down for generations.” Sexual orphanings did not make all children nonreproductive—there are generations who still bear the legacy of those who survived the school, who are also testament to the ongoing presence of Native peoples and sexuality in the face of attempts at erasure. However, Finley suggests a perva-

sive shame whose origin is in the schools, one that haunts many indigenous communities and has affected how Natives view and experience sexuality: it is filtered through a history of abuse.

Abuse and education in the schools helped the settler state center its understandings of sexuality. This sexuality, which Scott Morgensen (2010: 106) calls “settler sexuality,” permits a narrow heteronormativity for white bodies while sanctioning sexual violence against and abuse of nonwhite bodies. Settler sexuality casts as queer more capacious understandings of sexuality that consider dispositions, affect, pleasure, and sensations, or what Rifkin terms *erotics*. Sexual orphanings make it difficult to inhabit *erotics* because of alienation from the Native acculturated body. Rifkin (2012: 28) alludes to how more capacious understandings of sexuality are especially important for considering Native resistance because “sexuality points to a nexus of practices, desires, relations, and pleasures in which one could locate the presence of modes of indigeneity that exceed the ‘oppressed, repressed, shamed, and *imposed* sense of reality’ generated through institutionalized processes of settlement.” In other words, the settler state and its institutions—such as the boarding school—enforce an “*imposed* sense of reality” onto Native sexuality that narrate it as a source of shame and oppression. Here, Rifkin invites us to think about what to do with the presences of “desires” and “pleasures” that exist within and despite seemingly totalizing narratives of “oppress[ion],” “repress[ion],” and “shame.”

I use this invitation to return to Native queer childhood as produced by and experienced in the boarding school. Sexual damage is a hallmark of the settler education of Native children. The violence, abuse, and neglect in schools that the settler state allowed to continue for close to a century is undeniable and inexcusable. I want to focus, however, on some unexpected effects of sexual damage. Accounts of Native queer childhood in the boarding school force us to contend with the presence of desire and pleasure amid violence and abuse, as well as the alternative times and spaces they might open up. How does pleasure come about in this setting? What do these moments of pleasure unsettle? How might they disrupt totalizing narratives of the school’s production of oppression and shame? How much weight does pleasure actually carry in the context of ongoing genocide? Does pleasure enable access to alternative times and spaces, and if so, how? An examination of Native queer childhood asks us to consider the knotted problem of violence’s relation to decolonization. Children are an optic for apprehending and disrupting settler narratives of unmitigated colonization and disappearance; the schools and their agents colonize children’s bodies, but this colonization did not go uncontested by children.

The unique historical processes surrounding the queering of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Native children invite us to more fully explore this form of sexualized and racialized childhood. Scholars have worked on racialized and queer childhood but have not paid sustained attention to queer children in an indigenous context. I examine the historical production of these children, and, in order to consider the questions and problems surrounding an investigation of Native queer childhood, I turn to *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), by the Cree author and playwright Tomson Highway, whose fictional text imagines possibilities for survival and indigeneity *despite* the historical phenomenon of sexual orphanings. Highway's novel functions as a counterarchive, recounting the sexual orphanings two brothers are forced to undergo, but also exploring how children might maintain a connection to their sexuality, even in the context of violent education and abuse.

The boarding school is a nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical institution whose effects are ongoing; looking at a contemporary text that represents the boarding school is important to the present because Native children, most visibly in the modern-day foster care system, continue to be targets of settler policy that seeks to erase indigenous presence under the guise of welfare, putting children in often precarious situations. The only future for Native children is the white future they help preserve; Bethany Schneider (2015: 87) contends that "Native children are the diet of white supremacy and colonization," enabling settler futures not intended for them. The boarding schools educated children in a normativity to which they could never accede, guaranteeing the failure of the Native body: children are unable to grow up or move forward into a reproductive future. They are left, as Stockton (2009: 6) puts it, to "grow sideways," and I grapple with the pleasures and possibilities accessible to children in this liminal space to which the schools orient them. I examine the history of the boarding schools, which helps us understand how sexual orphanings that position children for no future exist in a larger context that neglects the Native body through biopolitical practices. I then turn to *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as a text to think through the issues of violence, pleasure, and decolonization in Native queer childhood, considering how sexual orphanings are enforced in the narrative and looking at alternative modes of embodiment that Highway imagines as possible responses to an education that leaves children orphaned from their bodies and sexualities.

### **Managing Children at the Boarding School**

While I focus on literal children in my essay, it is important to understand how the settler state has historically narrated Native Americans as figural children to

justify colonization and deny Native communities sovereignty. In *Fathers and Children*, Michael Rogin ([1975] 2008: 11) examines the rhetoric and actions of US president Andrew Jackson, engineer of the 1830 Indian Removal Act, to reveal how his carefully manufactured project of "'inevitable' Indian extinction" necessitated a conceptual kinship reordering. Jackson and his contemporaries conceived of Natives as stuck in the time of "'childhood' of the human race," whereas white males were understood to be endowed with an "adult white maturity" (ibid.: 6, 8), which legitimized their role as the rule-wielding parent nation. The settler state's perceived duty to discipline indigenous populations materialized in policy that sanctioned genocide and legalized the seizure of Native land. Through these acts, the father nation "grounded their growing up in a securely achieved manhood, and securely possessed [Native] land" (ibid.: 125).

Kinship rhetoric continued to be deployed to explain why Native communities needed to be under the settler state's parental care. In the introduction to "Sexuality, Nationality, Indigeneity," a special issue of *GLQ*, Schneider (2010: 17) points us to a critical statement in Chief Justice John Marshall's decision in the 1831 *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* case, where he suggested that Native Nations' relationship to the United States "resembles that of a ward to a guardian." Schneider's (2010: 20) reading of this seminal definition of Native nations understands the dynamic of father nation / colonized child as one where "Native people . . . were requeered as children, eternally stunted, the sexualized wards of the state." This maneuver was a "requeer[ing]," since the state initially "queered" Native culture and sexuality by casting it as deviant and backward; the "sexual[ization]" of Natives was a heterosexualization, as the state attempted to "force Indians into a heteronormative futurity defined by private property, inheritance, and the nuclear family" (ibid.). For the United States to gain access to the land, it made Native people into "wards of the state," orphaned communities who must be taken care of by the parenting nation.<sup>3</sup>

A crucial step in creating orphaned communities was intervening in, destroying, and restructuring kinship structures to fit into colonial understandings of personhood and property relations. Rifkin (2011: 8) has demonstrated how "imperial interventions into Native residency, family formation, collective decision-making, resource distribution, and land tenure" broke down Native traditions, customs, and kinship formation to achieve this violent restructuring. And, to make sure that many of these interventions would succeed, the state targeted children, most visibly in the form of educational policies focused on assimilation.

The first off-reservation Indian boarding school that produced queer Native orphans in the United States was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Founded

by Colonel Richard Henry Pratt in 1879 and in operation until 1918, the school served as a model for other Indian boarding schools that proliferated in the latter half of the twentieth century in the United States and Canada. These institutions that emerged out of child removal policies functioned as biopolitical tools of the settler state because they helped control indigenous kinship and futurity. Michel Foucault ([1976] 2003: 245) explains that “biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as [a] political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem.” The “population” of indigenous peoples had to be managed, and management of children functioned as a ruse for furthering the mission to eliminate Natives from the colonial landscape. The settler state’s intervention into kinship was an intervention into indigenous reproduction, and children helped the settler state exercise its “power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” (ibid.: 241). As Margaret Jacobs (2009: 4) explains, “Indigenous child removal constituted another crucial way to eliminate indigenous people, both in a cultural and a biological sense”—the children were stripped of their Indianness in the schools; forced to abandon their languages, cultural practices, names; and separated for years if not a lifetime from their indigenous communities, accounting for the cultural elimination that Jacobs describes.

While biological elimination of indigenous tribes started with the arrival of the first settlers in North America, the turn of the twentieth century marks a shift from biological elimination through war to cultural elimination through assimilation. However, the latter did not preclude the former. Patrick Wolfe (2006: 398–99) asserts that “the imposition on a people of the procedures and techniques that are generally glossed as ‘cultural genocide’ is certainly going to have a direct impact on that people’s capacity to stay alive.” In other words, trying to rid children of their Indianness culturally has a “direct impact” on their chances for survival. Sexual orphanings, a consequence of cultural genocidal tactics, enabled cultural genocide to effect biological elimination under the guise of welfare.

One immediate way schools affected Native futurity was by neglecting students’ health, resulting in many deaths. A brief look at the conditions of the schools shows that they were sites where children’s “capacity to stay alive” was compromised. From their inaugural moment in 1879, boarding schools operated as institutions that took in healthy children and made them unhealthy. Lack of regulation and oversight made it so that schools were never an environment that fostered health, growth, and general well-being. Schools produced what Jasbir Puar (2011: 153) terms “debilitated bodies,” and this created debility, exacerbated by disregard for the limits on children’s capacity for manual labor, hastened the “slow death” (Berlant 2011: 95) of Native populations. Debility meant that fewer children

had to be educated and the state desire for the “Vanishing Indian” was fulfilled, allowing the state to expend fewer resources on fewer Indians. In his report on the comprehensive state of Indian health, the physician Everett Rhoades (1976: 28) explains that at the end of the nineteenth century, “when the federal Government assumed responsibility for the education of Indians, some degree of responsibility for their health was incidentally involved, and the first expenditures for their health was made from funds appropriated for education and ‘civilization.’” In other words, concern for Indian children’s health was “incidental,” and there were no funds specifically allocated to oversee health and regulate living conditions in Indian boarding schools. As a result, many children never saw a physician, and they were not examined for preexisting illnesses or symptoms prior to enrolling in the schools.

Sequestered in this restrictive environment that was supposedly committed to civilizing its wards, children were forced to live in squalid conditions. Many became ill when arriving at the schools because of environmental factors. Children sent east experienced harsh climatic changes, not to mention the physiological stress of travel itself, but they did not receive any medical attention once they arrived. For example, David DeJong (2008) shares how a group of fifteen Shoshone boys were sent to Carlisle, and eleven died shortly after arrival. Children experienced overcrowding, often sleeping two or three to a bed in closed quarters that had poor ventilation. The food available at schools resulted in inadequate nutrition, which was especially concerning because children were forced to engage in strenuous physical labor. These conditions, coupled with “strict military discipline,” meant “some schools . . . became synonymous with death and disease” (DeJong 2007: 261–62). DeJong (2007) outlines how illnesses, including tuberculosis, smallpox, and trachoma, were widespread in schools at levels statistically more significant than among white people. Furthermore, when children became fatally ill, they were often sent back to their reservations; this practice allowed infected children to come in contact with their uninfected communities, enabling the transit and transmission of illness among Natives. Racist ideology fueled in part by social Darwinism considered Indian children, even if civilized, nonwhite and thus inferior and justified to be less invested in than their white counterparts (*ibid.*: 274–75). The state’s oversight of its own institutions worked to “let’ die” Native children.

For those who did pass through and survive the boarding school, the schools sought to educate them in ways that would ensure no future for Natives. The often-cited motto of the schools, “Kill the Indian, save the man” (Pratt [1908] 1979: 46), captures the schools’ violent project of ridding children of their Indianness to “save” their humanity—for their Indianness was conceived as nonhuman.

This motto exemplifies Russ Castronovo's (2001) theory of necro citizenship, or the ways that the state necessitates a death, especially for members of marginalized groups, before an individual can be made into a political subject. This necessary "death that structures national identity" (ibid.: 6) is the orphaning that children must undergo. Orphaning Indianness is synonymous with "kill[ing] the Indian"—the projects are one and the same, inextricably linked because educating children to orphan their Indianness enables the state to eliminate Indians. If children abandon their Indianness, they cannot sustain Native lineages; Native reproductivity stalls, and Natives start to disappear from the colonial landscape. The settler state's attempt to orphan the Native child functions to ensure no future for indigenous peoples as well as indigenous modes of being.

Pratt's rhetoric positioned Indian children as the means through which a future would be secured for both themselves and their tribes. In his treatise on the development of the schools, Pratt ([1908] 1979: 20) writes about how he convinced the Sioux to send their children away: "Your own welfare while you live and the welfare of your children after you, and all your interests in every way, demand that your children should have the same education that the white man has." But this "same education" did not mean the same future as settlers; according to Pratt, Indian children could be "convert[ed] in all ways but color" (ibid.: 5) and thus could never fully enter into white civilization. Rifkin (2011: 150) reiterates this point, explaining that eventual "interracial coupling" with whites was never foreseen for these children; the schools vehemently "preserv[ed] the reproductively constituted color line while arguing for a malleability in Indian character." In other words, the Native body would never permit children to take part in a white future, regardless of how much the state altered their "Indian character." Thus, the children were educated to abandon Indianness culturally, but they would never be able to leave behind their Native bodies in the eyes of the state; politically, legally, socially, and biologically, they could never be white citizens. But without their heritage or an understanding of Native customs, traditions, or languages, their Native bodies could not reproduce Indianness. "Kill the Indian, save the man" could succeed—except that "the man" saved was the white community that the state never intended for the children to join.<sup>4</sup> In other words, "Kill the Indian, save the man" is a peculiar kind of orphaning; the inability of orphaned children to carry on Indianness through the Native body preserves the future for white bodies at the expense of a generation of orphaned Native children, suspended in a liminal space between whiteness and Indianness, past and future. Children's bodies are the vestiges of this orphaning; since the body remains, the schools needed to alienate children from these bodies to succeed in a complete orphaning of Indianness.

The state, then, attempted to complete this orphaning from the body through queering Native childhood, and crucially through the sexual orphanings that enabled this queer production. Children were paradoxically queered through being educated in white heterosexual norms. This queering was a double bind. On the one hand, the boarding schools' ostensible heterosexualization of Native children orphaned them from indigenous modes of sexuality; on the other hand, that heterosexualization was racialized so as to arrive at normative failure, leaving Native children in a liminal space.

### **Sexual Orphanings in *Kiss of the Fur Queen***

I now turn to Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* to explore how sexual orphanings are enforced and consider what possibilities the text imagines despite these orphanings—can they be disrupted? Undone? Reversed? Paying attention to the bodily sensations that the orphanings effect in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and how the children refuse or acknowledge these sensations and pleasures, shows us how the Native child's body might be an important site for responding to colonization.

I explore *Kiss of the Fur Queen* in particular because, as a piece of indigenous literature, it can “supplement forgetting with new narratives of affirmation and presence” (Lowe 2015: 40). Violent colonization continues into the present, but the rhetoric of the modern-day nation-state obscures the history and presence of violence, often masking it as care, thus producing what Lisa Lowe calls a “violence of . . . forgetting” (ibid.: 41). Indigenous literature makes us recognize that *not everyone has forgotten*. Despite ongoing colonization, indigenous communities *do survive*, and literature is one site where indigenous peoples can affirm their survival, presence, and remembering. Lowe uses the historian Stephanie Smallwood's statement that “I try to imagine what could have been” as a jumping-off point to consider how “the *past condition temporality* of the ‘what could have been’ symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss” (40–41). I suggest that indigenous literature is a site where the “what could have been” is imaginatively and productively enacted to resist the settler state's imperative to forget.<sup>5</sup>

Indigenous literature that depicts sexuality participates in both a resistance to forgetting and a refusal of erasure. Daniel Heath Justice (2008: 103) explains that “as indigeness itself has long been a colonialist target, so too has our joy, our desire, our sense of ourselves as being able to both give and receive pleasure.” Justice asserts that seemingly quotidian bodily experiences and affects—“joy,” “desire,” “pleasure”—are not isolated from but intimately tied up

with settler colonialism; paying attention to these sensations, especially in literature, then, is a way to track and potentially resist the violence of settler colonialism on the ground. Since “Aboriginal peoples [are viewed] as historical artifacts, degraded vagrants or grieving ghosts,” “to take joy in our bodies—and those bodies in relation to others—is to strike out against five hundred plus years of disregard, disrespect, and dismissal” (ibid.: 104). Here, Justice connects being viewed as remnant anachronisms—“artifacts,” “vagrants,” “ghosts”—to being viewed as without bodies or without sexualities. Asserting sexuality is a way to assert presence, resist erasure, and combat the narrative that views Natives as disappeared or their sexuality as damaged. Justice sees writing about these experiences as a way to enact resistance: “Our sexuality isn’t just part of our Nateness—it’s fuel for the healing of our nations” (ibid.: 106). Representing Native sexuality in literature, then, depicts sensations at the micro-level that have potential to combat macro-level violences and enable pathways toward “healing.”

Highway’s fictional text initially started as a memoir, based on his own time in a residential school in Canada. The story’s final form as a novel allows it to imagine a “what could have been” that permits us to approach some of the vexed issues surrounding Native queer childhood. Linking fiction to social change, Sam McKegney (2005: 81) examines how Native fiction and Highway’s text in particular enact political resistance in ways that differ from memoir or testimonial because it can “unsettle comfortable power relations by creatively reimagining Indigenous culture and identity in the contemporary moment.” Focus on the “contemporary moment” is crucial because of the ongoing legacy and ramifications of the boarding school, which is arguably most visible in the modern-day foster care system disproportionately made up of Native children; Native children continue to be targets of state intervention into Native kinship and futurity.<sup>6</sup>

The novel is a fictional account of the Cree brothers Champion and Ooneemeetoo, who are christened Jeremiah and Gabriel and forced to use these names when they attend an Indian boarding school run by Catholic priests in the 1960s and 1970s. The novel is divided into six parts, and we follow the boys throughout their childhoods, first in northern Manitoba and then in the boarding school, as well as their adulthoods in Winnipeg, when Jeremiah becomes an accomplished pianist and Gabriel a successful dancer who identifies as a gay man.<sup>7</sup> An omniscient narrator gives us access to their diverging trajectories and also introduces us to the Fur Queen, the trickster figure who watches over and confronts the boys at moments when the settler world is severing them from their Native roots. Highway’s choice to tell the story about two brothers, who are fated to different experiences in the text, allows him to render two plots that differently present and imagine the

effects of queer Native childhood. While *The Kiss of the Fur Queen* is a sweeping and rich text, I focus mainly on the boys' time in the boarding school and where I see it affecting their adulthood to think through some of these effects.

In the boarding school, Gabriel and Jeremiah are educated in the rhythms of what J. Jack Halberstam (2005: 5) terms "repro-time," learning the proper practices that will enable heterosexual reproduction and (white) futurity. Education about repro-time is not recruitment into repro-time, and this distinction becomes clear once the boys pass through the school. Nonetheless, the school works to ensure that the bodies that pass through it are successfully internalizing this education in repro-time. The school carefully monitors the body and particularly its interactions with the opposite sex. When Jeremiah arrives at school, "his sisters . . . were marched away to their own world the minute they got off the plane" (Highway 1998: 64). At school, "girls had their own yard . . . away from the view of lusty lads" (ibid.: 63). The "lusty lads" are the school-aged boy children, and enforcing this separation of boys and girls works to teach children the appropriate object to desire while implying that this desire is inappropriate and must be prevented through strict separation. In this way, the school constructs heterosexuality as the appropriate end for children while teaching the children that desire is not permitted in this heterosexual paradigm. Rifkin (2011: 147) understands this construction to be a crucial component in the "romance plot" that the school narrates—schools "regulate social interaction between the sexes . . . [and] orchestrate and manage the process of courting" (ibid.: 152). More than just "orchestrating and manag[ing]" this process, they *produce* it through their regulations. Building on this connection between the disciplinary productions of heterosexuality and its accompanying affects in Native bodies, Deborah Miranda (2002: 140) notes that "the strict separation of boys and girls during long stints at Indian Boarding School . . . not only changed Native courtship and coming-of-age experiences, but also inscribed a European, Christianized dogma regarding the 'dirtiness' of Native bodies and sexuality in general." Educating children in "courtship" and heterosexual practices necessitated teaching children how to look back on "Native bodies and sexuality" as "dirty." Producing gendered categories and teaching appropriate romantic and sexual affect and behavior worked to queer the Native body and produce shame and disavowal of sexuality. Children were taught what a heterosexual future looked like, but sexual orphanings would preclude them from gaining access to that future.

Thus, the production and structuring of appropriate desire was not in the service of making sure that Native children would heterosexually reproduce. After

the boarding school, it is impossible for Jeremiah to return home, at least geographically—“he had absolutely nowhere to go” (Highway 1998: 103). He settles in Winnipeg, where “in this metropolis of half a million souls . . . he seemed to be the only Indian person” (ibid.: 100). Isolated and demarcated from the whiteness surrounding him, Jeremiah is left extricated from his Native community. While on a bus in this city, Jeremiah remembers how the school monitored “every bodily secretion” (ibid.: 102); conjoined with this memory of surveillance is the realization that in this city, unlike the school, he was “free to talk to girls. Except that there were no girls to talk to. At his [current high] school, there may have been a thousand, but they were all white” (ibid.: 102). Since Indian reproductivity cannot cross racialized lines, the heterosexual desire in which Jeremiah has been educated cannot be enacted outside the school. The girls he has been oriented to desire “were all white” and thus inaccessible to his Native body. This illusory, constructed “romance plot” halts the possibility of a future generation of Natives.

Despite being barred from repro-time, Jeremiah cannot unlearn this education that privileges the “biological clock . . . [and] bourgeois rules” (Halberstam 2005: 5). As an adult, he comes face-to-face with the Fur Queen, the larger-than-life embodiment of Cree culture who has “no gender” and structures the text; the trickster asks him what the point of life is, to which Jeremiah responds, “You are born. You grow up, you go to school, you work—you work like hell—you get married, sometimes, you raise a family, sometimes, you grow old. And then you die” (Highway 1998: vii, 233). This understanding of life follows the “biological” and “bourgeois” markers that are characteristic of repro-time, recognizing a clear beginning (birth) and end (death) punctuated by heteronormative life events (marriage and family). The mandate of marriage and family is twice-spliced by a perhaps hesitant, perhaps qualifying “sometimes,” which might illustrate Jeremiah’s recognition that he himself will not participate in this heterotime. The boarding school has cultivated within Jeremiah an understanding of what existence *should* look like according to a linear, heterosexual model; at no point in the text, however, does he achieve these heteronormative milestones.

The settler state successfully queers Jeremiah through educating him in straightness. He is educated in a reproductive futurism in which he can never participate. This ban queers him because he is, in the conclusion that José Esteban Muñoz (2009) recognizes as that of many children of color, never able to grow up. Jeremiah is unable to move forward but unable to return home, temporally, sexually, or in terms of kinship. He, then, is orphaned from sexuality—enabled by an orphaning from his Native past and resulting in an orphaning from a potential

reproductive future; his experience and education in the school have left him with a Native body from which he is disconnected. Native queer childhood bars Jeremiah from the future.

### **The Sovereign Erotic and Erotics of Sovereignty in *Kiss of the Fur Queen***

The sexual orphanings that Jeremiah experiences differ from those of Gabriel, who is raped by a white priest, Father Lafleur, during his time at the school. Jeremiah is left orphaned from his sexuality; however, the abuse Gabriel experiences produces sensations that alter the totalizing effects of his orphaning. Gabriel's sexuality both as a child and as an adult is inextricably linked with and perhaps even a product of his experience of sexual abuse—elements present in the scene the first time the priest rapes him are also present in his adult homosexual encounters. While the sexual abuse that Father Lafleur commits asserts colonial control over the bodies of Native children, the scenes of violence present abuse alongside sensations of pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

I use Qwo-Li Driskill's concept of the sovereign erotic to think about how ownership over one's body might paradoxically come through damage. Driskill (2004: 50) writes, "We were stolen from our bodies / We were stolen from our homes," and defines the sovereign erotic as "an erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions, and resistance struggles of our nations" (ibid.: 51). For Driskill, the sovereign erotic allows for an "erotic wholeness" even after being "stolen"—or orphaned—from the Native body. While Driskill envisions an "erotic wholeness," I am interested in how the body might heal in ways that do not necessarily result in wholeness but nonetheless open up pathways for decolonization. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* gives us a way to consider if and how local features of the body that constitute the erotic—bodily sensations and pleasures—disturb the totalizing narrative and violence of settler colonialism.

Thinking of decolonization happening at the level of individual bodies, and more specifically at the level of erotics, challenges the way we think about scale. These erotics are what M. Jacqui Alexander (2005: 297, 329) might term types of "body praxis," practices and sensations that "position . . . the body as a source of knowledge within terms differently modulated than the materiality of the body and its entanglement in the struggle against commodification." Alexander focuses on spiritual rituals that engage the body as the "means through which we come to be at home in the body that supersede its positioning in materiality, in any of the

violent discourses of appropriation, and in any of the formations within normative multiculturalism” (ibid.: 329). In other words, the spiritual is one register for accessing a relation to the body, finding a “home in the body,” that is otherwise foreclosed. I use Alexander to think not of the spiritual but of the physical, and specifically the erotic, as a way to approach how the body might act as a source of knowledge that exceeds the education produced in institutions, enabling ways to inhabit the body against which the state educates.<sup>9</sup>

Alexander’s formulation of the body as home is especially salient when thinking about Native boarding-school children; Driskill (2004: 53) argues that the body “is the first homeland” and one of many homes from which Native children are orphaned. This conceptualization of “home” is not strictly geographically determined or rooted to land; it is an expansive understanding of “home” that takes seriously the body’s role and allows us to consider the relation between Alexander’s “radical self-possession” and the dispossession of Native land. In other words, settler colonialism dispossesses Native Americans not just of their land but also of their bodies through a violent education that imposes settler sexuality and teaches children to apprehend erotics as shameful. Rifkin (2011: 151) explains that the settler state requires that “to gain ‘individuality’ [a necessity for white understandings of property and land ownership] Indians must shift the horizon of their thinking and, more importantly, their feeling, connecting ‘home’ not to specific tribal territories but to the great expanse of the entire United States.” Children are educated to abandon attachment to “specific tribal territories” and understand “home” as a “great expanse,” one that will never welcome them. The reality of colonization makes a return to “home” in terms of kinship and geography impossible—some orphanings are irreversible. However, if the body can serve as a “home” through a reclamation of erotics that the schools disallow, decolonization might begin to occur at the level of individual bodies.

Gabriel’s abuse and the pleasure it produces enable him to maintain a connection to the Native body despite abuse. His reaction to the abuse and how this first sexual violation recurs during his lifetime reveal that within traumatic, sexual violence, there is space for him to disrupt the sexual orphanings that this abuse works to incur. Embracing the pleasure produced in these encounters allows him to *return home through the body*. This return is not a temporal one; he is not returning to some pristine Indian past untouched by colonial violence. Gabriel returns to a body that has been violated and colonized, but allowing himself to experience pleasure and sensation—the very bodily practices the school produces in order to shame—enables a connection to the sovereign erotic that heals.

The first violation in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is bound with and even con-

tingent on Gabriel's pleasure. Gabriel performs in a school play and "beamed with pleasure" (Highway 1998: 76) as he dances across the stage, where an audience that includes Father Lafleur watches him. When Gabriel sleeps later that night, he dreams that he is dancing and that his "little body was moving up and down . . . producing, in the crux of his being, a sensation so pleasurable," but upon awaking, "the face of the principal loomed inches from [Gabriel's] own" (ibid.: 77). This sequence of events reveals that it is the performative act of dancing—an act that produced "pleasure" within Gabriel—that triggers Father Lafleur to approach Gabriel's bed that evening. Gabriel's pleasure, then, comes prior to the priest's and is actually responsible for the priest's own pleasure. Native sexuality takes precedence—the young Gabriel has not been rid of his sexuality yet, nor is it something primitive and in the past; his sexuality is present and powerful and apprehended as a sensation "in the crux of his being."

When Gabriel wakes up and realizes what is happening to him, his experience of pleasure disrupts the power dynamics of the encounter. The description of the rape that occurs reveals that Gabriel, while a victim, is not a passive object onto whom the priest inflicts violence during the act:

From some tinny radio somewhere off . . . [Gabriel] could hear Elvis Presley singing 'Love Me Tender' . . . Gradually, Father Lafleur bent, closer and closer, until the crucifix that dangled from his neck came to rest on Gabriel's face. The subtly throbbing motion of the priest's upper body made the naked Jesus Christ—this sliver of silver light, this fleshly Son of God so achingly beautiful—rub his body against the child's lips, over and over and over again. Gabriel had no strength left. The pleasure in his centre welled so deep that he was about to open his mouth and swallow whole the living flesh—in his half-dream state, this man nailed to the cross was a living, breathing man, tasting like Gabriel's most favourite food, warm honey. (Highway 1998: 78–79)

While Gabriel sees himself as an object over whom "holy men" have a "right" (ibid.: 78), this passage depicts an unexpected consequence of that right: the "pleasure" in Gabriel's "centre [that] welled so deep." Highway's narration of this pleasure forces us to pause and consider how to account for pleasure, and specifically sexual pleasure in a child, in a scene of vivid, unquestionable violence. Acknowledging the presence of this pleasure is crucial, even if uncomfortable. As Justice (2008: 106) asserts, "To ignore sex and embodied pleasure in the cause of Indigenous liberation is to ignore one of our greatest resources. . . . Every orgasm

can be an act of decolonization.” The presence of sexual pleasure in an act of sexual violation suggests the potential for the sovereign erotic and the “resource” of pleasure. Gabriel’s pleasure disrupts the attempted colonization and orphaning of his body by creating space for and allowing the erotic.

Allowing for the erotic means that Gabriel is not orphaning it; the sexual orphaning on which the state depends fails. Audre Lorde ([1984] 2007: 53) argues that Western conceptualizations of sexuality, particularly as they are tied with “suppression,” interfere with an ability to see the erotic as a site and “source of power and information.” Connecting with rather than suppressing the erotic, acknowledging rather than refusing the erotic, enables Natives to retain and reclaim what colonizers have attempted to destroy and restructure. If erasing the erotic is part of the colonization and queering of Native communities, connecting to and allowing the erotic functions as an important step toward decolonization. It also allows the possibility to reclaim or heal ties with Native conceptualizations of sexuality, thus resisting the state’s project of queering and rendering backward Native cultures.

Importantly, the erotic is not limited to the domain of sexuality. Lorde explains how it involves the political, spiritual, emotional, and social spheres, and Driskill (2004: 52) reiterates this point when they explain that the erotic is “not . . . a realm of personal consequence only. Our relationships with the erotic impact our larger communities, just as our communities impact our sense of the erotic. A Sovereign Erotic relates our bodies to our nations, traditions, and histories.” Thus Gabriel’s erotic encounter with the priest, even though “confusi[ng]” for him, helps him maintain a crucial connection to his “nation, traditions, and histories” (Highway 1998: 78). His pleasure interrupts a complete sexual orphaning.

Once he leaves the school, Gabriel experiences sexual pleasure as an adult, and these experiences invoke elements from his initial sexual encounter with Father Lafleur. After joining Jeremiah in the south, Gabriel almost immediately has sex with a man who was “transported by [his] cool beauty. . . . Ulysses’ sirens had begun to sing ‘Love Me Tender’ and the Cree Adonis could taste, upon the buds that lined his tongue, warm honey” (Highway 1998: 120–21). The return of the song “Love Me Tender” and the honey in this new sexual encounter suggest that his traumatic experience is shaping his adult sexuality. Elements of this first encounter continue to crop up in his sexual experiences outside the boarding school, especially “the naked Jesus Christ” crucifix the priest is wearing the first time he rapes Gabriel.<sup>10</sup>

Ann Cvetkovich (2003: 102) offers a way to begin to see the recurrence of trauma as a site of potentiality. She asserts that there can be “unpredictable

potential [in] traumatic experience.” She seeks a conceptualization of trauma that is “not pathologize[d]” but “that forge[s] creative responses” (ibid.: 3). The “creative” responses may, then, link sexual trauma to the “creative” power of the erotic—both are capable of opening up new spaces. She is particularly interested in the productive power of flashbacks. Flashbacks, characterized by the fact that they force a subject to repeat a traumatic event, may contain “subversive possibilities of repetition with a difference” (ibid.: 74). In other words, if an experience can be repeated but part of the experience can be changed or altered, it may “provide the basis for healing rituals and performances . . . [which] exemplifies Eve Sedgwick’s notion of a queer ‘shame-creativity,’ which reclaims that which has been debased and repudiated” (ibid.). “Embracing rather than refusing” trauma can actually be a way to heal from it (ibid.). It can counter sexual orphanings through this “shame-creativity.” The very repetition of trauma and the fact that it brings the past into the present might help counter the temporal orphanings that the school enforces; it disrupts the normal unfolding of the forward timeline, creating a space in which to “grow sideways.”

Gabriel grows up to identify as a gay man, a description of same-sex desire that is an effect of his induction into a modern settler sexuality. In an argument during which his brother, Jeremiah, realizes that Gabriel is gay, Jeremiah says, “How can you let someone do what that disgusting old priest did to you? How can you seek out . . . people like that?” to which Gabriel responds, “And you? . . . You’d rather diddle with a piano than diddle with yourself. You’re dead. . . . At least my body is still alive” (Highway 1998: 207). While Jeremiah has “willed his body dead” (ibid.: 205), Gabriel’s body is “alive,” and being alive allows him to experience sexual pleasure and erotic power. That he qualifies this survival of his body with “at least” might dwarf the impact of this survival; however, colonization and education have orphaned Gabriel from much of his Indianness, and he sees how in his brother, “Kill the Indian” has succeeded in killing the Native body. Gabriel’s body’s survival, then, is an individual site that has remained alive in the face of ongoing violent assault. In this moment, we see definitively that the traumatic violence of the boarding school does not succeed in orphaning Gabriel from his sexuality—rather, it keeps him connected to it and alive.

The final scene shows us how this healing enables Gabriel’s survival in an alternative time and space through the trickster narrative. Gabriel is diagnosed with AIDS in his early adult life, a diagnosis that indicates that his life will be cut short and that he will not participate in the reproductive order; he is the target of multiple genocides.<sup>11</sup> While he is on his deathbed, “the Fur Queen swept

into the room. . . . Rising from his body, Gabriel Okimasis and the Fur Queen floated off into the swirling mist” (Highway 1998: 306). Gabriel “ris[es] from his body,” leaving behind the Indian body from which the settler state so vehemently tried to alienate him. The scene suggests that while his body is left behind, his subjectivity continues—upon leaving his body, he can still “float off.” The settler state has attempted to educate Gabriel to orphan his own sexuality. Highway imagines Gabriel’s refusal to orphan his sexuality, and this imagining enables a final scene where Gabriel can orphan his own body but still survive. A connection to his body enabled by orphanings enables his return home, which requires him to leave behind that body and go with the trickster. Highway explains that the “continued presence of this extraordinary figure” of the trickster prevents “the core of Indian culture [from] be[ing] gone forever” (ibid.: vii). The final image of Gabriel and the trickster is one of survival and continuance not bound to linear time or material space, and still able to emerge despite fractures caused by sexual orphanings. Gabriel is denied the future, but Highway imagines an alternate way to endure. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* offers some possibilities for what “growing sideways” might look like—it is a site of pleasure and repetition, full of potentiality and continuance even if not future oriented.

### When Queerness Is Not Liberatory

Recent exchanges between queer and indigenous studies have been marked by productive tensions around issues such as kinship, institutions, pleasure, reproduction, and temporality. Both fields critique the state’s management of bodies and sexualities for the purpose of excluding queer and Native communities from state-sanctioned futures, exclusions that have been justified by rendering both Natives and queers in similar temporal terms: backward and childlike. However, key and revealing differences have emerged, for instance, in divergent views of kinship. While queer studies tends toward a utopic view of alternative kinship structures, indigenous studies reminds us that intervening into kinship, coupled with the production of queer kinship in Native communities, has been a violent tactic used by the settler state to access and steal Native land over the last two centuries. Queer studies attends to pleasure, rejects normativity, and embraces nonreproductivity, but indigenous studies asks us how these issues must be taken up differently in the face of ongoing cultural and biological genocide. Native people have not disappeared, but the attempts to disappear them make reproductivity salient and not something we can easily dismiss. In other words, queer studies’ embrace of plea-

sure and nonreproductivity can happen when there is a guarantee that bodies and populations will be there and will reproduce and survive; queer studies has limits in an indigenous context where survival and futurity are at stake.

In this essay, I have turned to the children of boarding schools as especially charged figures through whom to consider these historical and theoretical tensions at the intersection of queer and indigenous studies. This argument has taken a seemingly nonqueer approach to reproduction by casting it as a litmus test for viewing how the settler state prevents Natives from accessing the future, thus aligning reproduction and the future. However, Native children are not synonymous with or guaranteed a future in the context of settler colonialism; in fact, I argue that promises of futurity to Native children in the form of education obscure violences intended to prevent that very future. Second, since the settler state saw Native bodies as an obstacle to the seizure of land, legal and otherwise, preventing the literal reproduction of Native populations was crucial to settler expansion; taking seriously Native reproduction allows us to track how the settler state attempted to prevent the expansion of Native populations through sexual education of their children. My argument reveals the double bind of Indian education: children were educated to understand and experience their Indianness as queer, and thus orphaned from it, and then they were educated in white heterosexual norms, norms in which they would always fail because of their race. Paradoxically, then, ostensible heterosexuality queers these children. Queer, here, is not liberatory but genocidal. The settler state's refusal of the future to Natives is not liberatory but genocidal. And the promise of a future—through education—is a false one that enables this queering.

## Notes

I would like to thank the editors of this volume for all the time and energy they invested in this work. I am grateful to Heather Love, Bethany Schneider, and Kate Thomas for their generous mentorship and generative feedback on this piece. Thank you to Scott Herring and all the participants at Indiana Bloomington's "Child Matters" conference for their critical engagement with this work. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their attentive comments and helpful suggestions.

1. Robin Bernstein (2011: 16) has done exceptional work on how innocence is preserved for white children, while racialized children, and particularly African American children, are viewed as incapable of that innocence and thus "exclu[ded] . . . from the category of childhood."
2. While practices and understandings varied from nation to nation, the settler state

homogenized these practices, seeing them all as deviant. This pan-Native outlook extended to the schools, where children from many nations resided. Interactions between members of the same nation were strictly monitored so as to prevent attachment and allegiance to the communities from which they came; for example, children from the same tribe would be separated to make sure they were not speaking their language.

3. In this same *GLQ* issue, Andrea Smith (2010: 51) emphasizes the “eternal” element of this project, noting that “the Native is rendered permanently infantile . . . an innocent savage. She cannot mature into adult citizenship, she can only be locked into a permanent state of infancy.” If Natives are “permanently infantile,” then both the present and “future of the white, settler citizen” (Smith 2005: 51) are always guaranteed—and the future of Native communities is always tied up with and in the service of this white future. Natives must remain in this orphaned state in order for “white, settler citizen[s]” to maintain their destructive and dominating acts over Native land and bodies.
4. While I argue that the schools demonstrate that the state’s intent was never to actually assimilate these children or grant them full access to a settler future, a range of agents worked in and for these schools. It is likely that many did not know what they were participating in and indeed probably thought that they were helping these children. I point this out to show how structural, macro-level design of the school enabled a mission that those operating on the micro-level—in the schools and classrooms—helped purport, regardless of individual intention.
5. Rifkin also sees indigenous writing about sexuality as a way to productively engage with the “what could have been.” Building on Craig Womack’s (2008) critical formulation of imagining as vital for the production of Native epistemologies, Rifkin (2012, 27) asks if “the erotic might serve as a source of imagination? . . . Creative engagement with the erotic can . . . register . . . the largely unacknowledged presence of the past as well as opening heretofore (officially) unrecognized potentials for living indigeneity in the present.” In other words, imagining an erotics that exceeds those mandated by settler sexuality opens up “potentials” for Natives in the present. Thus, Highway’s rendering of the sexual orphanings in the 1960s boarding school in a 1998 fictional text has ramifications for available indigenous modes of being in the present.
6. Deborah Miranda (2002: 138) observes that “separation from parents and extended family resulted in adult survivors of boarding school who had no idea how to parent.” Lisa Poupart (2003: 93) explains how this proliferation of “unparented parents” has been further complicated by “the erosion of traditional extended-family systems . . . [which means] many are without the traditional networks of emotional and economic support.” The boarding schools’ intervention into kinship coupled with lack of institutional support has not completely halted Native reproduction, but it has altered and limited what the Native family and community can look like today.

7. Highway is a survivor of the boarding school system in Canada—there are certainly significant differences between the US settler state and the Canadian settler state, but the school systems developed and functioned similarly; McKegney (2005: 79) notes that “like American boarding schools, Canadian residential schools acted as a weapon in a calculated attack on Indigenous cultures.” I use this text to think about a broader Native North American experience of boarding/residential school and its effects, which opens up ways for thinking about transnational indigeneity.
8. Rifkin (2014: 140) has recently explored how the text “perform[s] an erotohistoriography of indigeneity and settler colonialism,” drawing on Lynda Hart to examine how the “incorporation of [Gabriel’s] abuse into his sexuality provides a means of challenging ‘the dominant order’s symbolic,’ refusing the negation of Indigenous eroticism.” My reading aligns in part with Rifkin’s, who suggests that this incorporation resists the erasure of Native sexuality. However, Rifkin focuses on how the text maintains and “reimagine[s] Indigenous continuity” (ibid.) and tradition, while I read the text as resulting in orphanings, which are forms of noncontinuity, that nonetheless open up ways for considering indigenous sexuality.
9. This is not to say that erotics do not include the domain of the spiritual—later in this essay, I engage with Audre Lorde’s ([1984] 2007) famous definition of the erotic in order to think about how reconnecting with a disavowed erotic has implications beyond the domain of the physical; however, I am interested in investigating exactly how the sensations, pleasures, and bodily practices that constitute erotics can function as sources of knowledge before making this move.
10. Instances where we see the recurrence of these elements in Highway 1998: 132, 169, 185, 204, and 263.
11. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick ([1990] 2008: 130) states that AIDS is “unlike genocide directed against Jews, Native Americans, Africans, or other groups” because “gay genocide, the once-and-for-all eradication of gay populations . . . is not possible short of the eradication of the whole human species.” While Sedgwick counterposes the genocides against Native Americans and gay persons because of her understanding of how Native and gay identities emerge, Highway proposes seeing Native and gay genocide as intertwined in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Both are genocides enacted on queered populations, and as a gay Native American, Gabriel occupies the position of the child queered by Native genocide who will be queered by AIDS.

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