Deviant and Ashamed: Queer Indigenous Subject Formation in the Age of Grindr

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ABSTRACT**:** In my contribution, I analyze shame, specifically 'queer shame' as an affect in Billy Ray-Belcourt's (Driftpile Cree) essay "Loneliness in the Age of Grindr" which is from his *A History of My Brief Body* (2020). I examine how the queer Indigenous subject is formed through shame by participating in contemporary queer digital hookup culture and then later interacting with the Canadian public health system due to the possibility of HIV infection. In the essay, shame functions as an identity-forming affect, which is internalized, sometimes embraced, and also shaped by outside influences.

KEYWORDS**:** Shame; Queer; Indigenous; First Nations; AIDS; Grindr; Deviant Subjectivity; Affect

Introduction

"*I'd like to ask a couple questions about my sexual health,* I say, trying to maintain at least a sliver of secrecy in the small room peopled to capacity. *Oh, like STDs?* she wonders aloud, without concern for my privacy. *Yup.* I clear my throat" (Belcourt 64, emphasis original). This quote is only one of several 'agonizing' moments from Bily-Ray Belcourt's 2020 essay collection *A History of My Brief Body* in which the narrator confronts Canadian public health personnel and feels shame due to his sexuality and sexual practices. Belcourt is an Indigenous (Driftpile Cree First Nations) author and academic who currently works as an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. Belcourt's work, sometimes framed as 'autotheory,' has strong self-referential qualities, which means that the essay's narrator in question can be equated to Belcourt's speaking.[1] In my contribution, I analyze the role of shame within the essay "Loneliness in the Age of Grindr," and more specifically, how the queer Indigenous subject is formed through shame by participating in contemporary queer digital hookup culture and then later interacting with the Canadian public health system due to a possibility of HIV infection. In Belcourt's essay, shame functions as an identity-forming affect, which is induced by outside influences, specifically settler-colonial Canadian public health institutes, but is then embraced and internalized. It renders the queer Indigenous subject vulnerable and, as he later confesses, abandoned. Nevertheless, shame is not necessarily a negative emotion; as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, shame is performative (52). The narrator actively performs shame, which in turn enables him to construct and more importantly, communicate, his individuality with his sexuality and Indigeneity to the reader. Shame has a complex function that resists a one-dimensional reading. Sedgwick and Adam

[1] For discussions of Belcourt's work as autotheory, please see: Cvetkovich "Minor Feelings" or Cvetkovich "Billy-Ray Belcourt's Loneliness."

Frank credit developmental psychologist Silvan Tomkins for foregrounding shame as an affect, which according to Tomkins, develops in infancy between three to seven months prior to the development of self-constraint. His findings influenced a substantial amount of developmental psychologists, who now acknowledge shame as an affect "that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop" (Sedgwick and Frank 6). Thus, in this reading, shame becomes a crucial aspect of Queer Indigenous subject formation.

The short essay revolves around an awkward and turbulent sexual encounter and its aftermath. After meeting with a stranger in his apartment through the queer dating app Grindr, the narrator is overwhelmed with fear and anxiety due to a possible HIV infection. His anxiety at first suppresses the shame that will be triggered later when facing Canadian public health institutions and personnel. After the encounter, he goes to an STI (Sexually Transmitted Infections) Clinic where he lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Once in the clinic, the medical personnel's imprudent questions and apathetic conduct toward the narrator induce shame in him. Due to the prevalent heteronormativity in mainstream Canadian society, queer subjects are made to feel ashamed of their sexual orientation. Thus, the shame that the narrator feels is an all too familiar experience for queer people in Canada. In this vein, I examine shame not just in general, but I emphasize the important specifics of queer shame or gay shame of queer subjects. Before delving into my analysis, however, I would like to delineate the difference between the dynamics of gay shame/gay pride, which belong to the realm of affect theory, and the dynamics between homonormative pride politics and anti-queer shame politics, which suggests culture wars. In other words, when I criticize homonormative practices of gay pride, I do not condemn LGBTQ+ movements for demanding political recognition and expressing pride. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the term 'queer' is a Euro-western construction and might not necessarily fit into Indigenous sexualities and sexual practices such as Two-Spiritedness. A contemporary example of this discrepancy would be the Two-Spirit Indigenous poet and author Joshua Whitehead's (Oji-Cree) decision to pull out from his nomination in Lambda Literary Awards from the category of trans poetry.[2] In a letter he sent to the organizers, Whitehead articulates that he is grateful for the nomination but cannot participate because: "[Q]ueerness is not a word we [Indigenous peoples] know, we know relationships and accountability and are birthed into our communities knowing our role and how it is we must contribute […]. To put it in the easiest terms for Western languages to understand, I live my life as a gay-femme and not as a trans Indigenous person" (Whitehead Tia House). Correspondingly Scott Lauria Morgensen emphasizes that "settler colonial power relations among Native and non-Native people define the status 'queer'" (19). Thus, 'queerness' as a sexual orientation is not a neutral, uncontested category within the context

[2] The Lambda Literary Awards, or the Lammys, are an organization that promotes political and literary awareness for LGBTQ+ authors and their stories operating since 1989 (Lambda Literary).

of Indigenous peoples and requires caution not to reproduce settler colonial erasure attempts of Indigenous self-determination.[3]

I begin my discussion by first analyzing gay pride: the "emotional antithesis" (Halperin and Traub 3) of queer shame. Then, I focus on the term 'deviancy' and how it can be used by queer subjects as a strategy for self-determination and resistance towards hegemonic discourses. In the second part, I analyze the performed roles and hierarchies in the sexual act between the Indigenous narrator and the white stranger where the Indigenous subject assumes the role of a Grindr saint. Last, I look at the interaction between the queer Indigenous subject and (settler) Canadian public health personnel. In this interaction, the public health institute acts as an, in Louis Althusser's terms, "ideological state apparatus" for the mainstream heteronormative Canadian state.[4] Oppressing non-Western, Indigenous sexualities and gender practices has been one of the main tools of settler colonialism in North America (Tatonetti x). In this regard, the goal is to control queer Indigenous bodies and assert, in Achille Mbembe's words, "necropower" (79), which is an extension of Foucault's concept of biopower highlighting the state's authority on deciding which groups in their populations have the right to live and which do not. In other words, the state has a "right of life," which is gained by "exercising his [the state/the sovereign] right to *kill*, or by refraining from killing" (Foucault 136, emphasis mine). Amidst all this, shame functions in the essay as an affect of self-making and complicating the self-positioning in Canadian society.

Proud to be (A)shamed: Gay Pride vs. Gay Shame and Deviant Subjectivities

In their introductory chapter to the edited volume *Gay Shame*, David Halperin and Valerie Traub argue that since the Stonewall Riots in 1969, "gay pride has been the rallying cry of a broad social movement for sexual freedom. It has also been the driving political force behind the emergence of the interdisciplinary fields of lesbian and gay studies and, more recently, queer theory" (3). In this sense, the positive impact of gay pride as a collective feeling for people who were once claimed 'sexually deviant' by hegemonic discourse cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, the relationship between gay shame and gay pride is more complex than complete opposition, even though Halperin and Traub remark that shame is pride's "emotional antithesis and its political antagonist" (3). Gay pride and gay shame rely on each other for their cultural influence; they have a reciprocal relationship. The concept of a hegemonically pathologized 'deviancy' is a good example to elaborate on this relationship.

Jennifer Terry traces the roots of pathologizing medical discourse on queer subjects by examining a published report of a 1930s medico-scientific study, which took place in New York entitled: *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns*. The empirical study is comprised of

[3] Having said that, Billy-Ray Belcourt uses the term 'queer' when he talks about himself and his sexuality and not an Indigenous North American term such as Two-Spirited.

[4] The aim of "ideological state apparatus" is to make sure that hegemony's, and subsequently the government's, power and control on its subjects is not questioned and works smoothly (Buchanan).

eighty men and women who volunteered for close examination by psychiatrists (290).[5] Terry argues that with this study, medical institutions, medical personnel, and consequently dominant ideology, utilized their authority and discursive power to construct queer subjects as 'deviants' but failed to do so, stating: "These queer subjects […] were never docile victims" (297). This subversion is possible through a process Terry calls "deviant subjectivity […] by which a position or identity-space is constructed discursively by sexology and medicine and strategically seized upon by its object of study, who […] [are] at moments compliant and at other moments resistant to pejorative or pathologizing characterizations of themselves by doctors" (289). In other words, queer subjects fight back against power structures by simultaneously insisting on a politics of respectability, inclusivity, and the consequent pride movement, while also partly embracing and performing the 'deviancy' and the resulting *shame* of being framed as deviant by hegemonic discourses.

The idea of gay pride comes from the premise of the externally ascribed and oftentimes internalized shame of being gay (Halperin and Traub 3). Therefore, gay pride does not and cannot exist independently of gay shame. Halperin and Traub credit Sedgwick for theorizing gay shame and bringing discussions about gay shame to the forefront of queer theory at the beginning of the 1990s. Sedgwick and others alike who are part of what can be called the movement of 'antiassimilationist queer culture' brought some of the 'infamous' pre-Stonewall figures such as Gertrude Stein under the spotlight whose supposed "flamboyance, brutality, homophobia or sexual and gender deviance"[6] (7) were at odds with the ethos of the gay pride movement. Halperin and Traub remark that the queer culture in the early years of the 1990s was about, and I would say still is, the rejection of hegemonic and mainstream ways of living and thinking. As gay pride movements soared among Western societies, specific homosexual subject positions and body types, primarily male, white, middle class, muscular, and generally, in good shape, have become the norm or have come to represent the 'universal gay individual' as far as the US American hegemonic discourse is concerned.[7] Indeed, the term gay pride in this sense is connected to homonormativity, which is a "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 179).

The identity markers of the 'poster boys' for homonormative pride movements foreground whiteness and simultaneously disregard, other, and illegalize BIPOC queer subject positions.

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[5] Terry does not disclose the identity markers (nationality, ethnicity, etc.) of these participants. Apart from a couple of mentionings of a Black lesbian subject, the common denominator between these people are their 'deviancy'. Thus, albeit it is clear that the ethnic background of the participants greatly influence their relationship to deviancy, Terry's article does not make that connection explicit.

[6] With the adjective, 'pre-Stonewall' I refer to an affective paradigm change in queer politics, not only 'historical time' but also a shift in discourse, or an *épistémè* as Foucault uses.

[7] In this regard, Jaspir Puar makes an argument for what she terms "U.S. sexual exceptionalism" where "national heteronormativity is now joined by an exceptional form of national homonormativity, in other words, homonationalism" (2). The white and middle class homosexuals are included within the dominant discourses of the US while the queer-of-color subjects are simultaneously othered (Puar 4).

This brings the discussion to the previously mentioned homonationalism where "whiteness and imperialism create U.S. queer subjects as 'regulatory'" (Morgensen 21) over BIPOC subjects. As mentioned, the term 'queerness' is not neutral and can function as a tool for settler colonialism's erasure attempts at Indigeneity. Morgensen describes modern sexualities as a "function of the biopolitics of settler colonialism" (58) and that queerness as modern sexuality is "produced in contextual relationship" (58) to settler colonialist structures. Settler colonialism in its origins is a heteropatriarchal structure. In this fashion, Indigenous peoples are queered in the corresponding hegemonic discourses "for elimination and regulation by the biopolitics of settler colonialism" (Morgensen 58). Settler colonialist governments in North America such as the US and Canada, to use Foucault's words, used their "right to kill" (136) and implemented necropolitics on their queered Indigenous populations "by targeting modes of embodiment, desire, and kinship" (Morgensen 59). Due to the oppressive practices and policies of settler colonialism, non-binary Indigenous sexualities were prosecuted and tried to be erased by force throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (Morgensen 66-71). These regulatory practices on Indigenous sexualities resulted in framing the concept of modern sexuality as a strictly settler phenomenon (Morgensen 72). In this fashion, modern sexuality becomes a "method to produce settler colonialism, and settler subjects by […] naturalizing its effects" (Morgensen 73). Thus, it is crucial to keep in mind the ongoing impositions of non-Indigenous, "normatively white, and settler [sexual] relationships on Native peoples" by settler colonial biopolitical practices (Morgensen 82). Following Mary Louise Pratt, Morgensen frames modern sexualities as "contact zones" (86). Belcourt's essay provides a detailed account of this contact zone contextualized within modern Canada with the use of Grindr. Belcourt negotiates subject positions by using shame as affect. The practice of "[p]erpetually negotiating the contact zone of sexual modernity […], Native queer and Two-Spirit projects mark the contingency, contradiction and potential transformation of settler colonialism" (87). In other words, the biopolitics of settler colonialism tries to further eliminate Indigenous life(ways) in their construction and regulation of modern sexualities. Modern sexualities are inherently connected to civic inclusion and the subsequent politics of respectability which brings my discussion back to (homonormative) gay pride movements.

Critics of gay pride movements argue that homonormative politics refer to a state where activism is discouraged for homosexual subjects and queer identifications are seen as unnecessary self-positionings in the far left of the political spectrum. Herein, in this normalization of a particular subject position, I argue, lies one of the primary, if not the most important, catalysts for the return to a pre-Stonewall gay shame. However, returning to a pre-Stonewall queer identification does not mean that Sedgwick and others who occupy similar positions are not opposing the gay pride or parallel movements which "deal with shame variously in the form of, for instance, the communal *dignity* of the civil rights movement; the individuating *pride* of 'Black Is Beautiful'" (59). Sedgwick's main issue with the gay pride movement and others alike is that they have the potential to function in ways that are not previously advertised (59). Instead of eliminating shame, these collective identities may function as rhetorical strategies for political recognition and claiming discursive power by

identifying with shame. Among those who do not fit into the gay pride movement, it has alienated a quite wide range of LGBTQ groups, for instance, queer-of-color, trans people, "drag queens, butch dykes, immigrants, the poor, the disabled" (Halperin and Traub 9) and more. Thus, the feeling of gay shame in this reading can create an alternative haven, "a site of solidarity and belonging" (9) for diverse queer people. For individuals who identify themselves as queer subjects who do not 'fit' into the homonormative practices of consumption and political stupor by not being wealthy enough, white enough, monogamous enough, and mainstream enough, gay shame can provide an alternative collective identity, solidarity, and rhetorical strategy.

Returning to shame as affect, Sedgwick argues that shame "floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication. Indeed, like a stigma, shame is itself a form of communication" (50). Moreover, "shame and identity remain in very dynamic relationship to one another" (Sedgwick 50), because shame is both relational and solitary. Individuals can feel shame internally, either for someone else or for themselves, as well as being shamed externally due to their subject positionings in a given society. As Sedgwick concludes: "I want to say that at least for certain ('queer') people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity" (61). It is interesting to think about the working principle of shame in queer identity formation here. In the aforementioned medical study from the 1930s, we see clear examples of how shame forms both queer and 'straight' identities in the same context and more specifically, how queer subjects implement a strategic deviancy by inducing shame in the medical examination.

Discussing the published report, Terry emphasizes that whenever the subjects were open, even proud and bragging about their so-called deviancy, the doctors, i.e., the dominant discursive authority, felt confusion: "[T]he doctor was baffled when subjects or their lovers boasted about these anomalies or excesses. Furthermore, he did not know what to make of the subjects' descriptions of their lovers as both 'feminine' and 'aggressive,' or 'masculine' and 'sensitive' since these couplings were seen as fundamentally impossible" (291). I suggest that this 'bafflement' is due to the shame induced by the unexpected embracing of queerness, or in Terry's words, the deviant subjectivity of the volunteers. Shame interrupts identification (Sedgwick 50). In this instance, heteronormative discourse tries to frame the volunteers as pathologically deviant due to their same-sex desire, i.e., homosexual orientation. The queer subjects, however, instead of feeling ashamed, on the contrary, are proud to be who they are.[8] By performing deviant subjectivity, the queer subjects induce shame in the authority figures and interrupt their hegemony-imposed identification by embracing their so-called deviancy. Another example is when one volunteer, nicknamed Frieda, openly talks about enjoying the company of her female lover who is physically large and acts 'manly' (Terry 292). Terry argues that when she talks about her desire for masculinity and amplitude not in men but in women,

[8] Note that this is before the collective gay pride movement, which means that being proud carries different connotations from the assimilatory homonormative politics that are associated with certain aspects of gay pride movements.

"[w]e can almost hear Frieda chuckling at the doctor's shocked expression" (292). Correspondingly, Sedgwick highlights shame's "uncontrollable relationality" (51) in how "someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior" (Sedgwick 50) can also create shame in the person observing the scene, which is the case in the exchange between Frieda and the doctor.

The Saint of Grindr: Shifting (Sexual) Positions

Returning to Belcourt's essay, during the hookup, shame operates on the internal level. The hookup is both homosexual and interracial. The stranger is an "attractive white guy" (Belcourt 60) who is "about five-ten, thin with a six-pack and light brown hair" (61), has large blue eyes, and is described as a "twink [which makes him] one of the most fuckable body types in the Grindr universe" (61). There are multiple layers of meaning in this all-too-casual remark. The in-shape body of the white stranger is part of the normalized white and male gay subject position and he prompts the queer Indigenous subject to feel ashamed for being less desirable, the unwanted one, in this encounter. The inner monologue of the narrator reveals his self-shame due to feeling worthless in comparison: "I feel as though I'm selling a false product, that I'm not his type, that he can fuck someone better looking" (61). Being ashamed of himself comes off as *natural* when encountering the conventionally good-looking and muscular white stranger. The intersection of queerness and Indigeneity is significant here. As a queer Indigenous individual, the narrator's subject position within the homonormative gay pride movement becomes extremely complicated. As I mentioned referring to Morgensen, queerness as a sexual modernity often supports Indigenous erasure as a byproduct of the biopolitics of settler colonialism. In the 'contact zone' of queerness within the Canadian settler colonial state, queer Indigenous peoples hold a different position than queer-of-color individuals since, as Morgensen argues, "even antiracist and anticolonial work by *queers of color* may become compatible with settler projects, notably when portraying sexual modernity as multiracial and transnational to achieve non-Native queer belongings in a multicultural settler state" (82, emphasis original) such as Canada.

Even though there is no explicit indication of the stranger's sense of self-worth (nor are there allusions to his social status including his financial means), I would argue that in this instance, the Indigenous subject is the one whose identity is formed through shame. Moreover, the anonymity of the stranger's background acts as a narrative device to make the reader focus on the protagonist and 'judge' the stranger only based on the narrator's (limited) description. This shame is deeply connected to his self-worth and affects the narrator's sexual life deeply and sometimes in twisted ways. The interraciality of the hookup creates a hierarchy of subject positions between two queer men. Darieck Scott reminds us that white men`s sexuality is associated with power and that power is considered desirable, or in Scott's words: "White dick is socially and historically represented to us as potency; it is power, and power is sexy" (310). According to Scott's theory, it is not just that the stranger is a 'twink' that he becomes desirable for the narrator, it is because he is a white 'twink' that he gets associated with power

and thus becomes sexy.[9] Sex becomes an "interplay of relatively empowered, and relatively disempowered roles, roles that can become all the more erotically charged when the markers of different kinds of power, gender/race/sexuality, are acknowledged" (Scott 310).

We can analyze Grindr in this essay as a discursive space that creates hierarchical subject positions and contains conflicting discourses simultaneously. Contextually, the app represents a digital place that exists in the "aftermath of the AIDS epidemic" where the users can enjoy it "DDF—drug- and disease-free" (Belcourt 59). However, this idealized portrayal is not entirely correct. "For gay and queer men and their sex partners, it's as though Grindr users were paradoxically infected and not at the same time" (60). For queer men who use the app, there are certain benefits: "Grindr users don't mince words. The app has made sex easy to come by for men who've been told their desires were to be shunned from public life" (61). Here, Grindr offers a cyber-wilderness where the sexual desire for the same sex can be openly expressed and actively sought after without being shamed as the 'deviant subject' by the mainstream heteronormative Canadian society. Furthermore, Grindr functions for the narrator as a sort of frontier, away from civilization and its societal rules where individuals are drawn to by the promises of riches, adventure, and fortune. At first glance, Grindr feels like a shame-free zone for the price of sexually transmitted disease. However, delving further, the promised freedom from shame is not as shame-free as it sounds. The Indigenous subject forms his cyberself fundamentally through shame, representative of Sedgwick's conceptualization of shame as "the structuring fact of identity" (61). The essay begins with the following words: "It's 2014. I hook up with men I don't find attractive because I suspect they've been told they aren't thin enough, toned enough, tall enough, pretty enough, or *white* enough to fuck" (Belcourt 59, emphasis mine). The narrator takes on a, in his words, "liberal savior complex" (59) so that these 'less desirable bodies' in the 2014 Grindr realm can feel loved.

The narrator performs this supposed masochism fueled by shame as a self-sacrifice, playing the role of a Grindr saint. His shame and consequent masochism are performative because shame is learned, starting from childhood. The narrator says: "I think I owe them my flesh because they find me desirable […] I quickly become an expert in the discipline of sacrifice" (Belcourt 59). By putting on the role of the Grindr savior, the narrator momentarily gains the position of power. His self-sacrifice puts him in a morally superior position as saviors tend to be seen in public discourse and albeit temporarily, his shame elevates his position in Grindr hierarchy. Momentarily, he is in the position that 'settles' for less desirable bodies. The essay portrays a hierarchy of desirability in Grindr cyberspace where the Indigenous queer body shows agency by choosing deliberately unattractive people to hook up with. This act complicates the social dynamics and shifts his position within the gay shame/gay pride binarism. He is *proud* to act as a savior; he gains pride from his self-sacrifice.

[9] I should mention that within the dynamics of 'top' and 'bottom' a 'twink' body type is usually associated with being the 'bottom' and thus the one who is not in control. However, the dynamics of settler/native is the designating principle for the roles of 'top' and 'bottom' in this instance.

As the stranger arrives, the narrator has already decided that he "will bend backward for him, literally and figuratively" (61). The roles are delineated with the Indigenous body performing as the passive one, also in the physical sense of 'bottoming,' and the white body actively being in control during the sexual encounter. When we look at the language, the submissive state of the Indigenous subject is apparent: "He coaxes a pulsating vulnerability out of me and this turns him on. I can feel tears welling up in my eyes, but I don't want him to stop. I want him to feel as though he can snap me in half" (62). Amalia Ziv argues in her article on cross-gender queerness in erotic fiction that masochism is a "common psychic strategy that […] subordinated groups employ to negotiate their subordinate status" (171). The passive Indigenous narrator's masochism then is performed to negotiate his status in this sexual encounter. This is an act that, as Darieck Scott phrases it, "can become all the more erotically charged when the markers of different kinds of power, gender/race/sexuality, are acknowledged" (310). Given its contradictory nature, interpreting the narrator's passivity as a self-empowering decision may not seem plausible. Negotiating and accentuating one's disempowered subject position for self-empowerment does not sound like the most effective strategy. However, I suggest we return to Sedgwick who highlights shame's "conceptual leverage for political projects" (50); shame distinguishes people and underlines their individuality but also creates an "uncontrollable relationality" (51) with others based on being ashamed of someone and/or shamed by someone. Sedgwick remarks that shame wipes itself out, and "shame and dignity, […] shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove" (51). Furthermore, the narrator embraces his settler-coded subject positioning by performing the role of the passive colonized and situates himself literally bending forward for the European settler. Here the temporary sexual performance enables the queer Indigenous subject to identify with the aforementioned deviant subjectivity. He strategically plays into the expectations of the white settler on his own terms, reminiscent of the Indigenous trickster figure. The power play grows complicated due to the slippery nature of the narrator's performative 'willingness' to be sexually dominated. Furthermore, beginning with the early colonial encounters with the Indigenous populations of the Americas, European discourse has consistently constructed Indigenous peoples as hypersexualized, 'exotic' beings in which their supposed 'primitiveness' played a key role in this conceptualization (Waling 93). Thus, the white stranger is not exempt from his culturally constructed desire. The fetishization of Indigenous bodies by Europeans allows the narrator to make himself fit into their physical interaction. I read this as a (sub)conscious decision of the Indigenous subject's trickster qualities in which promiscuity, sexual drive, and rejection of fixed identity markers signify the trickster character as a cultural trope in various Indigenous cultures.

Abandoned Subjects: Rectums, Graves, and Hospitals

Last, I analyze queer shame within the context of Canadian public health institutes. Public and medical discourses on queerness define the treatment of queer men in these spaces, especially when we think about the reason behind the narrator's visit, which is a possible HIV infection. Even though the story is set in 2015 and the AIDS epidemic of the late 1980s has

been at least a decade over, the repercussions against queer people and people with AIDS engineered by white-coded heteronormative publics and their health institutions can be explicitly felt in the medical personnel's behavior toward the protagonist. In his influential work on the mainstream responses to the AIDS epidemic, aptly titled *Policing Desire*, Simon Watney describes AIDS as "not only a medical crisis on an unparalleled scale, it involves a crisis of representation itself, a crisis over the entire framing of knowledge about the human body and its capacities for sexual pleasure" (9). In other words, during the height of the epidemic, responses to the disease were not about the disease itself. The debate came to be about heterosexuality, homosexuality, sexuality, and desire, and more importantly, the public responses to the AIDS epidemic and the surrounding discourse have been elevated, or better put, downgraded to a state of culture war. The discussion is framed by discourses on who can have sex with whom, which heralds the indirect discussions of monogamy and heteronormativity to follow.

In this vein, Leo Bersani argues that the AIDS epidemic "has been treated like an unprecedented sexual threat" (198). He continues with a list of how queer people with AIDS or an HIV-positive diagnosis were marginalized, abandoned to die, or violated:

> Doctors have refused to operate on people known to be infected with the HIV virus, schools have forbidden children with AIDS to attend classes, and recently citizens of the idyllically named town of Arcadia, Florida, set fire to the house of a family with three hemophiliac children apparently infected with HIV. Television and the press continue to confuse AIDS with the HIV virus, to speak of AIDS as if it were a venereal disease, and consequently to suggest that one catches it by being promiscuous. (199)

Promiscuity is a keyword here. Belcourt's essay depicts the zeitgeist of digital queer cruising in contemporary Canada, where volatility and speed are desirable factors: "Grindr users don't mince words" (Belcourt 61). Everything happens fast and anonymously, which the narrator 'confesses' fits the cruising culture. "I send the stranger my address, and he shows up about fifteen minutes later. (My instinct is to suggest that anonymous sex pressurizes the figure of the stranger, makes it into a pleasurable category)" (61). The brackets imply that even though this is part of the written text, the level of narrated intimacy is different. The entire essay has a confessional dimension with its thematic focus on how queer sex can feel quite random today. However, the brackets push the narrator's confession into a deeper level of meaning. The narrator himself does not present a reflected thought or idea, but an instinct, which allows himself and the readers a glimpse of his unconscious feelings. This leads to the perception of more intimacy regarding the pleasure the narrator derives from the anonymity and randomness of the sexual encounter.

The narrator does not give the name of "the stranger" (61); even if the narrator knows his name, the reader does not know the Grindr alias of the person. Therefore, throughout the essay, the stranger remains a stranger both for the narrator and for the reader. Accounting for this, coupled with the dominant public's disapproval of promiscuity that is deeply seated already before the AIDS epidemic, but all the more fortified by homophobia and

white(settler)-coded heteronormativity, the first encounter with Canadian public health can be interpreted in a different light. It is also worth mentioning that the narrator does not know that the stranger will ejaculate on him until he does: "He jerks off, and, without warning, ejaculates on my asshole. I don't notice until he puts his clothes on" (Belcourt 62). Thus, another violation has already been committed prior to the encounter with the Canadian public health personnel. It begins with the nonconsensual act of ejaculation from the settler on an Indigenous body, a reproduction of the ongoing settler-colonial-instigated physical acts of violence on Indigenous bodies. After having sex with the stranger, the narrator drives to an STI clinic in Downtown Edmonton, where he narrates the encounter to a medical professional: "his semen, I sheepishly confess, likely got inside my anus. She asks if I'd been penetrated, to which I say *technically*, *no*" (63, emphasis original). At this first point of contact between the queer subject and the medical institution, the shame is palpable, enflamed by the supposed promiscuity and anonymity of the hookup.

Here, it is interesting to think about the locus of anxiety, which is the anus. "*Did you cum on my ass?* I ask, knowing the answer. *Yeah*, *sorry about that, that usually doesn't happen*" (Belcourt 62, emphasis original). Prompted by Watney, Bersani draws a trajectory between nineteenth-century female sex workers and homosexual men during the AIDS epidemic: in which these two groups from seemingly different subject positions are constructed similarly as disease carriers by having sex (211). "Woman and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction" (211), which is a powerful image produced by dominant ideology and made into hegemonic discourse by the fearmongering tactics of mainstream media and popular discourse both in the nineteenth century and during the AIDS epidemic.

In this framework, AIDS "offers a new sign for the symbolic machinery of repression, making the rectum a grave" (Watney 125). In other words, anal sex is put into the discursive position of a death sentence. In the first clinic the narrator visits, he is refused post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) treatment in the form of, "an antiretroviral drug that can prevent HIV from latching onto your body if administered quickly enough" (Belcourt 63). The medical personnel's reasoning for this decision is that his anus was not penetrated by the stranger's penis. The rectum thus becomes a source of shame for the narrator. To receive medical help, he must confess to his own sexual experience, and consequently, confront his own biological death, his mortality, which is bound to his rectum by the fallible conceptions of the medical institution. According to public medical practice, the physical integrity of his rectum hinders him from receiving appropriate medical care. The rules for administrating PEP are strict, it is only possible in cases with extreme risk of infection (Belcourt 64). The word that is written here is "exceptional" such as "a prisoner raped by an HIV-positive inmate, for example" (64). Medical discourse decides that the narrator's hookup is not exceptional. On the contrary, it is a "silly matter" (65), that is not worthy of people's time according to the doctor at the clinic near the university campus. Shame, argues Sedgwick, "attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of almost anything: a zone of the body" (59). The narrator's

rectum symbolically makes the possibility of death real, but more than that, as Sedgwick highlights, shame attaches to the narrator's rectum and alters its meaning. It becomes more than a part of his gastrointestinal tract; the rectum becomes a signifier of his marginalization. Just like countless other queer bodies during the AIDS epidemic, the rectum turns into a source of stigma, not because "AIDS has literalized that potential [of death] as the certainty of biological death, and has therefore reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation" (Bersani 222), but because heteronormative medical discourse turns public health institutions into graves for queer subjects. The narrator describes the clinic as "a zone of abandonment" (Belcourt 65) constructing it as the sarcophagus of a necropolis for him and countless other queer bodies.[10] For the narrator, public health institutes become mass graves with their shame and guilt-inducing treatments of queer-of-color, and especially in this case, queer Indigenous subjects: "Hospitals have always been enemy territory. My body, too brown to be innocent, enflames the nurses' racialized curiosities" (Belcourt 63). As mentioned, the public health institutes in Canada belong to the settler colonial "ideological state apparatus" and thus function as tools for the state to implement its necropolitics. Additionally, there is mounting evidence that shows the "prevalence of Indigenous-specific racism in Canadian health systems" (Jongbloed et. al. 229). In this regard, Wispelwey et. al. point to the lack of research that explores the inherent link between settler colonialism and public health policy in Canada: "Settler colonialism is to the structural determinants of health as the structural are to the social, fundamentally reshaping the socioeconomic, political, and land-based environments through Indigenous erasure and settler hegemony" (3). They also highlight the disproportionate life expectancy between Indigenous and settler populations in Canada (4), which is an ongoing phenomenon signifying the need for political and structural change in Canadian public health policies and institutes. Settler colonial medical institutions trigger shame amongst their visitors to be directed at others and the self. The narrator describes that "once inside, you walk past the patrons, who avoid making eye contact" (63). The patients form a community of shame by performing a physical proto-form of shame which is "eyes down, heads averted" (Sedgwick 50).

After being told that his situation does not pose any immediate danger and that he can visit another hospital to get a second opinion, the brief sequence from the beginning of the article ensues. The heteronormativity of mainstream Canada affects the narrator when he 'confesses' his situation to the receptionist and then later to the doctor. He subjects himself to their moral judgement, which mediates the dominant moral standards of the settler colonial state. Furthermore, the narrator is forced to feel guilty because of seeking help. After asking the doctor for PEP, she goes on to contact the health services for the availability of the treatment. He overhears the phone call between the doctor and Alberta Health Services: "The walls, paper thin, can't conceal the irritation in her voice" (Belcourt 65). Although fundamentally

[10] This is where Mbembe's concept of "*death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*" (92, emphasis original) come into play. Public health institutions represent a death-world by implementing necropower to queer subjects.

different, shame and guilt are affects that are conceptualized and categorized together by various scholars. "[Both] are thus […] 'self-conscious' and 'moral' emotions: self-conscious in that they involve the self evaluating the self, and moral in that they presumably play a key role in fostering moral behavior" (Tangney and Dearing 2). What cannot be overstated here is of course the discursive quality of what 'moral' means. Nevertheless, besides being self-conscious and moral, the general difference between the two is "that shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is, whereas guilt attaches to what one does" (Sedgwick 51). When keeping these definitions in mind, it becomes apparent that the narrator's own actions are instrumentalized against him: by inciting guilt about his actions, he is also shamed for his identity. To frame it differently: mainstream heteronormative discourse finds him guilty of his same-sex desire.

The health care system is depicted as indifferent to the enormous extent of its malevolence towards the queer Indigenous subject. He ends up being told to wait "*about eight to ten weeks to be tested*" (Belcourt 65, emphasis original), which is too late for preventative intervention. The narrator is not just denied appropriate care but he is also denied a *friendly witness* with whom to share and thus also transform his shame into something positive, into a collective identity perhaps to show he is not alone and his voice is also heard. On the contrary, he claims "I was being conscripted into a culture of fear that makes STIs such as HIV into public enemies […] What's more, I had no audience for my misery" (65). He is not only denied proper medical care for a potentially serious condition, but also, there is no one to collectively share his anxiety and shame. By denying the appropriate care to the queer Indigenous subject, settler colonial public health institutes exercise their necropower and undermine the narrator's right to live.

Conclusion

In "Loneliness in the Age of Grindr," shame acts as the underlying trait of the self as the narrator says: "It's during these moments when the self is negotiated with others—in sex, in medicine and public health—that one is prone to be pulled off course and thrown into a crisis of ontological proportions" (Belcourt 66). The narrator's queer self is negotiated with agents of heteronormativity in Canadian public health institutes. His performed selves during the hookup and then later in health clinics open up alternative ways of feeling shame and self-formation. The narrator's performed self-sacrifice situates him on the other side of the shame/pride dichotomy, that of pride. However, it is not the normalized assimilatory and exclusive gay pride; this dynamism reminds us of Sedgwick's remark on how shame is transformational and how it "opens a lot of new doors for thinking about identity politics" (59). Just as playing the savior, the narrator also emphasizes his subject position and his shame. In the end, Belcourt's narrator (with strong autobiographical tendencies) achieves a strategically deviant subjectivity by constructing a queer Indigenous subject through shame. Throughout the essay, his shame renders him an individual, which also makes him identify with two intersecting social groups, queer and Indigenous people, in Canada. In the end, as

Sedgwick argues "[t]he forms taken by shame are not distinct 'toxic; parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed" (Sedgwick 59-60). Thus, shame as affect and, more importantly, discussing shame formalized as an autobiographical essay, provides a rich framework for meaning-making and resistance to dominant settler-colonial hegemony.

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